

Jesus And The Jewish Nation

G. B. Caird

M.A., D.Phil., Hon.D.D.

*Senior Tutor of
Mansfield College, Oxford*

**The Ethel M. Wood Lecture
delivered before the University of London
on 9 March 1965**

[p.3]

Anyone who believes that in the life and teaching of Christ God has given a unique revelation of his character and purpose is committed by this belief, whether he likes it or not, whether he admits it or not, to the quest of the historical Jesus. Without the Jesus of history the Christ of faith is merely a docetic figure, a figment of pious imagination. The Christian religion claims to be founded on historic fact, on events which happened *sub Pontio Pilato*; and having appealed to history, by history it must be justified. But where in the Gospels, after a century or more of exposure to the corrosions of criticism, are we to find history, uncontaminated by the piety of those early generations whose needs and interests were unquestionably influential in determining the selection of the traditions about Jesus which have survived and the shape in which they came to be written down? This is the question which has rightly dominated the study of the Gospels for two generations, and to which I shall try to make a small contribution in this lecture, with due appreciation to Mrs Ethel M. Wood and the University of London for giving me the opportunity to do so.

One answer to this question, which still finds a certain amount of support, is that associated for the past forty years with the name of Rudolf Bultmann. In 1926 Bultmann wrote: 'Critical investigation shows that the whole tradition about, Jesus which appears in the three synoptic gospels is

[p.4]

composed of a series of layers which can on the whole be clearly distinguished.' Having stripped off the Hellenistic layer, which owes its origin to the Gentile communities in which the Gospels were actually written, we are left with Palestinian material, where again 'different layers can be distinguished, in which whatever betrays the specific interests of the church... must be rejected as secondary.'¹ In all this Bultmann was, however, by no means original. Twenty-five years earlier Paul Schmiedel, in the massive essay on the Gospels which he contributed to the *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, had declared that five sayings only could be regarded as authentic, on the grounds that they could not conceivably have been invented by the early church. These he called the 'foundation pillars for a truly scientific life of Jesus'; and it is interesting to note that only two of them have since gone unchallenged (Mark 10-17—'Why do you call me good?' and Mark 3.21—'He is out of his mind.'). In the same year Wilhelm Wrede was arguing in his work on the Messianic Secret² that so all-pervasive is the

¹ *Jesus* (Deutsche Bibliothek, 1926; Eng. tr. by L. P. Smith and E. Huntress: *Jesus and the Word*, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), pp 12-13.

² *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien* (Vanderhoeck and Ruprecht, 1901).

influence of church theology in the Gospels that not even a kernel may be attributed to Jesus, unless that kernel is so hard, so special, so incompatible with its context that it could not conceivably be attributed to the church. It is the paradox of synoptic studies that the most sceptical and devastating results have been achieved by those who set out to provide a firm historical foundation on which the superstructure of faith might with confidence be reared. *Absit omen.*

I should perhaps make it plain at the outset that I do not subscribe to this school of criticism. I have never been able to persuade myself that the interests of Jesus and those of the early church were so mutually exclusive that what may be

[p.5]

ascribed to the one must be denied to the other. It is therefore interesting to discover that Bultmann himself declines to put his own cardinal principle into practice with the ruthless logic of Schmiedel and Wrede. It is essential to his conception of the gospel that two historical statements can be made about Jesus: that he was a messianic prophet who proclaimed the inbreaking of God's sovereign rule, and that he was a rabbi who argued with other rabbis about the interpretation of the Jewish Law. He recognizes that both these elements in the tradition fall within the interests of the early church, yet he defends their authenticity. Of the one he says: 'The certainty with which the Christian community puts the eschatological preaching into the mouth of Jesus is hard to understand if he did not really preach it'—a conservative principle astonishingly at variance with his major premise; and of Jesus as rabbi he says: 'The disputes between Jesus and the opponents were now recounted and written down as models, and were naturally told in such a way as to correspond to the interests of the church.' In neither case is he prepared to say: 'Whatever betrays the specific interests of the church... must be rejected as secondary.'

Nevertheless Bultmann's principle has a certain negative validity. If we find in the tradition something which corresponds to the interests of the early church, it is false logic to suppose that it cannot therefore be a genuine teaching of Jesus. But if we find in the tradition a large body of material which has no direct relation to the life, needs, and interests of the primitive church, then we have every right to assume that we are in touch with solid historical fact. Now my contention is that the Gospels contain a very large amount of material which links the ministry and teaching of Jesus with the history, politics, aspirations, and destiny of the Jewish nation. Early in the history of the church the gospel broke out from its Jewish cocoon to become a universal faith. The

[p.6]

Jewish nation was regarded as a persecuting opponent, against which the church had to defend itself; and the idea that this nation had once occupied the forefront of the gospel message, though it was never wholly forgotten, slipped into the background. The result is that the evangelists record the facts to which I shall draw your attention, but without evincing any special interest in them. They record, for example, that among the Twelve one was a member of the Jewish resistance movement and another belonged to the group of Quislings who had taken service under the government and were hated for fraternizing with the enemy; yet they never so much as hint at the personal strain that must have been generated when these two were thrown regularly into each other's company. They record the death of John the Baptist,

but it is Josephus, not Mark, who gives us the political explanation of that tragic event. They tell us of the release of Barabbas, 'who had committed murder in the insurrection', without any reference to that series of violent revolts, suppressed with a growing ruthlessness, which is the history of first-century Judaism. But if we admit that the evangelists were largely indifferent to Jewish politics, this does not mean that Jesus shared their indifference.

I

We begin, then, at the beginning. It is the consensus of all four Gospels, confirmed in the preaching tradition of the speeches in Acts, that the beginning of the gospel was the baptism proclaimed by John and the fact that Jesus went to be baptized. Now John announced the imminent arrival of a crisis, which he called 'the wrath to come'. The woodsman had his axe already poised to cut down the rotten tree, the farmer had his winnowing shovel in his hand, ready to separate the wheat from the chaff. John has sometimes been

[p.7]

portrayed as a prophet of sheer gloom, taking a ghoulish delight in the coming destruction of the ungodly; but this is to do less than justice to his imagery. The object of winnowing is not to collect enough chaff to have a glorious bonfire, but to gather the wheat into the granary; the bonfire is purely incidental. In other words, John's crisis was one which would determine who among the Jews belonged to the true Israel. 'Don't start saying,' he warned them, ' "I am racially descended from Abraham"; for God can raise up children to Abraham from the stones of the desert.' Descent from Abraham will not guarantee membership in the new Israel, nor will lack of it be a disqualification. In the coming crisis race will not count, only conduct. John accordingly summoned the Jews to a national movement of repentance, and his baptism was the proleptic symbol of admission to the Israel of the new age.

And Jesus went to be baptized. Why? The baptism of Jesus was early found to be an embarrassment to the church, both because it seemed to imply that he was John's subordinate, and because it suggested that he personally experienced the need for forgiveness. This embarrassment is further evidence in support of the point I have already made, that the early church showed all too little interest in the political background to the ministry of Jesus. For the simple explanation is that Jesus recognized the national character of John's summons to repentance and accepted his own involvement in the national life of his people. But this is to say that from the outset of his ministry Jesus was concerned with questions of national policy: What does it mean to be the Chosen Nation of God? How can Israel preserve her character as the holy nation in a world overrun and controlled by pagans? What must Israel do if at God's winnowing she is to prove wheat, and not chaff?

In the middle of his ministry Jesus sent his disciples out on a missionary tour. The instructions he gave them have

[p.8]

come down to us in several forms, drawn from at least four strands of tradition; and in details they differ. But in one essential respect they all agree. The mission was to be conducted with

the utmost urgency. The missionaries were to travel light and travel fast. They were to greet nobody on the road; not that Jesus set a premium on bad manners, but because the endless civilities of oriental etiquette would consume more time than they could afford. They were to eat whatever was put before them, without pausing to enquire, as a good Pharisee would have done, whether their host had conformed with all the levitical food laws, which even Peter had observed from his youth. They were not to waste time in any place that was slow to give them a hearing. Why the desperate hurry? Albert Schweitzer had good reasons for picking on this question as the key to the understanding of Jesus' ministry. His answer was that Jesus expected the coming of the Son of Man, God's final and decisive intervention in the history of mankind, and that when this hope was frustrated he went to his death in order to force God's hand. Schweitzer's answer has long since been found inadequate, but his question remains. Why the hurry? The more probable answer is that Jesus was working against time to prevent the end of Israel's world, that the haste of the mission was directly connected with the many sayings which predict the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple. He believed that Israel was at the cross-roads, that she must choose between two conceptions of her national destiny, and that the time for choice was terrifyingly short. This explains why, in his instructions to his disciples, he speaks of 'towns where they receive you' and 'towns where they do not receive you'. He seems to have expected not individual but mass response. 'It shall be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah in the judgment than for that town.' The disciples were not evangelistic preachers, sent out to save individual souls for some unearthly paradise. They were

[p.9]

couriers proclaiming a national emergency and conducting a referendum on a question of national survival.

This reading of the gospel story receives strong confirmation from the criticisms which Jesus is recorded to have made against his contemporaries. I leave on one side the criticisms of the Pharisees, which are in a category of their own, and concentrate on those directed against 'this generation' or Jerusalem. According to Mark (8.11-13) Jesus said: 'An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, and no sign shall be given them.' Matthew (12,38-40) and Luke (11.29-30) add 'except the sign of Jonah', and each then supplies his own explanation of that enigmatic phrase. I think we may take Mark's word for it that Jesus met the demand for irrefragable proof of his credentials with a flat negative, for 'except the sign of Jonah' does not constitute a serious qualification. Jonah was sent to Nineveh with a message of extreme urgency: 'Within forty days Nineveh shall be destroyed'; and the Ninevites did not wait to examine his credentials. To those who were spiritually alive, who had any sort of love and loyalty to God, the urgent warning of Jesus should have needed no more authentication than Jonah had; and, because they failed to recognize the word of the God they claimed to serve, they were stamped as an irreligious and disloyal generation. To this saying both Matthew and Luke have added the twin sayings about the Queen of Sheba and the men of Nineveh, each of whom responded to the best revelation available in their day. In the great assize they will be called as witnesses, and their evidence will secure the condemnation of 'this generation', because it has failed to respond to a fuller revelation.

In these sayings it is not at once clear what Jesus means by 'this generation' or what form he expected their sentence to take. It is possible to assume that he was thinking of his

contemporaries as individuals and envisaging them on trial at the last judgment. No such interpretation is possible in

[p.10]

the next example. 'The Wisdom of God has said, "I will send them prophets and messengers; and some of them they will persecute and kill, so that this generation will have to answer for the blood of all the prophets shed since the foundation of the world"' (Luke 11.49-51; cf. Matt. 23.34-35) Here there can be no question of individual responsibility at the last judgment. It is the whole nation of the time of Jesus which, in the preaching of John and Jesus, has been given an opportunity to break with the past, and which, if it refuses this chance, must answer at the bar of history for the accumulated guilt of former generations. This generation is in imminent danger of being the last generation in Israel's history.

The impression we have received so far is further strengthened by the references Jesus makes to Jerusalem. In answer to a threat from Herod he retorts: 'I must be on my way today, tomorrow, and the next day, for it cannot be that a prophet should meet his death outside Jerusalem' (Luke 13.33). Jesus feels perfectly safe in Herod's territory. As T. W. Manson has put it: 'Herod must not be greedy: for Jerusalem has first claim on the blood of God's messengers.'³ Here, as in the previous passage and in the parable of the wicked tenants, Jerusalem is being treated as heir to a long national tradition. In Luke's Gospel this saying of savage irony is followed by another of deep pathos, in which God is the speaker: 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills prophets and stones the messengers sent to her! How often have I wanted to gather your children as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not let me. Look how your temple is left deserted! I tell you, you shall not see me until the time comes when you say, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"' Shortly before the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. Ezekiel had a vision in which he saw the glory of the Lord

[p.11]

abandon the Holy of Holies, leaving temple and city deserted by the divine presence and exposed to enemy attack. Jesus has seen Jerusalem similarly deserted and similarly exposed, because she has not been prepared to welcome him who came in the name of the Lord. Not long afterwards Luke shows us Jesus weeping over Jerusalem, because she did not recognize the day in which God was visiting her (19.44).

To these passages we can add others: the picture of Jerusalem surrounded by avenging armies (Luke 21.20-24), the cleansing of the temple (Mark 11.15-19), the prediction that not one stone of it will be left on another (Mark 13.1-2), and the words to the weeping women (Luke 23.27-31)—if the Romans do this when the tree is green (when the victim is innocent of political offence), what will they do when the tree is dry (when all Israel is tinder, ready to be ignited by the first spark)? Not all these passages are generally agreed to be genuine sayings of Jesus, but they make a cumulative impression to which we may properly apply the more conservative of Bultmann's principles: the certainty with which the Christian community puts this preaching into the mouth of Jesus is hard to understand if he did not really preach it.

³ *The Sayings of Jesus* (S.C.M., 1937), p. 277.

There can be no serious doubt that Jesus predicted the destruction of Jerusalem, and predicted it as the direct consequence of the rejection of his own preaching. But what is the logical connexion between the crucifixion and the fall of Jerusalem? It would be intolerable to suppose that Jesus regarded God as a vindictive tyrant, capable of inflicting an arbitrary retribution on a recalcitrant city. The truth must be that he regarded his own teaching, not just as religion for the individual or for a church within the nation, but as a national way of life which the nation could disregard only at its mortal peril. It is true that he never offered security to man or nation. But he pointed to the paradox that the whole Jewish nation, and the Pharisees in particular, were bending

[p.12]

every effort to maintain their national integrity, and that this was the one sure way of losing all they treasured. 'He who saves his life shall lose it.' If they wished to save their national life, they must lose it in the service of God's kingdom, offering to God a radical obedience in excess of anything contemplated by the Pharisees, and leaving the results in the hands of God.

II

Once we begin with this outline of the teaching of Jesus, other facts rapidly drop into position. There is for example the attitude of Jesus to the Gentiles. According to that indubitably pro-Gentile book, the Acts of the Apostles, the church in its very early years was devoid of all concern for the preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles. The Christians were assiduous in their attendance at temple and synagogue, and in all outward respects remained good Jews; and the Pharisees, led by Gamaliel, were content to have it so. When later, through Peter's experience with Cornelius, the church faced for the first time the prospect of having Gentiles among their numbers, they received the intimation, not indeed with reluctance, but certainly with unfeigned astonishment. 'So then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance leading to life' (Acts 11. 18). Now this might be allowed to pass without remark, if it were not that in the Gospels we find Jesus so often saying and doing things which imply the universality of the gospel. Whenever he spoke of the Son of Man, whatever he may have meant by that much-debated title, he was calling up a picture of the symbolic figure whom Daniel had seen coming on the clouds of heaven, and to whom 'was given dominion and glory and sovereignty, that all peoples, nations, and languages should be his subjects' (Dan. 7.14). When he rode

[p.13]

into Jerusalem, he reminded the spectators of another prophet's vision:

Rejoice greatly, daughter of Zion!
Shout aloud, daughter of Jerusalem!
See, your king comes to you;
Triumphant and victorious is he,
Humble and riding on an ass,

On a colt, the foal of an ass...
And he shall command peace to the nations.
His dominion shall be from sea to sea,
From the River to the ends of the earth.
(Zech. 9.9-10.)

When he cleansed the temple court, he is reported to have justified his action by a quotation from Isaiah 56. 7: 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations.' (Mark 11.17). And he repeatedly compared Gentiles favourably with his fellow-Jews—the Queen of Sheba, the men of Nineveh, Naaman the Syrian, the widow of Zarephath, the people of Tyre and Sidon, even those of Sodom and Gomorrah.

How then are we to explain the discrepancy between this aspect of the teaching of Jesus and the practice of the early church? Are we to say that Jesus actually taught universalism, but that his disciples were slow to understand his meaning, until in the course of time events stimulated their comprehension? Or are we to say that this universalism was read back into the gospel tradition by the church of a later age? There is a third and much more plausible hypothesis, which has been offered to us by J. Munck of Aarhus and developed by J. Jeremias of Göttingen.⁴ Although these two scholars do not see eye to eye on all details, they are

[p.14]

fully 'agreed that the answer to our question is to be sought in eschatology.

The Jews in the time of Jesus held a wide variety of beliefs and hopes about the ultimate destiny of the Gentile nations, but there was one school of thought, strongly represented in the Old Testament, particularly in the books of Isaiah and Zechariah, which declared that the Gentiles would have a place in God's final kingdom. But their inclusion was not to be brought about by any missionary activity on the part of the Jews, not by any gradual process of making individual converts to Judaism, but rather by a great act of God in the last days. When the Day of the Lord arrived, first of all Israel would be restored to the righteousness and dignity proper to her calling as the holy people of God, and Jerusalem would become a truly holy city, in which God could be expected to dwell, and from which the voice of authority could issue to the world; then the redeemed nation would act as a beacon, drawing all nations to Jerusalem to join in the worship and service of the one true god.

In the end the mountain of the Lord's house
Shall be firmly set above all other mountains,
Raised higher than the hills.
All nations will come streaming to it,
Many peoples will come and say:
'Come! Let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
To the house of the God of Jacob,
So that he may teach us his ways,
And we may walk in his paths.
For from Zion comes teaching with authority,

⁴ J. Munck, *Paulus and die Heilsgeschichte* (Universitets forlaget, Aarhus, 1954), Eng. tr. *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind* (S.C.M., 1959); J. Jeremias, *Jesus' Promise to the Nation* (S. C. M., 1958).

And the Lord speaks his word from Jerusalem’.

(Isaiah 2.2-3.)

‘In those days ten men out of nations speaking every language will seize hold of the robe of a single Jew and say: “We will go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.” ’ (Zech. 8.23.)

[p.15]

When Jesus began preaching that the time foretold by the prophets had arrived and that the sovereign power of God was now breaking in upon human history, it might have appeared that this was the signal sent out from God to summon the nations from east and west, north and south, to sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob at the great banquet of the Kingdom. In fact, however, Jesus warned his disciples that this prophecy was not yet ripe for fulfilment. ‘Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel’ (Matt. 10.5-6). His task, which they were to share as they set out on their mission, was to seek and save these lost sheep, so that Israel, ‘ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven’ might ‘become the magnet nation, drawing all peoples into the service of God. It is interesting to find that this view of the mission of Jesus is preserved even in the Fourth Gospel. ‘The hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation comes from the Jews’ (John 4.21-22). In God’s new order all earthly worship will be transcended and all earth’s peoples will be one; but, until that time arrives, it remains true that ‘salvation comes from the Jews’.

It is understandable, then, that after the death and resurrection of Jesus the members of the church in Jerusalem should have felt their immediate task to be the winning of Israel to an acceptance of her proper rôle as God’s nation. ‘Repent therefore and return to God, so that your sins may be blotted out, that God may grant you a period of recovery, and that he may send the Messiah appointed for you, Jesus, who must remain in heaven until the time for the universal restoration of which God spoke through his holy prophets in days of old’ (Acts 3. 19-21). The winning of the Gentiles, so they believed, belonged to that universal restoration, which

[p.16]

would begin just as soon as Israel had accepted the demand and invitation of the gospel.

But how does this comparatively optimistic picture of the bringing in of the Gentile nations fit with our earlier and more gloomy picture of the Jewish nation facing its last grim crisis? We shall best solve that problem by asking another question: Did Jesus intend to found a church? In a book which still remains the classic treatment of this subject Dr Newton Flew adduced a large volume of evidence which enabled him to give an affirmative answer.⁵ But he made it quite plain that we can speak of Jesus and his church only if we give to the word *ecclesia* its proper biblical meaning. Jesus did not intend to found a new religious organization, nor even a new religious community. He intended to bring into existence the

⁵ *Jesus and his Church* (Epworth Press, 1938).

restored nation of Israel, promised in the Old Testament prophecies. It was to this end that he accepted baptism at the hands of John, to this end that he appointed the Twelve to be his intimate associates, instructing them that their number was a symbol of their relation to the twelve tribes of Israel. This was why he spoke of his followers as a 'little flock'—a word already used in the Old Testament to denote the Israel of the messianic age (Mic. 5.4; Isa. 40.11; Ezek. 34.12-24). This was why he predicted the raising up of a new temple made without hands, to take the place of the old hand-made temple, and why he interpreted his own forthcoming death as the sacrifice by which God was sealing his covenant with the renewed Israel. It was, I believe, integral to the purpose of Jesus that he should continue to the end to make his prophetic appeal to the nation as a whole; and the triumphal entry and the cleansing of the temple are best interpreted as symbolic preaching, like the symbolic acts of the ancient prophets, by which Jesus was making his last appeal to the city not to sign the death warrant which would be both his and hers. Yet the success of

[p.17]

his mission in no way depended on the acceptance of his preaching by the nation as a whole, for he had already brought into existence, in nucleus at least, the Israel of the new age. The very existence of this nucleus was a part of his appeal to the nation. Like the children of Isaiah in an earlier crisis, the 'little ones' of Jesus were to be 'a sign and a portent in Israel' (Isa. 8.18). The rejection of his message might mean death to himself, persecution for his followers, and utter ruin for the heedless Jerusalem; but some at least of the bystanders would live to see the vindication of his words and of his life-work. 'There are some standing by who shall not taste death until they have seen the reign of God established in power.' (Mark 9. 1.)

III

This brings me to the main object of my lecture, which is to say something about New Testament eschatology, and particularly about the Day of the Son of Man. When the third volume of the Oxford *English Dictionary* was published in 1897, the only definition of eschatology recognized by Dr Murray was as follows: 'The department of theological science concerned with the four last things: death, judgment, heaven, and hell.' Since then the word has come to be used in a widely different sense, to denote the Old Testament belief that God would one day intervene in the history of nations to introduce a new era of justice and peace. Let us distinguish the two senses by calling the one individual eschatology and the other historical or national eschatology. The second is almost the only kind of eschatology we find in the Old Testament, and this is hardly surprising, when we remember that almost all the books of the Old Testament were already written before the Jews achieved a belief in an afterlife. I am inclined, however, to regret that the one word

[p.18]

ever came to be used to cover two such divergent forms of future hope, for the use has almost inevitably led to the quite baseless assumption that the finality which attaches to death, judgment, heaven, and hell must be characteristic also of national eschatology, and therefore to an intolerable deal of literalism in the interpretation of the imagery used by prophet and

apocalyptist to describe the Day of the Lord. There is not the slightest justification for describing the Day of the Lord as an *eschaton*, a final event beyond which nothing else could conceivably happen. It is final only in the sense in which the end of a nursery story is final: 'and they all lived happily ever after'. National eschatology has been well defined by Ernst Jenni of Basel in the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*: " 'Eschatology' in the broader sense refers to a future in which the circumstances of history are changed to such an extent that one can speak of a new, entirely different, state of things, without, in so doing, necessarily leaving the framework of history.' Let me illustrate this from the Old Testament before we return to the New.

Jeremiah had a vision in which he saw the whole earth return to primeval chaos:

I saw the earth—there it lay, waste and void,
The sky, and its light was gone.
I saw the mountains totter before my eyes,
And all the hills rocking to and fro.
I saw—and not a man was there,
The very birds of the air had fled.

(4.23-25.)

Another prophet had a vision of paradise restored, the wolf keeping company with the lamb and the leopard with the kid (Isa. 11.1-9). Yet neither of these visions has anything to do with the end of the world. The one is a vivid prediction of an invasion of Judah by foreign armies, the other an idealized picture of an earthly kingdom, in which justice still needs to be administered and the rights of the poor

[p.19]

protected. The classic description of the Day of the Lord, found in Isaiah 13, begins:

The Day of the Lord is coming, cruel in its fury and fierce anger,
To make the earth a desert and exterminate its sinners.
The stars in the sky and their constellations shall withhold their light;
The sun shall be dark at its rising, and the moon shall cease to shine.
I will punish the world for its evil and the wicked for their sin.

This might appear to be both cosmic and final, yet, when we read on, we discover that what the prophet expects is the invasion and destruction of the Babylonian empire by the armies of the Medes. When we turn from prophecy to apocalyptic, there is a difference of literary convention, but no difference of theological content. The book of Daniel was written in time of persecution, and the only end its author was interested in was the one he refers to in his last chapter: 'when the shattering of the power of the holy people comes to an end, all this will be completed' (Dan. 12.7). The lesson of the book, which Nebuchadnezzar has to learn the hard way, is that 'the Most High controls the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he chooses' (4.17, 25, 32). When the prophet sees the throne of judgment erected, this is not the end of the world, but a climax of history, in which world dominion is to pass from the bestial and tyrannical oppressor by whom it has been exercised into the hands of the saints of the Most High, represented by that symbolic figure, 'one like a son of man' (7. 9-27).

When we turn to the New Testament the situation is a little more complicated, because by this time both Jews and Christians hold a well-established belief in life after death. It is therefore not always easy to tell whether we are dealing with national or individual eschatology, and, as the church moved more and more away from its original Palestinian setting into the Gentile world, there must have been a tendency to reinterpret the national in terms of the individual.

[p.20]

Nevertheless, whatever we may say about the Parousia or Advent of Christ in the epistles, there is a strong case for saying that the Day of the Son of Man in the teaching of Jesus remained firmly in the sphere of national eschatology. Here, as in the book of Daniel, from which the imagery is drawn, the coming of the Son of Man on the clouds of heaven was never conceived as a primitive form of space travel, but as a symbol for a mighty reversal of fortunes within history and at the national level.

Was there, then, any connexion between this eschatological crisis and the other national crisis which, as we have seen, bulked so large in the teaching of Jesus? It would greatly simplify our problem if we could say that they were one and the same. T. W. Manson, who argued so persuasively that 'Son of Man' on the lips of Jesus was not a title for the Messiah but a conventional ideogram for the Israel of the new age, dismissed out of hand the idea that the Day of the Son of Man might be an event in Israel's national history. 'For the Fall of Jerusalem as a fulfilment of the prophecy there is simply nothing to be said. The ruthless suppression by a great military empire of an insane rebellion in an outlying part of its territory has as much—and as little—to do with the coming of the Kingdom of God in power as the suppression of the Indian Mutiny.⁶ But can this theory be so easily discarded? There was in fact all the difference in the world between the Jewish revolt and the Indian Mutiny. Jesus believed that Israel was called by God to be the agent of his purpose, and that he himself had been sent to bring about that reformation without which Israel could not fulfil her national destiny. If the nation, so far from accepting that calling, rejected God's messenger and persecuted those who responded to his preaching, how could the assertion of God's sovereignty fail to include an open demonstration that Jesus was right and the nation was wrong?

[p.21]

How could it fail to include the vindication of the persecuted and the cause they lived and died for? 'Shall not God vindicate his elect, he who listens patiently while they cry to him day and night? I tell you, he will vindicate them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?' (Luke 18. 7-8.)

The fact is that in more than one strand of tradition the coming of the Son of Man and the fall of Jerusalem are inextricably interwoven. Luke has a passage about the Day of the Son of Man, usually thought to be derived from his source Q, which includes a piece of advice more useful to a refugee from military invasion than to a man caught unawares by the last trumpet. 'On that day, a man who is on the roof, with his belongings indoors, must not go down to collect them; and similarly, the man who is in the field must not return home.' (Luke 17.31.) Exactly the same instructions are given to those who see Jerusalem

⁶ *The Teaching of Jesus* (Cambridge, 1931), p. 281.

surrounded by enemy armies (Luke 21.21.) Again, Mark 13 begins with a prediction that the temple will be torn down stone from stone, and a question from the disciples as to when this will happen; but it continues with a prediction of a sequence of events leading up to the coming of the Son of Man on the clouds of heaven. How odd of Mark, say the critics, to append to a question about a historical crisis a discourse which is an answer to a question about an eschatological crisis! What a simpleton he must have been, a naive stitcher together of heterogeneous traditions which he most imperfectly understood! Matthew at least has had the wits to recognize Mark's ineptitude, and has altered the question to make it fit the answer; for he has turned Mark's question about the temple into a question about the Advent of Jesus and the end of the world. But supposing Mark was right! Supposing he actually understood what he was about! Supposing the prediction of the coming of the Son of Man on the clouds of heaven really was an answer to the disciples'

[p.22]

question about the date of the fall of Jerusalem! Is it indeed credible that Jesus, the heir to the linguistic and theological riches of the prophets, and himself a greater theologian and master of imagery than them all, should ever have turned their symbols into flat and literal prose?

Here then, in conclusion, is the picture of the ministry of Jesus I have been trying to put before you. Jesus believed that Israel had been called to be God's saved and saving nation, the agent through whom God intended to assert his sovereignty over the rest of the world, and that the time had come when God was summoning the nation once for all to take its place in his economy as the Son of Man. His teaching was something more than individual piety and ethics, it was a national way of life through which alone God's purpose could be implemented. The nation must choose between the way of Jesus and all other possible alternatives, and on its choice depended its hope for a national future. For nothing but the thoroughgoing change of heart which Jesus demanded and made possible could in the end keep the nation out of disastrous conflict with Rome. If the nation would not listen to him, it must pay the consequences; but he at least, and anyone else who would share it with him, must fulfil the destiny of the Son of Man. But so deeply does he love his nation, so fully is he identified with its life, so bitterly does he regret what he sees coming upon it, that only death can silence his reiterated and disturbing appeal. He goes to his death at the hands of a Roman judge on a charge of which he was innocent and his accusers, as the event proved, were guilty. And so, not only in theological truth but in historic fact, the one bore the sins of the many, confident that in him the whole Jewish nation was being nailed to the cross, only to come to life again in a better resurrection, and that the Day of the Son of Man which would see the end of the old Israel would see also the vindication of the new.

© 1965 Continuum Publishing. Reproduced by permission.

Prepared for the Web in July 2006 by Robert I Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>
