

**The Openness of the Kingdom:
Jesus' Apocalyptic Predictions Reimagined as Conditional by Early Apologists
by
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“The time is filled up and the Kingdom of God is almost here; repent and believe in the good news!” (Mark 1:15)

Likely because it signals he was mistaken, many Christians throughout history have struggled with Jesus' eschatological proclamations and apparent expectation that the end of the evil age was imminently drawing near. Jesus is remembered as telling his disciples, “I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power” (Mark 9:1). Many Christian scholars have suggested that the kingdom came spiritually,¹ was reinterpreted,² and others that the kingdom came in the form of an

¹ This word is used in so many different ways, at present; it seems to have almost no identifiable meaning. John Dominic Crossan thinks that Jesus' kingdom was a “sapiential Kingdom” which looks to the “present rather than the future... a style of life for now rather than a hope of life for the future.” Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 471. Bruce Chilton says Marcus Borg maintains that “Jesus spoke of the kingdom in order to refer to his own mystical or spiritual experience.” *Pure Kingdom: Jesus' Vision of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 16.

² It seems striking that many alongside N.T. Wright argue for Jesus redefining the kingdom of God. In reading parts of his landmark work, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, it is remarkable how subtle this redefining is. If Jesus truly meant to change the traditional, accepted mode of thought, it could be assumed that he would go to great lengths to make this clear. There are only very few passages that would indicate that this is what took place, and even then there are alternative translation and interpretive options, many of which Wright expounds upon. For instance, After quoting Luke 17:20-21, Wright contends,

The italicized phrase translates *entos hymon*, an expression that has given rise to much controversy. It has been read as meaning “within you” in the sense of “in your heart, as opposed to in your political or material circumstances”: that is, the kingdom is an inward, not an outward reality. It has also been read as meaning “in your midst”: that is, the kingdom is already present, here among you. Of these two, the latter is closer to the meaning we would have guessed from the rest of Jesus' work. But philosophically the meaning is most likely to be a third option: “within your grasp.” “If you had eyes to see,” Jesus seems to be saying, “you could reach out and take hold of the new reality that is already at work.” This reading is backed up by the following verses (17.22-37). (*Jesus and The Victory of God*, 469)

Describing the idea that Jesus was establishing a kingdom by gathering a renewed people, Wright writes, In Jesus' own century, Judas the Galilean might well have told his followers that, by joining his movement, they were part of the new, and final, reconstitution of Israel, even though there was still the little matter of throwing off the Roman yoke to be settled. Bar-Kochba went so far as to have coins minted, numbering the years from “1”, indicating the beginning of his declaration of independence. He behaved towards his followers as though he were already king. But his “inaugurated eschatology,” too, remained in need of a final victory, which never came. If we had asked Bar-Kochba or his followers whether they were living in the time of the kingdom, their very coins – the only real “mass media” of the ancient world – would have answered in the affirmative. Denial would have meant disloyalty. But if we conclude from this that they had no future hope, nothing left to aspire to, that their god had established his kingdom once and for all, we would be ludicrously wrong. Once we think historically, the language of the kingdom present yet future, already established yet needing still to win decisive victory, makes perfect sense” (*The Victory of God*, 467-468).

established Christian church. Still others maintain that some unidentifiable form of the kingdom actually came; yet there is more to come. I propose, that in the mind of many early followers of Jesus, the fulfillment or realization of Jesus' heralded kingdom³ was reconceptualized as contingent upon the repentance of the Abrahamic people and thereby acceptance of his message – a *conditional* kingdom only for a eagerly prepared people.⁴ In suggesting that early devoted apologists believed Israel's rejection of the gospel message delayed the kingdom's establishment at that time in history, they were able to see Jesus in line with many other Semitic prophets of old who proclaimed a message of blessing or cursing from their God, which was oftentimes, if not every time, conditioned upon reactions and responses of the people. This paradigm is most clearly delineated in Jeremiah 18:7-10.

If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it (NIV).

I would suggest that exegetes take the abundant number of clear texts, and the already established framework that has been discussed above as an interpretive grid for the few supposed “redefinition” passages.

3 This paper largely presupposes that the Israelites did not expect to go and be with God, but that God would come and dwell among them (Ezek 37:26-28; Rev 21:3). In other words, they did not expect to go to heaven, but that God would renew and restore the earth. This is a literal, physical, earthly view of the kingdom of God. James D.G. Dunn says, “talk of ‘entering’ the kingdom or ‘reclining at table’ in the kingdom, or of being ‘great’ in the kingdom obviously evokes a spatial or territorial image.” *Jesus Remembered: Christianity in the Making Volume 1* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 388. Marius Reiser says, “Jesus thus shared the early Jewish expectation of the eschatological event that brings salvation and judgment with it...he also thinks of salvation, in principle, not as other worldly and transcendent, but as this-worldly and earthly.” *Jesus and Judgment: The Eschatological Proclamation in Its Jewish Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 316. For a fantastic overview of the most relevant motifs which Jesus' kingdom would have evoked among Jews of the 1st century, see Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 393-396. Although I believe the kingdom to be a literal, physical, earthly establishment of a Davidic king, ruling/governing an Israelite people, extending out from the city of Jerusalem, I also acknowledge that kings were anointed sometimes long before being enthroned. Along these lines, Jesus, coming to see himself as the Davidic King seemed to be gathering for himself a kingdom, that is a renewed and purified people of God, a true Israel, a penitent group of Jews that would constitute a godly remnant. In this manner, the kingdom can be said to be present. This is cryptic at best and would not have been understood easily. This perspective does not deny that in its truest, purest and most natural form, the kingdom of God evokes images of prosperity, long life, peace, justice, and joy. Jesus seems to have illuminated the idea of resurrection of the dead and immortality, from the Hebrew Bible.

4 Upon further reflection, it seems that it was the leadership of Israel that primarily rejected Jesus and his message. As the shepherds and gate keepers of Israel, the ordinary people followed suit as sheep and some were virtually prevented from joining the kingdom movement. Jesus condemned the Pharisee's for this very thing, “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to” (Matt 23:13 NIV).

This “Openness of God” conception provides a framework for classical and contemporary apologists to explain why various prophecies go unrealized, specifically why Jesus’ expectations did not manifest, however, it also increases doubts among skeptics that see such explanations as *ad hoc*, just a rationalization, another attempt to salvage the misconceptions of mistaken religionists.

Understanding why the early followers of Jesus depicted him as anticipating an imminent apocalypse that could be delayed is dependent on a few assumptions. 1. An early Jewish/Christian belief that Jesus was an apocalypticist. 2. That early Jewish/Christian belief saw God’s plans as sometimes contingent and thus changeable. 3. That early Jewish/Christian expectations of the kingdom were not realized and thus they had a need to explain what had happened.

What is the Nature of the Kingdom that Jesus Proclaimed?

Although there is widespread misunderstanding and even confusion about what Jesus meant by the coming kingdom of God, I think Ehrman makes some critical observations that are worth noting.

For one thing, almost all scholars today would agree that when Jesus talks about the Kingdom of God, he is *not* referring to “heaven” – in the sense of the place that your soul goes, God willing, when you die. To be sure, the Kingdom of God has *some* relationship to “heaven” as the place where God is enthroned; but when Jesus talks about the Kingdom, he appears to refer principally to something here on earth – where God will at some point *begin* to rule as he already *does* rule up above. This is in full keeping with the Jewish background to Jesus’ life and thought.⁵

It is important to remember that the hope of Israel and the promises of God have always been that God would dwell in their midst, *not* vice versa.

I will put my sanctuary among them forever. My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people. Then the nations will know that I the LORD make Israel holy, when my sanctuary is among them forever” (Ezek 37:26-28 NIV).

⁵ Ehrman, *Jesus*, 142.

Probably echoing this very passage, a loud voice from the throne in John's Apocalypse is heard saying; "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God" (Rev 21:3 NIV).

In terms of the physicality of the kingdom and the reign of God, Ehrman contends,

[Jesus] does not appear to be thinking in purely symbolic terms about God becoming the ruler of your heart. For he often describes the Kingdom with graphically tactile language. Jesus talks about the Kingdom of God "coming in power," about people "entering into" the Kingdom, about people "eating and drinking in the Kingdom" with the Jewish ancestors, about his disciples serving as "rulers" of the Kingdom, sitting on actual "thrones" in the royal court.⁶

Jesus seems to regularly speak with common, ordinary language that would lead the majority in his day to imagine, visualize, and dream of a physical, earthly, and literal kingdom to be established in Israel. "Truly I say to you, in the renewed world, when the Son of Man is sitting on the throne of his glory, you (disciples) also will be seated on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Matt 19:28; cf. Luke 22:30).⁷ And again,

There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth,⁸ when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out. People will come from the east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God (Q: Luke 13:23-29; Matt 8:11-12).

References such as these are scattered throughout the earliest records. Using a different approach to determine the character of Jesus' message and ministry, Bart Ehrman argues persuasively that, since Jesus' ministry began with his association with the one who was to prepare the way of the LORD,⁹ the apocalyptic prophet, John the Baptist¹⁰ and ends with a

6 Ehrman, *Jesus*, 143.

7 Ehrman, *Jesus*, 143

8 Many have taken words such as these to mean that some will experience torment, agony and red, hot pain for all eternity in the flames of hell, whereas the context and other biblical data would tell a different story. Mainly, that some Jews will be *angry* (gnashing of teeth) when they are excluded from the kingdom while the Gentiles are welcomed to the messianic banquet. For background and context of this Hebraism, see Job 16:9; Psalms 35:16; 37:12; 112:10; Lam 2:16 and Acts 7:54.

9 N.T. Wright has popularized what has been called 'Exile Theology.' This notion would probably best make sense of John the Baptist being the one who prepares the way of YHWH. After cataloging an impressively long list of quotations from the Hebrew Bible that speak of YHWH returning to his people, he states,

Never do we hear that the pillar of cloud and fire which accompanied the Israelites in the wilderness has led the people back from their exile. At no point do we hear that YHWH has now gloriously returned to Zion. At no point is the house again filled with the cloud which veils his glory. At no point is the rebuilt Temple universally hailed as the true restored shrine spoken of by Ezekiel.

community of apocalyptic Jews who believed in Jesus,¹¹ we then have the key to understanding what happened in-between.¹² Ehrman asks, “How could both the beginning and the end be apocalyptic if the middle was not as well?”¹³

Apocalyptic Imminence

Moreover, John and Jesus were not merely proclaiming that there would be a kingdom of peace, prosperity and self-governance, for this was already widely accepted, but that the anticipated kingdom was imminent, on the horizon, “at hand.”¹⁴ Jesus is even portrayed as one who sent his disciples on their very last mission, “When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes” (Matt 10:23 NIV). The imminence language is so strong in this likely early gospel strata that skeptics are left wondering why it remains in the tradition and not clearly redacted as others.

This is not an isolated text, for Jesus is portrayed as urging Israel to be reconciled, at the last moment, even on the way to the judge (Luke 12:58).¹⁵ After outlining the apocalypse in detail, Jesus is remembered as saying, “I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened” (Matt 24:34). W.G. Kummel yields a number of synoptic passages which indicate that “this generation” means distinctly the men

Significantly, at no point, either, is there a final decisive victory over Israel’s enemies, or the establishment of a universally welcomed royal dynasty. (Wright, *Jesus and The Victory of God*, 621)

After quoting post-biblical writings that describe the same concept Wright goes on to say,

There is ample evidence that most second-Temple Jews who gave any thought to the matter were hoping for YHWH to return, to dwell once again in the Temple in Jerusalem as he had done in the time of the old monarchy. Significantly, at no point, either, is there a final decisive victory over Israel’s enemies, or the establishment of a universally welcomed royal dynasty. (Wright, *Jesus and The Victory of God*, 623)

10 John compared imminent judgment to an ax that was at the root of a tree Matt 3:1-10; Luke 3:7-9.

11 1 Thess 4:13-18; 1 Cor 15:51-57.

12 See Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*. Second Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 232-233.

13 Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 233.

14 Dunn supports NT Wright who says, “To say ‘the kingdom of God is at hand’ makes sense only when the hearers know ‘the story so far’ and are waiting for it to be completed.” *Jesus Remembered*, 387.

15 W.G. Kummel says that this text produces a meaning that is “free from objection, it corresponds undoubtedly with the original meaning of this text, which must therefore be understood as a pointer to the necessity of preparedness in view of the pressing imminence of the end.” James D.G. Dunn and Scot McKnight, eds., *The Historical Jesus in Recent Research* (vol. 10 of *Sources for Biblical and Theological Study*; ed. David W. Baker; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 192.

and women of Jesus time¹⁶ and concludes, “the coming of the end during the lifetime of this generation is predicted unambiguously in Mark 13:30 which signifies, as in Mark 9:1, that at any rate some of the men alive at present will witness the *eschaton* in their lifetime.”¹⁷ The parables of the waiting servants (Mark 13:34-36; Luke 12:36-38; Matt 24:42, 45-51 = Luke 12:42-46), the thief in the night (Matt 24:43 = Luke 12:39), and the ten virgins (Matt 25:1-13) all conjure up images of vigilant watchfulness.¹⁸ The exact date of the coming is unknown, but what is known is that the arrival is expected at any time. It is important to note that Jesus is not portrayed as telling his disciples that he is unsure of the *century* or *millennia*, but merely the exact *day* or *hour* of the *eschaton*. The parable of the fig tree is of importance in this matter. Jesus is represented as saying, “Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door” (Mark 13:28-29). Since when does summer delay 2000 years? Luke connects the kingdom of God to what is right at the door saying, “when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near” (Luke 21:31).

The Flexible Nature of YHWH and Thus Prophecy

The deity depicted by the Hebrew Bible and NT is one that is capable of learning, one that tests his people to find out information, is uncertain of outcomes, does not know the future, and experiences regret. In fact, there are nearly forty texts that explicitly say God relents and changes his mind.¹⁹ Prophetic utterances are portrayed as flexible and oftentimes contingent upon responses and reactions to God’s initiatives. Jonah, desiring the destruction of Nineveh, did not want to proclaim judgment to them precisely because he believed the people might repent, God’s mind would change, and they would be spared. Curiously, there are no explicit conditions attached to his message, “At the end of forty days, Nineveh will be overthrown!” As Jonah expected, the city repented, and we read, “God relented concerning the judgment he had threatened them with and he did not destroy them” (Jonah 3:10 NET).

16 Kummel cites Matt 11:16 = Luke 7:31; Mark 8:12 par. Luke 11:29; especially Matt 23:36 = Luke 11:51. He also mentions Matt 12:39, 45; 16:4 and says that these texts also do not exclude the same basic meaning. See Dunn and McKnight, eds., *The Historical Jesus in Recent Research*, 196.

17 Dunn and McKnight, eds., *The Historical Jesus in Recent Research*, 196.

18 See Dunn and McKnight, eds., *The Historical Jesus in Recent Research*, 190-192.

19 Clark Pinnock (ed.), *The Grace of God, The Will of Man* (Minneapolis, MN Bethany, 1989), p. 176.

If explicit conditions are not necessary for a prophecy to be conditional, could any prophetic utterance be viewed as inherently conditional?

Strategies Amidst Cognitive Dissonance

So what happened to the imminent kingdom that Jesus so fervently proclaimed? How did the early believers and apologists make sense of the continued, ongoing, seemingly perpetual Gentile domination and no Jewish theocracy? It was a pressing question, and one that skeptics raised frequently enough to merit addressing. The author of 2 Peter writes,

“First of all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, ‘Where is this ‘coming’ he promised?’ ... The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (3:3,9 NIV).

Curiously, in this reconceptualization, God did not fail, Jesus was not wrong, but the *people* were wrong not to repent and prepare themselves for the Day of YHWH. It appears that repentance of an ever increasing number of people emerges as a necessary pre-condition for the coming of the kingdom of God. This basic concept of the messianic age requiring a repentant, renewed, and clean people is scattered throughout post-biblical Jewish literature.²⁰ In an often overlooked NT passage, the author of 2 Peter expounds in an eschatological context, that God’s people can hasten the Day of the LORD, that is, “speed its coming”²¹ by holy and godly living. The Talmud encapsulates the idea that the messiah would only bring about the new age if Israel prepared herself by saying, “All the forecast dates [for redemption] have come and gone. Now the matter [of when the Messiah will come] depends only on repentance and good deeds” (Sanhedrin 97b).²² “Eliezer ben Hyrcanus spoke of Israel’s ‘repentance’ as the condition for her liberation from the Romans, the real and final return from the exile.”²³ These passages demonstrate that the idea of God postponing, or delaying an intended plan of messianic restoration based upon an unfavorable disposition of the Israelite nation toward God was within the theological milieu

20 Bar 2:32-4; Tob 13:5f.; Pss. Sol. 18:4-7; Jub. 1:15-23, 23:26, and Philo De Praem. 162-172 make the same point, seemingly as an exegesis of Lev 26:40-5 and Deut 30. I owe this list to a footnote in Wright, *Jesus and The Victory of God*, 249.

21 NIV version of 2 Peter 3:12.

22 David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (Clarksville: Jewish New Testament Publications Inc., Sixth Edition, 1999), 767.

23 Wright, *Jesus and The Victory of God*, 249.

of those in the early messianic community. It appears then that those – perhaps second generation Christians – with the desire to vindicate Jesus’ failed prediction of an imminent kingdom of God utilized it in order to reconcile their expectation of his kingdom and the failure of that expectation to materialize.

This paradigm would likely be superimposed upon Jesus himself – that is, inserted into an ever-changing “Jesus tradition” which finds expression in several New Testament passages. He is depicted in various texts as bemoaning a kingdom that could have arisen but did not. The gospel of Luke paints Jesus in a dejected state, grieving over Israel for not recognizing their failed opportunity for peace, likely a synonym for the kingdom, then pronounces judgment.

Now when Jesus approached and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, ‘If you had only known on this day, even you, the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden²⁴ from your eyes. For the days will come on you when your enemies will build²⁵ an embankment against you and surround you and close in on you from every side. They will demolish you – you and your children within your walls – and they will not leave within you one stone on top of another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God (Luke 19:41-44 NET).

In an earlier passage, after learning that Herod wants to kill him, Luke portrays Jesus as one who intended on corralling a rebellious Israel, without success. Judgment is then pronounced.

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but *you were not willing!* Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” (Luke 13:34-35 NIV).²⁶

Again, according to Luke, was Jesus wrong, or were the gatekeepers of Israel wrong to reject God’s purpose, refusing to repent?

24 A study note in the New English Translation observes, “This becomes an oracle of doom in the classic OT sense; see Luke 13:31-35; 11:49-51; Jer 9:2; 13:7; 14:7. They are now blind and under judgment (Jer 15:5; Ps 122:6).” *New English Translation* (Biblical Studies Press, 2001), 1911.

25 Another NET study note points out,

Jesus now predicted the events that would be fulfilled in the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The details of the siege have led some to see Luke writing this after Jerusalem’s fall, but the language of the verse is like God’s exilic judgment for covenant unfaithfulness (Hab 2:8; Jer 6:6, 14; 8:13-22; 9:1; Ezek 4:2; 26:8; Isa 29:1-4). Specific details are lacking and the procedures described (*build an embankment against you*) were standard Roman military tactics. (*New English Translation*, 1911)

26 Emphasis mine.

But the Pharisees and experts in the law *rejected* God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John [i.e., for repentance in anticipation of God's soon coming judgment and subsequent establishment of Israel into the fullness of God's kingdom] (7:30 NIV).²⁷

It seems that Jesus is now portrayed as believing that what could have come, did not, creating the image in our mind that the cross was Plan B. Moreover, Jesus is even imagined as believing God may have had a Plan C or D and so forth, pleading in Gethsemane, "Abba, Father,' he said, 'everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will'" (Mk 14:36).

Bringing It All Together

When taken collectively, these ideas illuminate and heighten our understanding of how early Messianic Jewish/Christian apologists and thus the communities that were influenced by their records reconciled Jesus' proclamation of an imminent kingdom. While there are multiple strategies employed, including downplaying and reinterpreting Jesus' apocalyptic proclamations, one of them was to see the prophetic utterances of Jesus regarding the kingdom as *conditional* upon a national repentance of Israel. To my mind, seeing Jesus' apocalyptic statements as *contingent*, within the open framework provided by Jeremiah and others, seems to offer the best apologetic tool for those attempting to rescue Jesus and apocalyptic communities from embarrassment. Though this approach offers a feasible explanation for why this or that prophecy never came about, it is however increasingly difficult to employ thousands of years from the initial predictions. The skeptical outlook that acknowledges the unfalsifiable nature of uncertain prophetic proclamations and a God who can endlessly change the plan is thus strengthened since such a method can be applied to almost any failed prophetic utterance. In the end, though we may not agree with early Christian apologetic attempts and interpretations of Jesus, we can at least better understand them.

²⁷ Emphasis mine.

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