

Hempel at Göttingen, Zimmerli left Germany in the 1930's, after Hitler came to power, and returned to his native Switzerland, taking a post at the University of Zurich. He returned to Göttingen in the fifties to accept the chair of his old teacher who had been discredited along with the Reich.

To sit in Zimmerli's lecture hall was a rare treat, for not only was he a brilliant Old Testament theologian, he also was a living incarnation of that period which has so largely shaped modern consciousness. Zimmerli, like history itself, is hermeneutics. And what power of language he possessed! I shall never forget his description of the captivity of Joseph in Egypt in the language of those who left Germany during the Third Reich, forced into slavery by their government, many, like Joseph, never to return home alive. To experience Zimmerli was to experience passion, meaning, life itself. From this time positivistic historiography, which has anachronistically continued to dominate Old Testament methodology, collapsed for me as a viable meaning-structure. Exegesis is by necessity hermeneutics. I was thirty-five.

Refreshed by what Ricoeur calls second naiveté, I join the Jesus Seminar, attracted by the power of words. Only this time it is the language of that strange other, Jesus of Nazareth. I seek to hear, speak if I may, the one (whether prophet, sage, or poet perhaps) whose language has so significantly shaped the consciousness of much of modernity. And perhaps through the work of this Seminar, at least a fragment of the language may be recovered from one whose speech has generated the language of those so significant in shaping my life. And perhaps I may hear that voice, if not the actual words, and once again encounter the power of language.

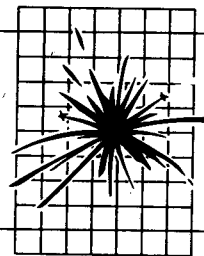
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In this issue, the *Westword* articles focus on the current views of the historical Jesus in the field of biblical studies.



## A Temperate Case for a Non-Eschatological Jesus

Marcus J. Borg

This paper virtually takes the form of a letter to my associates in the academy—most directly to my colleagues in Jesus studies, but also to colleagues in the disciplines of New Testament, introduction to religion, history of Christianity, theology, and the history of religions. In short, it is addressed to anybody who teaches (or preaches) about Jesus at all, even if only briefly for a period or less in an introductory religion course. It treats one of the "big" questions about Jesus and calls for a reexamination of the image of the historical Jesus which has dominated Jesus scholarship in this century. This image has been widely shared not only by those of us in New Testament studies but also by scholars in other disciplines who to a large extent depend upon us for their understanding of Jesus and early Christianity—just as we depend, for example, upon Buddhist specialists for our understanding of Buddhism.

Specifically the essay challenges the basic image of the historical Jesus as "the eschatological Jesus." Because I will use this phrase frequently, I want to define it both precisely and compactly at the outset. By it I mean an image or *gestalt* of the historical Jesus which sees his mission and message within the framework of his expectation of the end of the world in his generation, understood in an objective and not purely subjective sense.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of the historical Jesus, according to this image, was

1 There is a need to define the phrase precisely because of the wide range of meanings that the word "eschatology" has come to have. As a number of scholars have noted, "eschatology" is one of those words that have lost all precise exegetical meaning; see, e.g., Beker, "Biblical Theology Today," 27; Carmignac, "Les Dangers de l'eschatologie," *passim*, but especially 388-90. I am defining it to include as an indispensable element the notion that the world itself will come to an end, including the traditional expectation of last judgment, resurrection, and dawn of the new age. *The eschatological Jesus is one who thought this was imminent*. Thus, with the term "eschatological," I do not mean "end" in more metaphorical

to call his hearers to repent before it was too late, to ground themselves in God because the world was soon to pass away, indeed in that generation.

In my argument for a non-eschatological Jesus, I point to recent developments within our discipline which decisively undermine the foundation of the eschatological Jesus. This involves me in a treatment of the themes of the "coming Son of man"<sup>2</sup> and the kingdom of God in the synoptic gospels. In a concluding section, I report the results of a poll which indicate that there is no longer a consensus among us regarding the eschatological Jesus, and suggest some of the implications for us. But before describing the reasons for replacing the eschatological Jesus with a non-eschatological Jesus, I want to begin by speaking of the dominant position occupied by the former in our discipline.

### 1. The Dominance of the Eschatological Jesus

The eschatological Jesus entered the mainstream of biblical studies through the work of Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer around the turn of this century. Many of the highly specific details of Schweitzer's reconstruction of the mission of Jesus have not been accepted by subsequent scholarship. For example, few scholars have agreed with Schweitzer's claim that Jesus initially expected the end of the world in the middle of his ministry and then, because it did not come, went to Jerusalem deliberately to provoke the authorities to kill him so that God would intervene and transform him into the eschatological Son of man. But Schweitzer's basic claim—that Jesus' ministry is to be understood within an eschatological framework—has become one of the paradigmatic convictions of New Testament scholarship.

Its dominance is particularly evident in German scholarship. In the work of Rudolf Bultmann and his "school," it constituted the core element of the portrait of Jesus and of Bultmann's demythologizing hermeneutic: Jesus was the proclaimer who proclaimed the imminent coming of the kingdom of God; and Jesus' proclamation of the imminent end

senses, either in the sense of a dramatic change in Israel's history, or in the sense of a radical change in the individual's subjectivity which one might describe by speaking of the (old) world coming to an end for that individual. When these meanings are meant, I think other adjectives are more apt than "eschatological." See also my *Conflict, Holiness and Politics*, 10–13.

- 2 For those readers to whom the technical phrase the "coming Son of man" may be unfamiliar, a number of sayings attributed to Jesus speak about a "Son of man" coming in the future, often explicitly associated with end-of-the-world phenomena. The meaning will be elaborated further in section two of this paper. Classic texts are Mark 8:38, Luke 12:8–9, Mark 13:24–27, Mark 14:62, Matt 10:23.

points to the understanding of existence which Bultmann found to be central to Jesus' message. The eschatological Jesus is portrayed in Gunther Bornkamm's *Jesus of Nazareth*, probably the most widely-read scholarly book on Jesus in the thirty years since its publication. It continues to dominate German New Testament scholarship, including the work of "new generation" scholars such as Gerd Theissen.<sup>3</sup>

Especially indicative of the consensus in German scholarship is the treatment of the historical Jesus by Hans Küng. At the heart of his weighty and yet best-selling *On Being a Christian* is a lengthy section on the historical Jesus.<sup>4</sup> His account is brilliant, thick with incisive insights and quotable phrases which catch some of the passion of the gospels themselves. Yet running throughout is a picture of Jesus as one who expected the end of the world in his generation.<sup>5</sup> What makes Küng's work so illustrative of the consensus is that he is not a New Testament scholar but a systematic theologian. His treatment of Jesus is grounded in what he perceives the consensus of New Testament scholarship to be; it provides the historical data with which he works theologically.<sup>6</sup>

The consensus extends beyond Germany, of course. Two works on the kingdom of God published in 1963—one by the Swedish scholar Gösta Lundström and the other by Norman Perrin, an Englishman trained in Germany who spent much of his teaching and publishing career in the United States—both made the eschatological understanding of the kingdom central to their exposition and evaluation of previous research.<sup>7</sup> Whether or not scholars recognized that Jesus used the phrase "kingdom of God" in an *eschatological* sense was one of the primary criteria for assessing their scholarly contribution. The eschatological understanding of the kingdom (and Jesus) had become one of the

3 See especially his *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity*. Theissen's book is the finest introduction to the Jesus movement in its Palestinian setting known to me.

4 Küng, *On Being a Christian*. About half of the six hundred pages of text is devoted to Jesus.

5 *On Being a Christian*, especially 216–20, where he stresses the element of immediacy: "... whether Jesus expected the advent of God's kingdom at his death or immediately after it" is unclear, but it is "... clear that he expected (it) in the immediate future" (p. 216).

6 For Küng, that consensus is based almost exclusively on German scholarship. But the consensus would not have been much different if he had also taken into account North American scholarship.

7 Lundström, *The Kingdom of God*; Perrin, *The Kingdom of God*. For a similar comment on the significance of these two books, see Bruce Chilton's excellent introduction to the fine anthology which he recently edited, *The Kingdom of God*, 16. Chilton also speaks of a "post-war consensus" on this issue (p. 15).

"results" of scholarship in light of which the history of scholarship could now be seen.

The extent to which the eschatological Jesus has become one of the paradigmatic convictions within New Testament studies can be seen in the many guises in which he appears. For Bultmann and many in both Germany and elsewhere who were affected by the German tradition, Jesus was the proclaimer of the end who called his hearers to an existential decision for God. For more recent scholars in this tradition, his message (including its forms, especially parables and aphorisms) brought "end-of-world" to those who responded to it. Even scholars who have emphasized a political dimension to Jesus' message often work within the eschatological paradigm. S. G. F. Brandon, for example, in his trilogy which argued that Jesus was a Zealot sympathizer, saw the cleansing of the temple as Jesus' purification of the temple for the coming kingdom of God, understood as an imminent supernatural event.<sup>8</sup> More recently, William Herzog has sought to align Jesus' apocalyptic message with liberation theology.<sup>9</sup>

Thus the normative pattern for speaking about Jesus both within the guild of Jesus scholars and in disciplines which make use of our work is to speak of him and his message as eschatological. However, the consensus is not unanimous, and indeed there are signs that it no longer is one, as I shall report later. But before turning to the reasons for calling it into question, it may be relevant to tell my own story of how I moved from an initial acceptance of the eschatological Jesus to my present understanding.

My own impression of the dominance of the eschatological Jesus as the "orthodox" image of Jesus in our discipline began with my first year in divinity school (Union Theological Seminary, New York, in 1964). Like many of us, I went to graduate school without really knowing that there was a question here. I had heard of Albert Schweitzer, but mostly as a medical missionary and modern saint whose "reverence for life" perhaps extended even into the insect and micro-organic kingdoms. I did not know what he had said about the kingdom of God. My professor

8 See especially Brandon's *Jesus and the Zealots*, 336-38. The other two books in his trilogy are *The Trial of Jesus* and *The Fall of Jerusalem and the Christian Church*.

9 Herzog, "The Quest for the Historical Jesus." Herzog actually takes his essay in a direction very compatible with the thesis of this paper: he argues that Jesus' apocalyptic proclamation (which he does not deny) is not to be referred to the "natural" or "physical" world, but to the "social world" (see especially p. 32). I agree, but wonder if "apocalyptic" is a helpful way of designating such an expectation, for it requires using "apocalyptic" in a sense very different from its most common use.

at Union was W. D. Davies, a Welshman trained in England with intellectual kinship to C. H. Dodd, the "dean" of British New Testament studies and famous for his rejection of Schweitzer's position with his own case for "realized eschatology." I cannot recall if Davies took sides on this issue; but the reading which we were assigned certainly did. Much of it was German.

There was (and is) something impressive about German scholarship. The great names of our discipline are disproportionately German, a tribute to the study of theology in German universities. I read Schweitzer and Bultmann and Bornkamm and Conzelmann, impressive writers all. The "hot" book in synoptic studies was Tödt's *The Son of Man in the Synoptic Tradition*; there I learned that the only significant remaining question about the "coming Son of man" sayings was whether Jesus was referring to his own coming as the "Son of man" or whether he was referring to a future figure other than himself.<sup>10</sup>

And so, despite the fact that my mentor was British, I came to believe that Jesus expected the end of the world in his own generation. The picture painted by German scholarship was consistent with what I was learning about the early church as well; it was an eschatological community, and many early Christians, including Paul, expected the world to end soon. Dodd and other scholars influenced by the "British school" seemed to me to be fighting a rearguard action, sniping at the main column as it marched by. Besides, there was something unconvincing about "realized eschatology." Though I could understand the argument for saying that the kingdom of God was proclaimed by Jesus as a *present* reality, as soon as I tried to *think* of it as present, it vanished. I could not figure out what was present that could legitimately be called the kingdom of God. The inability to see may have been in me rather than in Dodd's exposition; I am not sure.

Then I went off to Oxford for a year and studied with George Caird. In his lectures and tutorials, Caird frequently took potshots at German scholarship, especially calling into question the eschatological Jesus. I found his thrusts and parries provocative and enjoyed them immensely, but finally did not find them persuasive. I listened to other students talking about Caird "defending the walls of Oxford against the German invasion;" and, horror of horrors, the walls had already been breached in the figure of Dennis Nineham, rumored to be a "Bultmannian."<sup>11</sup>

10 Tödt, *Son of Man in the Synoptic Tradition*. Tödt was not the first to treat this particular question, but I first encountered it in his book.

11 And now the walls have not only been breached, but Caird's own chair has been occupied. Caird's successor as Dean Ireland Professor at Oxford is E. P. Sanders, whose recent impressive book, *Jesus and Judaism*, un-

Though I still thought the British were probably wrong on this issue, I returned to Oxford three years later for the doctorate with Caird as my thesis supervisor. During those years, I came to believe that a respectable case could be made for a non-eschatological Jesus, and it was one of the themes of my thesis.<sup>12</sup> At the time I considered my position one that could reasonably be defended, but perhaps not convincing outside a circle of scholarship already favorably disposed to it.

Over the years, however, in part because of my own continuing study and even more so because of the work of others, I have become convinced that the evidence really does lie in favor of a non-eschatological Jesus.<sup>13</sup> I do not know finally what to make of this emerging conviction; it is possible that it is the product of a way of seeing that has now become habituated. We never know, as one of my colleagues put it, when what we think is the philosopher's stone might turn out to be our pet rock.<sup>14</sup> I want to be corrected if I am off target, confirmed if I am headed in the right direction, encouraged if this seems important but unresolved.

In any case, my own turn-about from affirming an eschatological Jesus to seeing Jesus in non-eschatological terms has been the product of three factors: (1) The realization that the primary foundation of the eschatological Jesus is the "coming Son of man" sayings, and that these are now commonly viewed by scholars as inauthentic—not part of the words of Jesus; (2) A second realization, namely that the understanding of the kingdom of God as the imminent end of the world is without basis in the kingdom texts themselves; imminence has to be imported from the coming Son of man texts; (3) A rethinking of the kingdom of God that seeks to place it in a framework other than the temporal paradigm of present/future which has dominated much of twentieth-century scholarship.

equivocally affirms a Jesus who expected the imminent restoration of Judaism in a full-blown eschatological sense. In his book which was the product of the Bampton Lectures given in Oxford in 1980, A. E. Harvey also affirms that Jesus spoke of the end of the world in his own time; see Harvey, *Jesus and the Constraints of History*, 86–90.

12 *Conflict as a Context*. The basic line of argument, thoroughly revised and expanded, is central to my 1984 book (see n. 1 above).

13 In addition to the 1984 book, see "The Historical Jesus and Christian Preaching," 764–67; "An Orthodoxy Re-Considered"; and *Spirit and Culture*, a book on the historical Jesus.

14 Nicholas Yonker, chair of Religious Studies at Oregon State University, and author of an interesting book which falls into the category of "global theology" or "theology of religions": *God, Man, and the Planetary Age*.

## 2. The "Coming Son of Man" Sayings

A number of sayings in the gospels speak of a future coming of the "Son of man," portrayed as a figure of the end-time who will play a critical role in the final judgment, as either advocate or judge. His coming is often associated with angels or the clouds of heaven. Judgment, coming, and angels are all found in one of the classic texts:

For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of man also be ashamed, when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.<sup>15</sup>

Not all of the coming Son of man sayings speak of the coming as imminent, but some do. Mark 13:24–30 speaks of the heavenly bodies being darkened and falling, the coming of the Son of man in clouds with the angels, and then affirms, "This generation will not pass away before all these things take place."

These sayings have been the foundation for the eschatological Jesus from the beginning. They were central for Schweitzer, for whom Jesus was essentially one who believed that he himself was the "coming Son of man" who would soon judge the world and rule over the new world. The element of imminence came especially (though not exclusively) from Matt 10:23, in which Jesus said to the disciples as he sent them out on a missionary journey in the midst of the ministry, "Truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of man comes." Though much of subsequent scholarship has rejected the authenticity of this passage in particular,<sup>16</sup> the conviction that Jesus proclaimed the imminent coming of the Son of man (whether himself or another) has continued in the works of Bultmann, Kümmel, Tödt, Jeremias, and others. All of them accepted the authenticity of some (at least) of the coming Son of man sayings, and in one way or another made them central to their understanding of Jesus' message and mission.

It is important to realize how central the coming Son of man sayings are for this position. Without them, there is very little in the gospels which would lead us to think that Jesus expected the end of the world soon. The notion that Jesus did proclaim the end flows from the connection made in the texts between the "coming Son of man" and "supernatural" end-time phenomena such as the last judgment, the sending of

15 Mark 8:38; see Matt 16:27 and Luke 12:8–9.

16 See my *Conflict, Holiness and Politics*, 366 n. 38, where I report the negative verdicts of Bultmann, Perrin, Bammel, Tödt, Higgins, Hahn, Fuller, Manson, and Kilpatrick.

the angels, the clouds of heaven, the darkening of the sun and moon, and the falling of the stars. If one did not think these sayings were authentic, most of the exegetical foundation for the eschatological Jesus would disappear.

Yet exactly this has happened in much of New Testament scholarship over the past two decades. The undermining of these sayings has occurred through the convergence of three lines of argument, any one of which alone would be enough. First, an increasing number of scholars no longer think any of the "coming Son of man" sayings is authentic. This movement was perhaps signaled by Norman Perrin in his *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, published in 1967. There Perrin argued that these sayings were the product of Christian scribal interpretation of Dan 7:13-14 in the decades following Easter.<sup>17</sup> After a lengthy treatment, he concluded: "the apocalyptic Son of man tradition has itself developed from an early Christian interpretation of the resurrection and early Christian passion apologetic."<sup>18</sup> His conclusion has been increasingly accepted, recently by Barnabas Lindars in his 1983 book.<sup>19</sup>

Second, there is increasing agreement that "Son of man" was not a designation in early first-century Judaism for a supernatural or end-of-the-world figure. The assumption that it was such a designation reached both its zenith and nadir in Colpe's essay on the "Son of man" published in one of the widely-used dictionaries in our field. Colpe granted that no existing Jewish source provides any evidence for a "supernatural" Son of man associated with the end of the world; and then argued that we must posit a missing source to account for it.<sup>20</sup> His argument thus shows how deeply-ingrained the assumption has been. The fact that there is no evidence that the phrase had any special meaning in Jewish literature of

the time has led other scholars to draw the more obvious conclusion, and it is now routine to say that "Son of man" was not an apocalyptic title in Judaism.<sup>21</sup> Thus Jesus could not have used this phrase as a "short-hand" way of referring to a figure of the end-time, whether to himself in a transformed state or to somebody other than himself.

Third, Geza Vermes has argued convincingly on linguistic grounds that the phrase "Son of man" in Aramaic not only had no pre-Christian titular usage, but was such a common idiom that it could not have been heard by the hearers of Jesus as having special or titular significance.<sup>22</sup> The upshot of these last two lines of argument is that language about a "coming Son of man" (whether referring to Jesus or a figure other than himself) would not have been intelligible to Jesus' audience. However, it would have been intelligible in the early church after Easter as a way of speaking of their belief in the the Second Coming of Jesus, a point we shall return to in the fourth section of this essay.

With the disappearance of the coming Son of man sayings as authentic words of Jesus, the primary exegetical reason for thinking that Jesus expected the imminent end of the world disappears. Yet this implication is often not seen, perhaps because it is often thought that it is Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God that is the main exegetical basis for the eschatological Jesus. But, as we shall see, there is very little in Jesus' kingdom proclamation that refers to an imminent end.

### 3. The Kingdom of God

As virtually every scholar affirms, the kingdom of God is the central focal point of Jesus' proclamation, of both his mission and message. The coming of the kingdom is the core of Mark's advance summary of the gospel: "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand."<sup>23</sup> It is widespread

17 Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, 164-206.

18 *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, 203; see also 198: "all [of the apocalyptic Son of man sayings] reveal themselves to be products of the early Church."

19 Lindars, *Jesus Son of Man*. Lindars' argument differs from Perrin's in many ways; for example, he finds a number of the Son of man sayings which speak of the Son of man as *present* to be authentic; however, he agrees that the *coming* Son of man sayings are inauthentic. This represents a reversal of an earlier position he took in "Re-Enter the Apocalyptic Son of Man." N. T. Wright takes the argument in a different direction. He argues that some of the coming Son of man sayings are authentic, but that they refer to a historical judgment upon Israel. Thus he denies them an "end of the world" meaning. The details differ, but the result is the same; see his "Jesus, Israel and the Cross."

20 Colpe, "ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου." Apparently a draft was already complete by 1965 (Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, 260).

21 Leivestad made this argument in 1967 in his provocatively entitled essay, "Der apokalyptische Menschensohn: ein theologisches Phantom"; he concludes that the apocalyptic Son of man is a phantom, a "theologische Erfindung der letzten hundert Jahre" (theological fabrication of the last hundred years; p. 101). See also his "Exit the Apocalyptic Son of Man." Perrin also reached the same conclusion in 1967; see *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, 172-73, 260. Lindars similarly treats the "myth" of the apocalyptic Son of man on pp. 3-8 of *Jesus Son of Man*.

22 Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*, 160-91; see also 89-99 of his *Jesus and the World of Judaism*, a shorter form of which appeared in *Journal of Jewish Studies* 29 (1978). Lindars, *Jesus Son of Man*, 17-28, reviews the linguistic argument and though he modifies Vermes' conclusion, he agrees that the linguistic evidence means that Jesus could not have used it in an apocalyptic titular sense.

23 Mark 1:15. Their importance for Mark can be seen in the fact that these are the first words attributed to Jesus in Mark, his "inaugural address."

throughout the synoptic tradition in diverse forms: parables, proverbs, beatitudes, controversy stories. But how is it to be understood?

From the time of Schweitzer, it has largely been understood to refer to "the end of the world," i.e., eschatologically. Having made the coming Son of man sayings central to understanding the mission of Jesus, Schweitzer attached the imminence associated with them to the notion of the kingdom of God, and both "imminence" and "end of the world" have remained connected to the kingdom ever since. To be sure, in part because of C. H. Dodd's emphasis on "realized eschatology," scholarship by mid-century had begun to speak of the kingdom as *both* present and future; this was the great synthesis noted by both Perrin and Lundström in their histories of research. But even within this synthesis, it seemed that the future kingdom received greater emphasis.<sup>24</sup> That was what was near, the imminent arrival of the kingdom-as-end and, it would be added, the powers of that coming kingdom were already in some sense present in the ministry. The future dimension provided the essential definition or the clearest conception. *It* was the main thing, and because it was coming it could be "proleptically realized" in Jesus.

Yet the association of imminence, end of the world, and kingdom is not justified by the kingdom texts themselves. It is very striking that "kingdom of God" and "the coming Son of man" are not found in the same texts; they seem to represent two quite distinct traditions.<sup>25</sup> Thus it is illegitimate uncritically to transfer the imminence associated with the coming Son of man to the kingdom of God sayings.

Moreover, the kingdom of God sayings by themselves do not have the element of imminence in them. The sayings do use the language of time to speak of the kingdom (as near, as present, and as future), but what is lacking is a clear link between the coming of the kingdom and the end of the world temporally tied to that generation. The one apparent exception to this statement is Mark 9:1: "Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power." The verse is not without its problems. It is not

clear that the coming of the kingdom in power refers to the end of the world; the verse permits a number of interpretations,<sup>26</sup> and is sometimes viewed as inauthentic.<sup>27</sup> In any case, one verse is a slender thread upon which to hang such a weighty case.

To repeat, without the coming Son of man sayings, there is no reason to think of the kingdom of God as the imminent end of the world. "End of the world" imagery and imminence are connected together only in the coming Son of man sayings. They are not found together in the kingdom of God sayings. The texts do associate "end of the world" imagery with the kingdom (e.g., in the parables of judgment and the image of the messianic banquet); but it is not said that this is imminent. So also in other texts in the gospels which speak of "end-time" events; the element of imminence is missing. Especially illuminating are a number of last judgment sayings, in which Jesus warned his hearers that Gentiles from the past (the men of Nineveh, the queen of Sheba) would arise at the judgment and testify against the "men of this generation"; but it is not said that "this generation" will live until then.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the most natural way to read the texts is to suppose that both "this generation" and the Gentiles from the past will need to be raised at the judgment. Jesus, like many of his Jewish contemporaries, apparently believed that history had a final judgment at its boundary, but neither this nor the "final" kingdom of God is said to be imminent.

The notion that the kingdom of God is the imminent eschatological kingdom is thus without foundation in the kingdom texts. The element of imminence has to be imported from the coming Son of man sayings. Yet modern scholarship has found the coming Son of man sayings to be inauthentic without substantially calling into question the picture of an imminent kingdom (and an eschatological Jesus).<sup>29</sup> The lesson to be learned is clear: when one discards something as major as the coming Son of man sayings, one had best take another look at one's data base.

24 Explicitly affirmed by Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, who affirms that Jesus spoke of the kingdom as both present and future and then adds, p. 154: "... if Jesus truly expected God to act decisively in the future, we must also assume that this expectation dominated and controlled his activity and message and that the future event is what primarily defines Jesus' view of 'the Kingdom.'" (Italics added).

25 A quite obvious point when one examines the texts. The insight is often credited to P. Vielhauer in his essay, "Gottesreich und Menschensohn." Perrin notes, however, that it appears in two English-language works published in the 1940's (*Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, 187 n. 2).

26 As Chilton notes, *The Kingdom of God*, 15. See also his *God in Strength*, 264-66. Chilton's work on the kingdom of God is both solid and promising, suggesting a way forward that moves away from an imminent eschatological understanding.

27 See, e.g., Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, 16-20, 199-201.

28 Luke 11:29-32=Matt 12:38-42. See also Luke 10:13-14=Matt 11:21-22 and Luke 10:12=Matt 10:15. For more detailed treatment, see my *Conflict, Holiness and Politics*, 210-211.

29 Vielhauer's argument (n. 25 above) is an interesting example of this widespread tendency. Having noted that the coming Son of man and the kingdom are not linked, and having pronounced all of the coming Son of man sayings to be inauthentic, he nevertheless keeps the element of imminence in his understanding of the kingdom of God.

This completes the case for saying that there is no convincing exegetical basis for understanding Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God as involving the imminent end of the world. Yet, in part because it seems slightly unsatisfactory to conclude on a negative note without at least suggesting the presence of a satisfactory alternative, and in part because I find it interesting, I wish to sketch an alternative briefly. It is only a sketch; to provide anything like a full treatment would go far beyond the scope of this essay. Moreover, as a sketch it is more like an alternative framework within which many different and more precise elaborations could be spun.

The way toward a compelling alternative is pointed to by Norman Perrin's final work, published ten years ago in the year of his death.<sup>30</sup> There he argued that the phrase "kingdom of God" was a *symbol*, whose purpose was to evoke a myth. It has been a persistent mistake of Jesus scholarship, he argues, to think of the term "kingdom" as pointing to a *concept* (e.g., as the end of the world, or the rule of God in the human heart, or the "brotherhood of man"). Instead, it was a symbol which evoked Israel's myth (or story) of God's kingship over Israel and the world. That story contained several elements. As king, God created the universe and the earth, and then created Israel in the exodus event. As king, God continued to rule in the present, even though the divine rule often seemed puzzlingly obscured or eclipsed. As king, God both invited and commanded the Jewish people to put themselves under the divine kingship (to take upon themselves the "yoke" of the kingdom). Finally, as king God would one day establish the everlasting kingdom of compassion and justice, which would involve the judgment of both Israel and the nations. In short, the phrase "kingdom of God" evoked the whole story of God's relationship to Israel and humankind. We can also see why Perrin stresses that kingdom is a *tensive* symbol, i.e., one with a number of nuances of meaning. It does not have a singular meaning, but resonates with the various meanings which Israel's story of God's kingship combined.

Fruitful as Perrin's work is, it needs to be taken one step further. In order to understand this myth, it is helpful to see it as one form of an even more basic way of understanding reality, namely as a particular cultural form of what Huston Smith has called the "primordial tradition."<sup>31</sup> The "primordial tradition" (a root metaphor?) is a way of "imaging" reality that appears in a multiplicity of cultural forms (indeed, in virtually as many cultural forms as there are cultures; Smith refers to it as almost a cultural universal, the "human unanimity" prior to the

modern period).<sup>32</sup> Essential to it are two central claims. First, in addition to the visible material world disclosed to us by ordinary sense perception (and modern science), there is another dimension or level or layer of reality. It is the image of reality as having, minimally, two levels, "this world" and a "world of Spirit."<sup>33</sup> Moreover, the "other world"—the world of Spirit—is seen as "more" real than "this world." Indeed, the "other reality" is the source or ground of "this world." Second, and very importantly, the "other world" is not simply an article of belief, but an element of experience. That is, the notion of another reality does not have its origin in pre-modern speculation (or anxiety), but it is grounded in the religious experience of humankind.<sup>34</sup> It is not merely "believed in," but known.

Most basically, myths are stories which seek to speak about the other world and its relationship to this one.<sup>35</sup> Israel spoke about the relationship between the two worlds with its story of the kingship of God. That story affirmed that "this world" had its origin in the power and sovereignty of God. God's kingship continued into the present; even now the world was ruled by God. Moreover, Israel affirmed that the "other world" and "this world" were connected, intersecting at a number of points: historically, especially in the exodus and the return from exile,

<sup>32</sup> This is an important point; the primordial tradition is not to be identified with a particular cultural expression, as often happens when it is identified with "the great chain of being." As I understand it, the "great chain of being" is one form in which the primordial tradition appears, and a highly detailed one at that. If one thinks of "primordial tradition" and "great chain of being" as synonymous, then one will not find the primordial tradition to be central to the biblical tradition. But such a highly particular identification is incorrect.

<sup>33</sup> This basic "cut," in which reality is seen to have minimally two "divisions," can be spoken of in many ways—as the sacred and the profane, the holy (or numinous) and the mundane, spirit and matter, etc. What is most important is the notion of a "cut" rather than any particular set of terms.

<sup>34</sup> That is, this basic distinction flows out of the experience of reality as having both ordinary and non-ordinary aspects. Thus it is important to understand terms such as sacred and profane, the holy and the mundane, etc., as phenomenological terms and not, e.g., simply as ingredients in an intellectual argument (whether Eliade's, Otto's, etc.).

<sup>35</sup> So, for example, Mircea Eliade. Myths are stories about the other reality and its relationship to this one. See especially *Myth and Reality*. The title of the book is significant. In the modern world, we tend to contrast myth and reality; but Eliade's point is that "myth" is the way one speaks about reality, i.e., about that which is "most real," namely, the other world. Dennis Duling briefly employs Eliade's understanding of myth in his extension of Perrin's work; see Duling, *Jesus Christ through History*, 19–20.

<sup>30</sup> Perrin, *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom*.

<sup>31</sup> Smith, *Forgotten Truth*.



though also in other central events of Israel's history; personally, in Spirit-filled mediators such as Moses and the prophets, as well as in the devotional and non-ordinary experience (visions and hierophanies) of less prominent figures; culturally, in the temple of Jerusalem, the *axis mundi* or navel of the earth connecting this world to the other world which was its source. Israel also affirmed that one day "this world" and the "other world" would be visibly reunited, i.e., that the kingdom of God would come in some final sense. "End of the world" is thus one nuance of meaning, but only one. In Israel's story of God's kingship, the two worlds are related to each other at the beginning (creation), in the present (the "other world" can be known and experienced), and at the end (consummation).

The primordial tradition is not completely palatable to modern tastes. Indeed, in many ways it was the understanding of reality which needed to be overthrown in order for the modern age to begin. The western Enlightenment increasingly saw reality as basically one-dimensional, and we in the academy are to a large extent the product of the Enlightenment. It is interesting that it is precisely the primordial tradition which Bultmann thought needed demythologizing. The "three story" model of the universe found in the imagery of the New Testament is a form of the primordial tradition, one which used spatial and vertical imagery. Bultmann objected quite properly that it cannot be taken "literally" (almost geographically). But he failed to see that it was meant ontologically—i.e., as an affirmation of the reality of another world, a world of "Spirit."<sup>36</sup> Perhaps our difficulty in comprehending Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom has flowed from the modern antipathy toward taking seriously the reality of a world of "Spirit." But if one does, then Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom forms a coherent whole.

Put most simply, within the framework of the primordial tradition, "kingdom of God" was for Jesus a symbol pointing to the kingship of God—the divine power and sovereignty, compassion and justice. The reality of God as king could be known, and the power of the Spirit (God acting as king) could flow into this world. Kingdom could also refer to the way of being engendered by that reality—joy, compassion, purity of heart. Moreover, the image of kingdom suggests that that way of being was communal and not simply individual. Finally, kingdom was also a symbol for the final state, "paradise restored." The most satisfactory understanding of the kingdom of God is one in which "end of the world" becomes one nuance among many, rather than being the defining

nuance. The final kingdom is part of Israel's story about the kingship of God, but kingdom-as-end was not the central element in Jesus' message. Nor did he say that kingdom-as-end was imminent. Jesus did not emphasize a future act of God (the end of the world), but emphasized the present kingly power of God and invited his hearers to "enter" it and have their lives shaped by it.<sup>37</sup> The story of God's kingship, understood as Israel's version of the primordial tradition, thus provides a "home" within which Jesus' language about the kingdom can be understood. It refers to the kingship of God at the beginning of time, in the present, and at the end of time; and to life in that kingdom, i.e., to a way of being created by the kingship of God.

Whatever is thought about this alternative framework for understanding Jesus' use of the symbol "kingdom," I do not wish it to detract from the main thread of this argument. That thread is the claim that there is no significant exegetical basis for the eschatological Jesus. To that main thread we now return.

#### 4. Some Clarifying Remarks

There are two further elements in the New Testament which have sometimes been thought to point to an eschatological Jesus. One of these is the church's expectation of the end of the world in that generation; the second is the element of crisis in the synoptic tradition.

The argument that Jesus proclaimed neither the imminent coming of the Son of man nor the imminent final kingdom may be thought to leave unexplained the church's expectation of the end. Some (at least) expected the "end of the world" in their generation, including the resurrection of the dead, the last judgment, and the "new heavens and new earth." Where did this expectation come from? It is tempting—and even "natural"—to think of it as a continuation of Jesus' proclamation of the imminent end. Thus the expectation of the early church is often seen as evidence for what Jesus himself expected.

But the expectation of the early church does not need to be grounded in Jesus' own expectation. Indeed, another ground seems more likely. The church's expectation of the "last things" is more plausibly understood as a post-Easter development, a deduction based upon the Easter

36 There is a significant difference between thinking of symbols and myths as ways of speaking of another reality rather than as metaphorical ways of speaking about our existence—our condition and potentiality.

37 As I see it, this understanding of the kingdom is very consistent with Bruce Chilton's important recent works on the kingdom of God (see n. 26 above). Though he does not make the connection to the primordial tradition, he concludes that Jesus' public announcement of the kingdom refers primarily to "God acting in strength," i.e., to "God's disclosure of himself," and secondarily to the human response to that disclosure.



event itself. As is well-known, "resurrection" (as distinct from resuscitation) in Judaism was an event expected at the end of time. To some within the church, the fact that a resurrection had occurred was an indicator that the general resurrection must be near; Christ was the "first fruits" of those to be raised from the dead.

Moreover, the church did not talk about the imminent coming of the kingdom; neither did it speak simply about the end of the world in a general way. Rather, it spoke of the imminent end of the world only in connection with the return of Jesus. The belief in the imminent end of the world appears in the context of the belief in the Second Coming; it does not appear independently. Rather than supposing that the expectation of the imminent end of the world originated with Jesus, it is more plausible to affirm that it originated with the expectation of his return.

Furthermore, as already noted, language about a "coming Son of man" who would function as advocate or judge at the last judgment is not intelligible in the pre-Easter setting of the ministry. But it is intelligible in the post-Easter setting of the early church, by which time the church spoke of the Second Coming of Jesus using the language and imagery of Daniel 7. The one who had been victimized and judged had now been vindicated and would return for judgment. The "coming Son of man" sayings express the church's expectation of Jesus' return, of his "Second Coming." The expectation of the imminent end of the world thus originates with the church's expectation of Jesus' return as Son of man. The belief in the imminent end of the world is best understood as a post-Easter development.

Finally, it is important not to exaggerate the extent to which the early church was an "end-time" community. Despite the explicit statements affirming an imminent end, it is not clear that this was very central (except, perhaps, in the book of Revelation). The letters of Paul and the gospel of John, for example, both contain such explicit statements, but clearly the emphasis of both authors is on the present as a time when the reality of God can be known, and not upon the future.<sup>38</sup> The image of the church as an intense eschatological community struggling with the delay of the parousia goes beyond our sources. Thus I do not deny that some in the church thought the end was at hand; but I do not think their conviction originated with Jesus.

38 See, e.g., Scroggs, *Paul for a New Day*, and Kysar, *John: The Maverick Gospel*. For both Paul and John, the emphasis was upon the "new age" which had already dawned; both spoke of the "new creation" or "eternal life" as realities which were already being experienced; i.e., their emphasis (like Jesus?) was upon the present experiential reality of the "new age."

Nor do I deny the element of crisis running through the synoptics. But the crisis is not the imminent end of the world; it becomes that only if one reads the crisis sayings in light of the coming Son of man sayings. Rather, the crisis is the end of the world of conventional wisdom as a basis for existence, as well as the threatened end of the "social world" of Judaism (including the threat of war and the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple).<sup>39</sup> The crisis of the ministry flowed out of the radicality of Jesus' teaching in a time when the socio-political stakes were high. There is a sense in which the mission of Jesus does bring about the end of a world, both in a "world-deconstructing" way and in the sense of the birth of a new age or new way of being. But there is no reason to think that he also proclaimed the imminent end of the world of history.

## 5. The Consensus in Collapse?

Throughout this essay I have spoken as if there were a virtual unanimity within scholarship regarding the eschatological Jesus. That is not quite the case, as I shall soon mention. But it was (and to a large extent, still is) the German consensus when most of us (and our colleagues in other religious disciplines) received our formative scholarly education. We (or at least I) received the consensus as one of the "results" of research, one of those foundation stones that did not need to be quarried again.

There have consistently been exceptions to the eschatological Jesus from his conception onwards. There were Dodd and Caird in the British School, for example, as well as other scholars.<sup>40</sup> There are also signs that this weakening or dying the death of a thousand qualifications. The later Rerrin (as well as others) made the future dimension much less specific and definite, almost to the point of denying "temporality" to it.<sup>41</sup> In other

39 I realize that I have not talked about the relationship between Jesus' mission and the "conventional wisdom" and "social world" of his day in this essay. This has been a theme of much of my published research thus far, and is also one of the two central topics in my forthcoming *Spirit and Culture*.

40 Without trying in any way to be comprehensive, I would add several books by T. F. Glasson (beginning in 1945) and Gaston's *No Stone on Another*.

41 Unless this is done carefully, a curious result occurs. It is sometimes said, for example, that Jesus put no limit on the expectation of the end, that he had no "calendar," etc. But so long as kingdom continues to retain its "end of the world" connotation, the effect of the revision is to suggest that Jesus proclaimed, "The kingdom-as-end can come at any time, now, or hundreds of years from now." One might presume that Jesus had more of an insight (and message) about the kingdom than that.

works, "eschatology" is understood in other than an end of the world and judgment sense. Two recent Roman Catholic works sharply call it into question. Edward Schillebeeckx in his recent massive book on the historical Jesus denies that Jesus had in mind the approaching end of the world: "No historically firm evidence allows us to argue this with any degree of cogency." He adds, "It nowhere appears from the texts that Jesus identifies this coming (of the kingdom of God), this drawing near, with the end of the world."<sup>42</sup> G. S. Sloyan reaches the same conclusion in his more introductory work.<sup>43</sup>

A poll of scholars in our own discipline also suggests that the consensus is weakening. Indeed, it discloses that there is no consensus, but a relatively even division that actually tilts toward a negative verdict. In preparation for the writing of this paper, I decided to take a simple poll of two groups of Jesus scholars, the thirty "charter fellows" of the Jesus Seminar and forty-two participants in the Historical Jesus Section of Society of Biblical Literature.<sup>44</sup> I asked a single question, with four options for response:<sup>45</sup>

Do you think Jesus expected the end of the world in *his generation*, i.e. in the lifetime of at least some of his contemporaries?<sup>46</sup>

42 Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, 152. Like the present essay, Schillebeeckx also finds the origin of the expectation of Jesus' imminent return in the Easter experience of the church. Somewhat ironically, despite denying the element of imminent end of the world in the preaching of Jesus, Schillebeeckx continues regularly to speak of Jesus as "eschatological." Why continue to use the term if the reason for introducing it into the discussion (Schweitzer's end-of-the-world Jesus) has disappeared?

43 Sloyan, *Jesus in Focus*, especially chap. 8.

44 There is, so far as I know, no "official" membership in the Historical Jesus Section. The list of forty-two people with some degree of participation in the section was supplied by Prof. Paul Hollenbach, co-chair of the section.

45 I also asked a second question; namely, I asked respondents to indicate their age by checking an appropriate block (sixty-five or over, fifty-five to sixty-four, forty-five to fifty-four, etc.). I was interested to see if there would be any difference by "generation"; however, the sample proved to be too small for any significant generalization.

46 I included the following commentary as a way of clarifying the question: "I am not simply asking whether, for example, Jesus expected a drastic change in the life of Israel, or whether he was referring to a dramatic internal or subjective change that might be referred to as 'end of world' for one who experienced it. Rather, I am asking whether you think he thought *the end was near*, understood as a cataclysmic change in the 'objective' world, however we might interpret that expectation or proclamation today."

Strongly think so \_\_\_\_  
Inclined to think so \_\_\_\_  
Inclined to think not \_\_\_\_  
Strongly do not think so \_\_\_\_

The division within the Jesus Seminar was almost exact. Of the twenty-one who responded (out of a total of thirty), ten thought so (strongly or inclined to), and eleven did not. The eighteen who responded (out of forty-two) from the Historical Jesus Section were less evenly divided: only six thought so, whereas twelve did not. Combining the two groups, sixteen thought so, twenty-three did not.<sup>47</sup> I am fully aware, of course, that historical issues cannot be settled by taking a vote; but such a poll does show what we think.

Thus no consensus exists, despite the appearance of one in much of our work. This has interesting implications for us, it seems to me. If no consensus exists, if this question is clearly up for grabs, we need to be clear about that, both for the sake of our own discipline and for the sake of scholars in other disciplines who depend upon our work.<sup>48</sup> Quite frankly, I was surprised by the results of the poll. More than half of us share a fundamental perception that Jesus probably did not expect the imminent end of the world. I would not have guessed that from my reading of the literature, and have sometimes felt like a maverick because of suggesting a non-eschatological framework for understanding the ministry of Jesus. It is good to know that I am not alone. In addition to being clear that no consensus exists, there is, of course, the need to look at this whole question very closely in order to discern which image is more historically compelling.

47 The exact results were as follows. Jesus Seminar: six strongly thought so, four were inclined to, five were inclined not to, and six strongly thought not. For the SBL group, the totals (in the same order) were three, three, six and six. I do not know what to make of the higher percentage response from the Jesus Seminar; perhaps they are more accustomed to polls. I wish to thank Mrs. Pat Rogerson, secretary of Religious Studies at Oregon State University, for conducting the survey.

48 Some of us may feel a responsibility to the church as well, simply because many of us are involved in the education of future clergy, whether as seminarians or pre-seminarians. I have suggested elsewhere (in "The Historical Jesus and Christian Preaching"; see n. 13 above) that the mainstream church is rather quiet about the historical Jesus, in part because of the difficulty of adapting the eschatological Jesus to Christian preaching and teaching. Obviously, the needs or wishes of the church cannot be a factor in our historical judgments; but if a non-eschatological Jesus is judged on historical grounds to be more probable, then seminarians deserve to know that.

Beyond that, the disappearance of the consensus creates exciting possibilities for us. There is the opportunity to construct a variety of images of a non-eschatological Jesus. Just as the eschatological Jesus has appeared in many guises, so the task of historical clarification and illumination will require a variety of portraits of a non-eschatological Jesus. There is the excitement of looking at texts in new ways and of doing our more detailed studies without presuming the validity of the eschatological framework as a paradigmatic conviction.<sup>49</sup>

As we engage in these tasks, I think it is likely that the question of Jesus' relationship to culture—both to culture understood as "conventional wisdom" and culture understood as "social world"—will become more prominent in our work. To a considerable extent, we have not dealt much with that question in this century, at least partly because the eschatological Jesus obscured that question. We have tended to assume that, because Jesus proclaimed the end of the world, he was therefore not interested in questions pertaining to a continuing social and historical order. But if we see Jesus non-eschatologically, then those questions return as significant questions. The movement which Jesus began will be seen not as an end-of-the-world movement unconcerned with culture but as a "contrast-society" or "alternative community,"<sup>50</sup> a community seeking to live in history under the kingship of God.

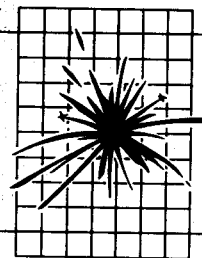
49 Our view on this deeply affects how we see texts. In recent decades much work on the gospels (and the New Testament generally) has assumed that a major issue for the early church was the delay of the parousia. For example, Conzelmann's seminal work on Luke sees Luke's picture of Jesus as "the middle of time" as a substitute for a more original image of Jesus as "the end of time." The gospel is understood as an attempt to deal with the fact that the end did not come as the early Christians (and presumably Jesus) expected. Of course, some texts do deal with the delay of the parousia (though not all that many). But there are two very different ways of "seeing" what was going on. If we assume the eschatological model of Jesus, then the inference follows that the early church as a whole was saddled with the problem that the world did not come to an end as he had expected. The image is of a disappointed community, struggling to accommodate its founder's mistake. But if we assume that the belief in the return of Jesus originated after Easter, then we would understand the texts which address the delay of the parousia as indicators that there were some early Christians who took the expected return of Jesus in both an imminent and literal sense and some who did not. That is, the different views of the end (including its timing) reflect different views held within the church, rather than the church as a whole trying to cope with the mistaken expectation of Jesus himself.

50 The phrases come from, respectively, Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, and Brueggemann, *The Bible Makes Sense*.

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## The Beatitudes and Turn the Other Cheek

RECOMMENDATIONS AND POLLING

Robert W. Funk

### O. Introduction

These remarks review the discussion of two sets of aphorisms by the Jesus Seminar: the beatitudes and the cluster beginning with Turn the Other Cheek. I propose, first of all, to summarize the preparatory papers by M. Eugene Boring and J. Dominic Crossan in some detail. I will then report the voting of the Fellows and Associates of the Seminar who were present at the St. Meinrad meeting, as well as the votes of Fellows and others who returned mail ballots. A regional Seminar met in Philadelphia in May 1986 and took votes on the beatitudes: I will also report those votes. Finally, I will endeavor to interpret for the non-specialist the underlying assumptions that prompted many Fellows to vote as they did.

The texts on which the analyses and recommendations are based are drawn from Crossan's *Sayings Parallels: A Workbook for the Jesus Tradition*. The relevant inventory numbers are, for the beatitudes: 36-43; 217-220; and for Turn the Other Cheek: 60-61. Inventory items 36-43 are aphorisms 3-10 (given in Crossan as A3-10); items 217-220 are aphorisms A184-187; and items 60-61 are aphorisms A27-28. The double numbering system was devised to make it possible to refer to inventory items by an absolute number and yet to indicate the type of saying (parable, aphorism, dialogue, story) for each item. For the benefit of those who do not have Crossan's *Sayings Parallels* in front of them, there are 503 items in the inventory, of which 33 are parables, 291 are aphorisms, 81 are dialogues, and the balance, 98, are stories.

The chapter and verse references that correspond to these items are given below in the discussion and in the polling tables.