

Dale C. Allison, Jr., A Millennial Kingdom in the Teaching
of Jesus?

In the seventh chapter of 4 Ezra, a Jewish pseudepigraphon composed shortly before or shortly after AD 100, the hope of an earthly messianic kingdom (of 400 years duration) /1 is found together with the notion of a supramundane "age to come".

4 Ezra 7.27-31 reads as follows:

And everyone who has been delivered from the evils that I have foretold shall see my wonders. For my son the Messiah /2 shall be revealed with those who are with him, and those who remain shall rejoice four hundred years. And after these years my son the Messiah shall die, and all who draw human breath. And the world shall be turned back to primeval darkness for seven days, as it was at the first beginnings; so that no one shall be left. And after seven days the world, which is not yet awake, shall be roused, and that which is corruptible shall perish (RSV)

In this passage the righteous dead are raised up in order to share in the eternal kingdom of God. They do not participate in the reign of 400 years (see 7.32)

While acknowledging that no one conception was universally held by Jews of the first century, T. Francis Glasson has recently asserted that if there is one view rightly labelled "the late Jewish view", it is that represented by 4 Ezra - a temporary messianic kingdom followed by the resurrection and the new creation. "There is reason to believe that in the time of our Lord, the Jews (apart from the Sadducees) looked for a Messiah as an earthly king, and they expected too the resurrection as the prelude to eternal life in a new universe." /3 Glasson also argues that Jesus' proclamation squared with the then prevalent expectation: he looked for a first fulfilment, a temporary messianic reign (of considerable although unspecified duration), and beyond that to the resurrection and the final fulfilment, a new heaven and a new earth. In addition, the time from Jesus until now,

the time of the church can according to Glasson be legitimately equated with the messianic age. In other words Jesus' expectation of a temporary kingdom has found its fulfilment in the new era that came into the world with the first advent. /4

The purpose of this brief article is to ask what one is to make of Glasson's clear proposals? Did Jesus in fact look forward to and announce a messianic kingdom, a kingdom which can be fairly identified with the course of church history? An answer must begin with this observation: talk of "the late Jewish view" with reference to eschatology is difficult to accept. Few generalisations on this subject including those of Glasson will stand up under close scrutiny. For example, if by "messianic kingdom" one means a blessed era of limited duration (so Glasson), then a number of Jewish writings know of no such kingdom (Daniel; 1 Enoch 6-36; Psalms of Solomon 17; Pseudo-Philo (Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum); and the Similitudes of Enoch (ie 1 Enoch 37-71))

/5 For the idea of two future fulfilments or two decisive climaxes in the eschatological drama plays no role in these books. They all promise an earthly kingdom of eternal or immeasurable continuance or simply a new heaven and a new earth (Dan 2.44; 7.27; 1 Enoch 10.16; Sibylline Oracles 3.49f; Psalms of Solomon 17.4; Pseudo-Philo 3.10 and 1 Enoch 49.2) Recall what the Johannine Jews declared: "We have heard that Christ remains for ever" (eis tōn aiōna; John 12.34). Again it is exceedingly hard to see how Glasson can link up with the so-called "late Jewish view" the expectation that the resurrection of the dead will take place only after the messianic age has run its course. Apart from the fact that this evaluation wrongly presupposes in Judaism a dual eschatological expectation or double horizon and also neglects to acknowledge the existence of those Jews who were at one with the Sadducees in having no doctrine of a resurrection, /6 it must be remarked that at least some rabbis associated the resurrection with the coming of the Messiah. /7 And in any case there was no one rabbinic view. Glasson's statements about the messianic age and the age to come are far more clear and coherent than the statements of the ancient rabbis. /8 Furthermore, few extant apocalypses look forward to a resurrection climaxing the messianic age. 4 Ezra is here an exception. /9 Of the books

that foresee only one future fulfilment or envision only one "end", none, naturally enough, places the resurrection after the time of that fulfilment or "end". On the contrary the resurrection marks the dawn of the promised era (cf Dan 12.1-2; 1 Enoch 22.13; Testament of Benjamin 10.6-8; Ps-Philo 3.10; Rev 20.4-6). /10

If Glasson's generalisations about Jewish eschatology are not persuasive, what about his interpretation of Jesus' predictions? Did Jesus look for an initial fulfilment, an earthly kingdom of temporary duration (which has been realised in the last 2000 years), and past that to a second fulfilment, the age to come? There are at least two obstacles in the way of this understanding of things. First, Jesus' words about the coming kingdom are not so mundane as to find their natural fulfilment in the history of the church. It is important in this connection that the portrayal of a coming earthly kingdom of God is, in Jewish sources, almost invariably pictured as bringing sweeping changes and great wonders, even in the sphere of nature. According to Jubilees 23, the coming time will be without Satan or any evil destroyer, and children will grow to be a thousand years old, and there will not be old men for all will be as youths. According to 4 Ezra 7.25-27, the messianic kingdom will bring the descent of an invisible city and an invisible land, the heavenly Jerusalem and paradise. And according to 2 Baruch 73, there will be no more war, disease or anxiety; joy, rest and gladness will come to all; passion and hatred and untimely deaths will depart; and gladness will so cover the earth as to transform the animals into harmless servants of children (cf. Papias in Irenaeus, Against Heresies 5.33.3-4). Even granted the good measure of symbolism in these exalted depictions of the future, the apocalyptic seers obviously believed in a God who would some day transform the physical environment. Jesus evidently thought the same. "Blessed are you poor for yours is the kingdom of God" (Luke 6.20b cf Matt 5.3). "Blessed are you who hunger now for you will be satisfied" (Luke 6.21 a and par). "Blessed are you who weep now for you shall laugh" (Luke 6.21b and par). The dominical beatitudes straightforwardly declare that the kingdom of God will banish hunger, poverty and

suffering. They thus envision a world very much different from the one we know now. /11 Of similar import is Matt 8. 11-12 (and par) which foretells a messianic feast in which the resurrected patriarchs will participate. "Many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham. Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" (cf Mark 14.25). /12 Has this promise been fulfilled in the church? The question answers itself. The coming of the eschatological kingdom of which Jesus spoke can scarcely be identified with a history that has seen want, unrighteousness and war. When Jesus referred to the interim period between his death and consummation, he spoke not of a millenium but thus: "the poor you always have with you" (Mark 14.7). /13

In the second place, once the notion of a "late Jewish view" on eschatological matters is, as it should be, laid to rest. there is no longer any good reason to suppose that Jesus had in mind a temporary messianic kingdom which would be concluded by the resurrection of the dead. One should, admittedly, concur with Glasson on one point: the words of Jesus do know of a present fulfilment and of a future consummation. But this is not to be interpreted in terms of the scheme, messianic age followed by the age to come. Such a scheme is nowhere explicit in the authentic words of Jesus, and an alternative interpretation lies nearer to hand. As I have argued elsewhere /14 and others have argued before, /15, it seems probable enough that Jesus conceived of the arrival of God's eschatological kingdom as being composed of several significant episodes, some of which had already taken place, some of which were taking place, and some of which would take place later ("inaugurated eschatology"). Glasson has not, in my opinion, brought forward any compelling evidence for abandoning this position - which can appeal to Jewish parallels /16 - in favour of another, namely, that Jesus anticipated a temporary messianic kingdom.

If Glasson's arguments are not persuasive, what is the alternative? Jesus frequently used symbolic language when speaking of the coming redemption, and he apparently was little concerned to satisfy curiosity by giving predictive descriptions of the hoped for golden age. But we are not wholly in the dark, entirely without evidence. There has come down to us no indisputably genuine logion in which the total destruction of this world and its replacement by a new

aeon is clearly implied. /17 Thus, although certainty on the matter is scarcely attainable, one is inclined to think that for Jesus as for the authors of 1 Enoch 6-36; Sibylline Oracle 3; Psalms of Solomon 17 and 1 Enoch 37-71 the eschatological promises were to find their realisation not in a completely new world but in a transformed world, an old world made new, in which the boundaries between heaven and earth would begin to disappear. There is moreover nothing which points to the temporal character of the coming era - although its everlastingness is also nowhere made perfectly plain. The question of duration is simply not addressed. One might admittedly bring Mark 13.31 into the picture. "Heaven and earth will pass away but my words will not pass away". But most scholars now reject the dominical origin of this saying. /18 And even if the verse were against the weight of contemporary opinion to be traced back to Jesus, it has little bearing on the question under discussion. For Mark 13.31 simply takes up a commonplace ie belief in the eventual end of the world (cf Gen 8.22; Ps 102.25f; Isaiah 51.6) in order to make a pointed contrast: Jesus' words will outlast anything. The implied destruction of heaven and earth is rhetorical and in any case not brought into connection with the kingdom of God. This makes it hazardous to argue the Mark 13.31 presupposes a millennial era; one cannot legitimately read so much into the verse. Our conclusion, then, is this: Jesus probably did not envision a temporary messianic kingdom. /19

Notes

1. The length of the messianic kingdom was variously estimated: see H.L. Strack & P. Billerbeck, Kommentar zum NT aus Talmud und Midrash (München, C.H. Beck, 1926-63), 3.824-27
2. The text is disputed; see Stephen Gero, "'My Son the Messiah': a note on 2 Esdr 7.28-29," ZNW 66 (1975) 264-7.
3. T. Francis Glasson, Jesus and the End of the World (Edinburgh 1980), 85. Cf p122

4. *ibid*, 60-93, 120-43
5. For discussion see D.S. Russell, The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic 200BC-100AD, OT Library (Philadelphia 1964) 286-290
6. Cf Jub. 23.31; 1 Enoch 103.1-8; 4 Maccabees; and for discussion, G.W.E. Nickelsburg Jr, Resurrection, Immortality and Eternal life in Intertestamental Judaism, (Cambridge Mass.1972), 177-80
7. Note b.Sanh.92a; Gen.Rab.96.5; and other texts listed by Strack-Billerbeck, op.cit. 3.828-30
8. Cf J. Klausner, The Messianic Idea in Israel from Its Beginnings to the Completion of the Mishnah, ET by W.F. Spinespring, (New York 1955), 408-419)
9. 2 Baruch is not clear on the point. 30.1-2 can be taken to mean either that the resurrection will occur before the messianic kingdom or at its close.
11. Many now refer the beatitudes to the presence of the kingdom of God; so.eg, Paul Hoffmann and Volker Eid, Jesus von Nazareth und eine christliche Moral: Sittliche Perspektiven der Verkündigung Jesu, QD 66 (Freiburg 1975) 29-39. But R. Schnackenburg is right: "In all the beatitudes the future salvation is already now spoken to the hearers, but only as that which will first be completely fulfilled in the future"; cf Schnackenburg's review of Jean Carmignac, Le Mirage de l'Eschatologie, in BZ 24 (1980), 280.
10. The author of Revelation has two resurrections: see 20.5. Perhaps the seer followed Ezekial's order: "resurrection" and new age (chs 36f) followed by the assault of Gog and Magog (chs 38-39) followed by the final restoration (Chs 40-48).
12. For a recent discussion on this saying and a defence of its basic authenticity see Bruce D. Chilton, God in Strength: Jesus' Announcement of the Kingdom SNTSU B 1 (Freistadt 1979) 181-201.
13. On the authenticity of this and its setting see Rudolph

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Pesch, "Die Salbung Jesu in Bethanien (Mk 14.3-9)," in Orientierung an Jesus. Zur Theologie der Synoptiker. Für Josef Schmid, ed. P. Hoffmann, with N. Brox and W. Pesch (Freiburg, 1976), 278-281

14. Dale C. Allison, Jr., The End of the Ages has come: An Early Interpretation of the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus (Philadelphia 1985), ch 11
15. So eg Robert F. Berkey, ἐγγίζειν, φθάνειν, and Realised Eschatology," JBL 82 (1963), 177-87 and Lloyd Gaston, No Stone on Another: Studies in the Significance of the Fall of Jerusalem in the Synoptic Gospels, NovTSup (Leiden 1970) 413ff
16. See Jacob Licht, "Time and Eschatology in Apocalyptic Literature and Qumran," JJS 16 (1965), 177-82, on the Apocalypse of Weeks (cf 1 Enoch 93 + 91.12-17), and Allison, op.cit. for Jubilees 23.
17. Matt 5.18 might be cited as an exception but many dispute the authenticity of this verse; in any case the Lucan parallel (16.17) which may be judged more primitive (cf R.H. Gundry, Matthew. A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art (Grand Rapids, 1982) pp79f) says only that "it is easier" for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void. For further discussion see E. Schweizer "The Good New According to Matthew" (ET, Atlanta 1975) 104f and Anton Vögtle, Das Neue Testament und die Zukunft des Kosmos, Kommentare und Beiträge zum Alten und Neuen Testament (Düsseldorf, 1970), 99-107.
18. Cf. Rudolph Pesch, Das Markusevangelium II Teil. Kommentar zu Kap 8.27-16.20, HTKNT II/2 (Freiburg, 1977), 311.
19. The post-Easter conviction that Jesus Christ even now reigns (1C 15.13-28) is not evidence against our conclusion. The conviction did not derive from the pre-Easter proclamation of Jesus himself but was an outgrowth of the appearances of the risen Lord.
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