

the apocalyptic teachings of jesus

SO, JESUS WAS EVIDENTLY AN APOCALYPTICIST. WHAT, THOUGH, DID HE ACTUALLY SAY AND DO? THESE ARE THE KEY QUESTIONS, THE GOALS TOWARDS WHICH WE'VE BEEN DRIVING SINCE word one. And now that we've passed through the preliminaries we can put the pedal to the floor. In this chapter and the one that follows we'll consider teachings of Jesus that appear to go directly back to him (as opposed to those that his later followers put on his lips—for example, many of the ones found in the Gospel of Thomas). In this chapter, we'll consider teachings that are most obviously apocalyptic in nature; in chapter 10 we'll look at other teachings, for example, those involving Jesus' "ethics," that are rooted in this apocalyptic context. In subsequent chapters we'll go on to consider Jesus' deeds, controversies, and experiences in a similar light. Throughout these discussions you should recall that we are trying to reconstruct what the *historical* Jesus himself actually said, based on the various criteria that I mapped out in Chapter 6 and in light of the context of his life as discussed in Chapter 7.

A Preliminary Overview: Jesus and the Kingdom

The very first thing that Jesus is recorded to have said in our very earliest surviving source involves an apocalyptic pronouncement of the

coming Kingdom of God. In Mark's Gospel, after being baptized by John and tempted by Satan in the wilderness, in neither of which is he recorded as having said anything, Jesus comes into Galilee with an urgent message:

The time is filled up and the Kingdom of God is almost here; repent and believe in the good news! (Mark 1:15).

I take this to be an adequate summary of what Jesus himself actually preached. The saying about "time being filled up" is an apocalyptic image. Recall that for apocalypticists there were two ages of history—the present evil age that was running along its predetermined course and the glorious age to come in which God would establish his sovereignty once and for all. For Jesus, the time of this age was all but complete; the bottom of the sand clock was virtually filled. This age was near its end and the new Kingdom was almost here. People needed to prepare by turning to God and accepting this good news.

Later Christians, of course, took this very term "good news" and applied it to the accounts of Jesus' life itself—especially the accounts of his death and resurrection. The same Greek word that I've rendered "good news" is translated "gospel" elsewhere. But obviously Jesus wouldn't be urging people to believe in his own death and resurrection when he had just started his ministry—hence my translation. He is urging people to accept the message of the good news, that now, very soon, God is going to intervene in history and bring in his Kingdom. What does Jesus *mean* when he speaks of God's coming Kingdom?

This is a question that has plagued New Testament scholars since—well, since there have been New Testament scholars. I won't go into all the ins and outs of the debates here, but instead simply emphasize a couple of the significant points. 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. For throughout the Hebrew Bible, there is constant talk of the God of Israel being the King of all people and establishing his rule for them.

God is the king of all the earth; sing praises with a psalm.
God is king over the nations; God sits on his holy throne (Ps. 47:7-8).

The LORD is king, he is robed in majesty;
The LORD is robed, he is girded with strength ...
Your throne is established from of old;
you are from everlasting (Ps. 93:1-2).

Moreover, when Jesus refers to this coming Kingdom, in which God will reign, he 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.

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).¹

And there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom, but you are cast out; and people will come from east and west and from north and south and recline at table in the kingdom of God (Q: Luke 13:23-29; cf. Matt. 8:11-12).

Such references are scattered throughout the tradition, and rather than writing them off—for example on the grounds that we ourselves don't imagine that God will actually, literally, establish a kingdom here on earth—we should take them seriously. Jesus, like other apocalypticists living before him and afterwards, evidently thought that God was going to extend his rule from the heavenly realm where he resides down here to earth. There would be a real, physical kingdom here, a paradisaical world in which God himself would rule his faithful people, where there would be eating, drinking, and talking, where there would be human co-regents sitting on thrones and human denizens eating at banquets.

This future kingdom stands over against the present evil kingdoms to which God's people are now subjected, kingdoms of hatred, want, and oppression. In the future kingdom, God's people will be rewarded with a utopian existence. No wonder Jesus proclaimed the coming Kingdom as "good news" to those who would listen. But it wasn't good news for everyone—not, for example, for those who were *already* in power. For when the coming kingdom arrived those who were in power now would be overthrown. And the day of judgment was soon.

The Coming Judgment

Throughout his teachings, Jesus warns of the coming judgment and the need to prepare for it. As I've already intimated in chapter 8, this judgment was to be brought by someone Jesus called the Son of Man, a cosmic judge sent from heaven who would destroy all that is opposed to God and reward those who were faithful to him. Consider the following sayings, found in independent parts of the tradition.

Whoever is ashamed of me and of my words...of that one will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels (Mark 8:38).

And in those days, after that affliction, the sun will grow dark and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the sky will be shaken; and then they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds with great power and glory. And then he will send forth his angels and he will gather his elect from the four winds, from the end of earth to the end of heaven (Mark 13:24-27).

For just as the flashing lightning lights up the earth from one part of the sky to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day.... And just as it was in the days of Noah, so will it be in the days of the Son of Man. They were eating, drinking, marrying, and giving away in marriage, until the day that Noah went into the ark and the flood came and destroyed them all. So too will it be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed (Luke 17:24; 26-27, 30; cf. Matt. 24:27, 37-39).

Whoever acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man will also acknowledge before the angels of God; but the one who denies me before others, will be denied before the angels of God (Luke 12:8-9; cf. Matt. 10:32-33).²

Be alert at all times, praying to have strength to flee from all these things that are about to take place and to stand in the presence of the Son of Man (Luke 21:34-36).

These dire warnings about the coming Son of Man in judgment are scattered throughout our early sources: Mark, Q, M, and L. Sometimes they occur in graphic parables of Jesus, such as the parable of the weeds

among the wheat in Matthew 13:24-30; 36-42, which concludes with the fearful prospect that

Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the culmination of the age. The Son of Man will send forth his angels, and they will gather from his kingdom every cause of sin and all who do evil, and they will cast them into the furnace of fire. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun, in the kingdom of their father (Matt. 13:40-43).

Or the parable of the fishnet, found in both Matthew and Thomas. Its oldest surviving form reads as follows:

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net which was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. When it was full, they hauled it ashore, and sitting down chose the good fish and put them into containers, but the bad fish they threw away. That's how it will be at the completion of the age. The angels will come and separate the evil from the midst of the righteous, and cast them into the fiery furnace. There people will weep and gnash their teeth (Matt. 13:47-50).

As can be seen, Jesus calls this coming agent of judgment who is regularly accompanied by angels, the "Son of Man."

The Coming Son of Man

Among the most heated, and least enlightening, debates among New Testament scholars has been the question of the origins of the phrase "the Son of Man" in the teachings of Jesus. Everyone agrees—since it's plain for all to see—that in the Gospels Jesus uses the phrase in a variety of ways, sometimes to talk about his present ministry ("the son of man has no where to lay his head"; Luke 9:58; Matt. 8:20), sometimes to predict his future suffering ("the son of man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again"; Mark 8:31; Luke 9:22), and sometimes to refer to a cosmic judge from heaven, whom we've now met on several occasions (for example, Mark 8:38). Hence the questions: Did Jesus—that is, the historical Jesus, the actual man himself (not Jesus as portrayed in the later Gospels) use the phrase in all of these ways? Did he always use it in reference to himself? Did he ever use it in reference to

himself? Was it a common phrase in first-century Aramaic? Would his hearers have understood what he meant by it? These and related questions have occupied scholars and led to mixed results. And as I've suggested, some of the debates have been less than scintillating.

For example, one of the most hotly contested questions is whether the phrase "Son of Man" was a widely-used (or *ever-used!*) title among Jesus' contemporaries to refer to a future cosmic judge of the earth. The assumption behind the question seems to be that if no one else used it this way, Jesus wouldn't have either. This kind of assumption strikes me not only as unreflective but also as demonstrably false. People make up words, or generate new uses of words, all the time. Anyone who thinks otherwise simply hasn't spent enough time with high school and college kids. And the fact is that there are lots of places in our tradition—independently attested all over the map—that Jesus himself does use the phrase in this way, as a title for a future cosmic judge from heaven. *Someone* coined the phrase; it would be pretty bizarre to think that it couldn't have been Jesus, the one to whom all of these sayings are attributed in independent sources, or someone living before him.

So point one: in multiply attested traditions Jesus did use the phrase to refer to a cosmic judge of the earth. Point two has already been made: when he does so, he seems to be referring to someone other than himself. Moreover, these are sayings that Christians themselves would not have been likely to invent, since Jesus' later followers naturally assumed that he *was* the Son of Man.³ These particular Son of Man sayings, at least, have a good chance of going back to Jesus on the grounds of dissimilarity. The same is not true of the other kinds of Son of Man sayings, since they presuppose that Jesus, like his later followers, *did* use the term to refer to himself. That is, they can't be shown to have been said by Jesus on the grounds of dissimilarity.

Moreover, as we've seen, the apocalyptic sayings are multiply attested. Where did the idea come from, though, that a future cosmic judge of the earth would be called the Son of Man? Almost everyone agrees that the phrase, used in this apocalyptic way, ultimately comes from our oldest surviving apocalypse, the book of Daniel in the Hebrew Bible. In a fascinating passage in Daniel 7, the prophet is shown the future course of history in one of those ghoulish nightmares that you're glad was inflicted on someone else. He first sees a series of beasts arising out of the sea, one after the other. There are four beasts, each worse than the preceding. These trample the earth, wreak havoc, and devastate the people of God. But then, in contrast to these grotesquely formed beasts, Daniel sees "one like a son of man" coming from heaven on the clouds. Unlike the beastly ravagers of earth, this figure is

human-like, humane. To him is given an eternal kingdom, the perpetual rule over the earth, with dominion, power, and praise forever, as the beasts are robbed of their power and done away with (Dan. 7:2-14).

In an angelic interpretation of the dream, we're told that the beasts represent kingdoms that will take over the earth and assert their oppressive control over its peoples. These evil powers will remain until the coming of the one like a son of man, who will bring destruction to the forces opposed to God but eternal dominion to God's people (Dan. 7:17-27).

When Jesus refers to the Son of Man, he appears to be alluding to this vision in Daniel 7. Like other apocalypticists from his time that we know about, Jesus maintained that there will be an actual cosmic judge sent from God to overthrow the forces of evil and bring in God's good kingdom. Consider the following Jewish apocalyptic texts of the first century:

And they [the people of God] had great joy, and they blessed and praised and exalted because the name of that Son of Man had been revealed to them. And he sat on the throne of his glory, and the whole judgment was given to the Son of Man, and he will cause the sinners to pass away and be destroyed from the face of the earth. And those who led astray the world will be bound in chains, and will be shut up in the assembly-place of their destruction, and all their works will pass away from the face of the earth. And from then on there will be nothing corruptible, for that Son of Man has appeared and has sat on the throne of his glory, and everything evil will pass away and go from before him (1 Enoch 69).

As I kept looking the wind made something like the figure of a man come up out of the heart of the sea. And I saw that this man flew with the clouds of heaven; and everywhere he turned his face to look, everything under his gaze trembled.... After this I looked and saw that an innumerable multitude of people were gathered together from the four winds of heaven to make war against the man who came up out of the sea... When he saw the onrush of the approaching multitude, he neither lifted his hand nor held a spear, or any weapon of war; but I saw only how he sent forth from his mouth something like a stream of fire, and from his lips a flaming breath...[which] fell on the onrushing multitude that was prepared to fight, and burned up all of them, so that suddenly nothing was seen of the innumerable multitude but only the dust of ashes and the smell of smoke (4 Ezra 13:1-11).

Jesus appears to have shared this basic apocalyptic vision and called the coming judge the "Son of Man." In his view, at the judgment that this one will bring, those who are at present oppressed will be vindicated, and those who are in power will be vanquished. This in fact is a general theme of Jesus' apocalyptic teaching: there is to be a major set of reversals when the kingdom comes. Those who are suffering now will be rewarded then; those who are in control now will be overthrown. And this coming reversal should affect how people live, and want to live, in the present.

The Reversal of Fortunes

Among Jesus' most widely attested sayings are those that indicate that everything will be turned on its head when the Son of Man arrives in judgment. Many of these sayings have lost their apocalyptic edge over the years, as Christians began using them almost as clichés—as even today, when someone wryly remarks that "the first shall be last and the last first" (for example, when standing in an aggravatingly long line) without reflecting on what, actually, the saying means. For Jesus, it means that those who are on the top of the socio-politico-economic heap now are actually going to be displaced at the end of this age by those who are underneath them. There will be a radical set of reversals in the coming kingdom.

Reversals in the Kingdom

The logic behind this system of reversals should be pretty clear, given what we've already seen. The present age is governed by the forces of evil. Those who prosper and succeed and rule in this age are therefore, of necessity, empowered by these evil forces (or else they wouldn't prosper, succeed, and rule!). But in the age that is coming, evil will be overthrown and God will reassert himself. Those who are in charge now will be dethroned and debunked, and those who are suffering and oppressed now—the people of God who are opposed by his enemies, the devil and his minions—will take their place. The first really will be last and the last really will be first.

Notice that on Jesus' lips, the saying occurs in the context of the coming Kingdom. This can be seen in Mark's version:

Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left a house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands for my sake and the

sake of the good news, who will not receive them all back a hundred fold in this present time—houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and lands, along with persecutions—and in the age that is coming, life that never ends. But many who are first will be last and the last will be first (Mark 10:29–31).

And in L's:

And people will come from east and west and from north and south and recline in the kingdom of God; and behold, those who are last will be first and the first will be last (Luke 13:29–30; this may be Q—cf. Matt. 20:16).

The reality of this future reversal should affect the way people seek to live in the present, as we'll see more fully in chapter 10. They should, in fact, be willing to give up their lives in the service of others, rather than seek to dominate and control others through power or money. It is in this apocalyptic sense that Jesus told his followers that "whoever wants to save his life will destroy it, and whoever will destroy his life for my sake and the sake of the good news will save it" (Mark 8:35; notice that Jesus goes on to talk, then, about the coming Son of Man in 8:38). Destroying one's life now does not mean committing suicide. It means giving up one's own desires and quests for power and prominence for the sake of others. Those who do so will enter into the Kingdom and find true life. Those who refuse to do so, who only grasp for what *they* can get out of this life, will lose their life when the Son of Man arrives in judgment.

Serving Others

That's why, repeatedly throughout our traditions, Jesus insists that his followers become the slaves of others, living lives of service, rather than asserting themselves like domineering masters who constantly seek power and control. Thus, from our earliest surviving source, Jesus is recorded as saying:

If anyone wishes to be first, he will be last of all and the servant of all (Mark 9:35).

And also:

You know that those who are thought to rule over the nations exercise full power over them and their mighty rulers utilize their great authority over them. But it will not be so among you. But whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant, and

the one who wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all (Mark 10:42-44).

Or from the L materials: "For whoever is least among you, this one in fact is great" (Luke 9:48).

What all this means for the way one lives should be obvious. Rather than seeking to be exalted one ought to debase oneself, seeking to serve others rather than dominate them. And Jesus himself regularly draws this conclusion in apocalyptic terms. Thus, from Q: "For whoever exalts himself will be humbled (= brought low), and those who are humble (= lowly) will be exalted" (Luke 18:14; Matt. 23:12); from L: "whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 14:11); and from M: "Whoever humbles himself as this small child, this is the one who is great in the Kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18:4).

What I am claiming here is that Jesus really meant these sayings—they weren't simply clichés. When the Kingdom comes, those who have debased themselves in order to serve others will be rewarded, and those who have vaunted themselves over others will be punished.

Becoming Like Children

Relatedly, the earliest traditions sometimes portray Jesus as speaking about receiving the Kingdom "as a child" (as in the passage just quoted from Matt. 18:4). People have engaged in lots of speculation concerning what he might have meant by that, but since the sayings are commonly found in the context of humility and self-abasement, perhaps that should be our clue. For ancient Jews, children had no legal standing to speak of; they had no power, no prestige, nothing that could elevate them above others. To enter into the Kingdom, one should become like that—not like a powerful ruler of an empire, but like a lowly and seemingly unimportant child. For when the Son of Man arrives, there will be a radical reversal in which the lowly will be exalted and the high and mighty brought down low.

Salvation for Sinners

Among those who were sometimes seen as particularly lowly in Jesus' world, or at least among the least likely candidates to enter into the Kingdom, were, of course, the people who did not go out of their way to maintain appearances of strict religiosity. In chapter 11, I'll look further into the companions of Jesus—the "tax collectors and sinners" who were so scorned by many of the religious elite in our early accounts of Jesus' life. At this point, though, I should say at least a brief word about

who such "sinners" were, to make sense of the surprising fact (it's surprising to most people still today, who in fact refuse to believe it!) that Jesus maintained that it was *they*, rather than the devout religious folk, who would enter into the Kingdom when it arrived.

Contrary to what is often said—even by scholars—the category "sinners" does not refer simply to "prostitutes," on the one hand (even though prostitutes would no doubt have been considered sinners; but not every sinner was a prostitute), nor is it a shorthand term for non-Pharisees on the other (it is sometimes claimed that everyone who did not follow Pharisaic traditions was mocked as a sinner; in reality, that's not true). In the Hebrew Bible, sinners are people who make no attempt to follow God's law, the Law of Moses itself. They are people that most reasonably religious folk would see as beyond the pale, corrupt, evil, mean-spirited, selfish, self-centered, godless SINNERS. Jesus appears, as we'll see, to have attracted more than his share of such people to be his followers. And he insisted that they were the ones who would inherit the Kingdom.⁴

Consider the following independently attested types of traditions. (a) In Mark, when asked why he associated with such people, Jesus replied "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I came to call not the righteous, but sinners" (Mark 2:17). (b) In Q and the Gospel of Thomas is the parable of the shepherd who leaves his ninety-nine sheep to seek after the one that was lost; when he finds it, he calls his friends and says, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost." Jesus concludes the parable by saying, "So there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than for the ninety-nine who don't need repentance" (Luke 15:1-7; Matt. 18:12-14; cf. G.Thom. 107). (c) In L: after a parable about a woman who finds a coin that was lost, Jesus says: "So there will be joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:8-10).

All of these sayings seem to indicate that Jesus is particularly concerned in bringing those who are lost and in need into the Kingdom. What is even more striking, though, is that there is an independently attested strain of his teaching that indicates that in contrast to such sinners, people who are otherwise righteous (that is, who do what is right before God) will *not* necessarily enter into the Kingdom. And so, in a saying found in M, Jesus tells a group of Jewish leaders who did not heed the call of John the Baptist: "Truly I say to you that tax collectors and prostitutes will go before you into the Kingdom of God; for John came to you in the path of righteousness, and you did not believe him; but the tax collectors and prostitutes believed him" (Matt. 21:31-32). So too, in a parable found only in Luke, we're told that a tax collector

who recognized and regretted his own sinfulness was "right before God" (= justified), instead of a righteous Pharisee who was proud of his religious devotion (Luke 18:9-14).

It is a little difficult to know what to make of these traditions. One particularly competent recent interpreter has argued that Jesus proclaimed that such wicked people would enter into the Kingdom without repenting—and that it was precisely this teaching that caused such a scandal.⁵ But we've already seen in independent traditions that Jesus urged people to repent (for example, Mark 1:15; 2:17; Luke 15:7), and I'd assume that when he speaks about them "hearing" John the Baptist he doesn't simply mean that the sound waves emitting from John's mouth impacted their ears. They actually took his words to heart and began to live differently in view of the coming Kingdom. Moreover, this seems to be the point of the sayings about the sick in need of the physician and the lost sheep: those who are sick but recover have experienced a change in their lives, and the sheep that was lost does return to its fold.

Jesus appears, then, to have taught that people needed to repent and live in ways God wanted them to in light of the coming Kingdom. In the next chapter we'll consider more fully what that might have entailed. For now we should return to the central theme of this chapter, Jesus' apocalyptic message of the coming Kingdom of God. In this context, Jesus' point about the wicked inheriting the Kingdom makes perfect sense. There will be a complete reversal in which the high and mighty are brought low and the low and oppressed are lifted up. This includes those who were widely discounted by the religious establishment as beyond reach. The worst of sinners will be exalted in the coming Kingdom.

The Lowly Who Get Lifted: Jesus' Beatitudes

This theme of reversal gets played out in some of Jesus' most familiar teachings, the so-called Beatitudes, which tend, unfortunately, to be ripped out of their original apocalyptic contexts by people who quote them. The beatitudes are a group of sayings attributed to Jesus in a variety of our sources in which he pronounces "blessings" on certain groups of people (the term "beatitude" itself comes from the Latin "beatus"—blessed). The best known of these sayings are found in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, which begins:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven;
blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted; blessed

are those who are meek, for they will inherit the earth; blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied (Matt. 5:3-6).

What many readers evidently haven't noticed in these sayings is the verb tenses. They describe what certain groups of people are experiencing in the present and what they *will* experience in the future. *Will* experience? When? Not in some vague, remote, and uncertain moment—sometime in the sky by and by; it will happen when the Kingdom arrives. Those who are lowly, poor, and oppressed now will have their reward then.

A number of these Matthean sayings are actually derived from Q. Interestingly, in Luke's version they tend to emphasize physical hardship more than internal struggles. For instance, rather than blessing the "poor in spirit," in Luke Jesus blesses "you who are poor" (i.e., those who are literally impoverished). Rather than speaking of those who "hunger and thirst for righteousness," in Luke Jesus speaks of those who "hunger and thirst." There are good reasons for thinking that in these instances Luke's version is closer to what Jesus himself may have said. For one thing, we find a very similar form of the sayings independently attested in the Gospel of Thomas:

Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven
(G.Thom. 54).

Blessed are those who are hungry, for the belly of the one who desires will be filled (G.Thom. 69).

Blessed are you when you are hated and persecuted; no place will be found where you are persecuted (G.Thom. 68).

Interestingly, in Luke's version of the beatitudes, these various apocalyptic blessings are followed by their counterparts, a set of apocalyptic woes:

But woe to you who are wealthy, for you have your comfort (now);
woe to you who are full now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who are rejoicing now, for you will mourn and weep. And woe when everyone speaks well of you; for so too did your ancestors treat the false prophets (Luke 6:24-26).

These particular apocalyptic judgments are not independently attested in our other sources, but they certainly coincide with the major themes we've already seen in this chapter. Jesus taught that a day of judgment was coming with the appearance of the Son of Man, who

would bring a radical reversal: those who were presently well-off would be condemned and those who were suffering would be blessed. Included in this apocalyptic message was a warning of imminent destruction for all who did not heed Jesus' words and turn to God as he wished.

The Coming Destruction

We have already seen that the coming judgment was to involve an act of destruction, as individuals who have failed to heed Jesus' message will be condemned when the Kingdom arrives. This kind of tradition is multiply attested in independent sources.

1 In Mark, Jesus warns:

If your eye should cause you to sin, pluck it out; for it is better to enter into the Kingdom with a single eye than to be cast with two eyes into Gehenna [a place of torment], where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched (Mark 9:47-48; picked up also in Matt. 18:9).

2 In Q, Jesus says:

There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you are cast out (Luke 13:28; Matt. 8:11-12).

3 In M, Jesus speaks of the last judgment as a separation of the sheep and the goats, the latter of whom are told:

Go away from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire that is prepared for the Devil and his angels (Matt. 25:41).

None of this is a pretty prospect. And the coming destruction of those opposed to God doesn't stop here, with the judgment of individuals. It also entails the demolition of governments (as the new Kingdom replaces older ones) and institutions. In particular—and this appears to have been a particular emphasis of his proclamation—Jesus maintained that the coming judgment of God would engulf the most holy place of the Jewish people, where God himself was believed to dwell, the Jerusalem Temple itself. This was the locus of Jewish worship and praise for the God of Israel. Jesus claimed that in the coming judgment sent by God, the Temple would be destroyed.

No surprise that Jesus' message was not heartily welcomed by the

leaders among his people. As we will see at greater length in chapter 11, it was this aspect of Jesus' proclamation in particular that got him into some serious hot water, especially among the Jewish aristocracy charged with running the Temple and conducting its services. Jesus insisted that all they held dear and cherished was soon to be destroyed by God himself. This was the message that provoked the Jewish leaders into turning Jesus over to the Roman governor, Pilate, for prosecution.

The Demise of the Temple

The Temple in Jerusalem

The Jerusalem Temple was built on instruction from God in the Hebrew Bible. It was the place that Jewish worshipers could come to perform sacrifices of animals and foodstuffs to him in fulfillment of the Jewish Law found in the Hebrew Bible. For most Jews, it was the only place on earth where such sacrifices (commanded by God) could be performed.

The Temple was known to be one of the grandest buildings in the world of antiquity, spoken of with praise and admiration even by those who were not among its devotees. In the days of Jesus, the Temple complex was immense, encompassing an area roughly 500 yards by 325 yards—large enough to accommodate twenty-five (American) football fields, including the end zones. From the outside, its stone walls rose 100 feet from the street, as high as a modern ten-story building. No mortar had been used in its construction; instead, the stones—some of them 50 yards in length—had been carefully cut to fit together neatly; the gates into the temple were 45 feet high by 44 feet wide (with two doors, 22 feet wide, in each). One ancient source indicates that 200 men were required to close them each evening. From all of our ancient descriptions, the Temple complex appears to have been a fantastically beautiful set of buildings with the best materials money could buy, extensive portions of it overlaid with gold. As you might imagine, its construction was an immense feat. When it was completed in 63 CE, 18,000 local workers were reportedly left unemployed. It was destroyed just seven years later at the climax of the Jewish war against Rome, never to be built again.⁶

One of the things that made the Jerusalem Temple unique in the Greco-Roman world is that, as I've indicated, for most Jews of the period it was to be the only temple for the God of Israel. Whereas numerous temples could be devoted to any of the pagan gods, this God would receive sacrifices only in the Temple in Jerusalem. It is striking

that Jews from around the world paid an annual tax to help defray the costs of its upkeep and administration—even Jews who never managed to set foot inside. In no small measure, this special reverence for the place derived from the belief that God himself dwelt there, in the Temple, in a special room called the Holy of Holies. The belief that a god might actually be present in a holy place was widespread throughout antiquity. In most ancient temples, however, the deity was present in the cult image, or “idol,” kept in a sacred room. The sacred room in the Jerusalem Temple, on the other hand, was completely empty. Since the Jewish God was so holy, unlike all else that is, he explicitly forbade any images to be made of him.

No one could enter this holiest of rooms except the Jewish High Priest, and that came only once a year on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), when he performed a sacrifice for the sins of the people. The Holy of Holies was thus the most sacred spot in the Temple and the rest of the building complex was structured so as to emphasize the holiness that emanated from its center. Around the Holy of Holies was the sanctuary, into which only certain priests could go; further removed still was the court of the priests, which allowed only priests and their assistants, the Levites. Yet further removed was the court of the Israelites, in which only Jewish men could come to bring their offerings to the priests; beyond that was the court of (Jewish) women, who were not allowed any nearer to the inner sanctum (Jewish men could assemble there as well). And finally beyond that came the court of the Gentiles, where even non-Jews could congregate.

Jesus and the Temple

It was this most sacred place, the dwelling of God himself, that Jesus predicted would be destroyed in the coming judgment—of this very God. Evidence is found in multiply attested traditions. The earliest surviving account is Mark 13:2:

And as [Jesus] was coming out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Teacher: see what great stones and what great buildings are here.” And Jesus said to him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left upon another that will not be destroyed.”

In later traditions, Jesus himself is said to have threatened to destroy the place. For example, at his trial, false witnesses reputedly claimed, “We have heard him saying, ‘I will destroy this temple that is made with hands and after three days build another made without hands’ (Mark 14:58); and on the cross he was allegedly mocked: “Look at the one

who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days!” (Mark 15:29). Something similar is independently stated in John, where Jesus tells his Jewish opponents, “Destroy this temple and I will raise it up in three days” (John 2:19). And from an unrelated source, a speech found in the book of Acts, at the martyrdom of Stephen, false witnesses again arose to say that they had heard Stephen claim that “this Jesus the Nazarene will destroy this place and revamp the customs that Moses gave to us.” Even the Gospel of Thomas gets in on the act, as Jesus there says, “I will destroy this house and no one will be able to rebuild it” (G. Thom. 71).

Thus the tradition that Jesus spoke about the destruction of the Temple is widely spread. Moreover, most of these traditions indicate that Jesus himself will have something to do with it. The idea that he would personally destroy the Temple is difficult to get past the criterion of dissimilarity: Christians who considered him the all-powerful Lord may well have given the sayings that twist in order to show that after his death, he “got even” with Jews by destroying their temple. Nor does it do well by the criterion of contextual credibility: How could a single man claim to be able to demolish an enormous set of buildings like this? Similarly problematic is the notion found only in John, that when Jesus talked about the temple being destroyed and raised in three days, he was actually speaking of his body (John 2:21).

Did Jesus then speak at all about the coming destruction of the Temple? One might be tempted to push the criterion of dissimilarity a bit further, and claim that since the Temple was in fact destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE, none of the predictions of Jesus can be safely trusted as actually going back to him—that is, that later Christians put predictions of its destruction on his lips to show his prophetic powers. Most scholars, though, consider this an extreme view, since the predictions of the destruction on one level or another pass all of our criteria: (a) They are obviously multiply attested (Mark, John, Acts, and Thomas!). (b) Moreover, in one respect, at least, the earliest form of these sayings appears to pass the criterion of dissimilarity, since Jesus’ claim in Mark that not one stone would be left upon another did not in fact come true, as you can see yourself by visiting the Western Wall in Jerusalem today; if anyone actually knew the details of the destruction, they wouldn’t have invented this verse. (c) And, just as importantly, the sayings are completely contextually credible. For we know of other prophetic figures throughout the history of Israel who had maintained that the Jewish people had so strayed from God that he would enter into judgment with them by destroying their central place of worship.

Of particular relevance are the words of the Hebrew prophet Jere-

miah, living in the sixth century BCE, before the destruction of the first Jewish Temple in 586. Jeremiah maintained that since the people of Israel had sinned so thoroughly, they could no longer trust God to deliver them or their sacred temple. In fact, despite their trust in the sanctuary to provide them protection, God was soon going to destroy both it and them. Jeremiah's words are worth quoting at some length:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words: This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD.... Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house which is called by my name, and say 'We are safe!'—only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight?... And now because you have done all these things... therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your ancestors, just what I did to Shiloh (that is, destroy it). And I will cast you out of my sight, just as I cast out all your kinsfolk. ... And I will bring to an end the sound of mirth and gladness, the voice of the bride and bridegroom in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem; for the land shall become a waste" (Jer 7:3-4, 9-11, 14-15, 34).

The prediction that God would enter into judgment with his people, destroying them and their sacred places, is as old as the Hebrew prophets that Jesus heard read as a child in the synagogue in Nazareth.

And the tradition was kept alive, not just in literary texts, but among living, breathing people down through his own day. Recall the prophet named "Theudas" and the unnamed one called, simply, "the Egyptian" whom I mentioned in chapter 7. Both of them, in their own ways, predicted that God would bring about a destruction of Jerusalem and a salvation of the remnant of his people who remained faithful to him (and to his prophetic servants).

And consider the proclamation of yet another prophet of the first century, another Jew who was, by an odd coincidence, also named Jesus, the son of an otherwise unknown Ananias. Some thirty years after Jesus' death, according to the Jewish historian Josephus, this other Jesus went through the city of Jerusalem crying out: "A voice from the east, a voice from the west, a voice from the four winds, a voice against Jerusalem and the sanctuary, a voice against the bridegroom and the

bride, a voice against all the people" (*Jewish War*, 6.5.3). Jesus son of Ananias spent seven and a half years proclaiming the doom and destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple. As with his better-known namesake, he too was arrested and placed on trial before the Roman governor as a trouble maker. In this instance, though, the accused was found to be innocent on grounds of insanity, and was released after being scourged. But his mistreatment didn't retard his proclamation: he continued lamenting the coming destruction until he was accidentally killed by a catapulted stone during the siege of Jerusalem, a couple of years before his predictions came true.

To return now to our own Jesus. As part of his prediction of the coming judgment of God, he too urged—as Jeremiah and other prophets had done before, and several lesser lights were to do after—that destruction was at hand, and that not only individuals but also social institutions and structures would be brought low when the Son of Man arrived on the clouds of heaven with the angels of glory and the power of God.

A Judgment That Is Universal

Unlike some of his prophetic confreres (for example, Jeremiah), Jesus did not think that the coming judgment would be limited in scope. It didn't apply, that is, only to the individual Jew or to Jewish institutions like the Temple. For Jesus, as for most apocalypticists, judgment was to be universal. Recall: apocalypticists were concerned not just with the godless activities of their own people. They believed in forces of evil that had been unleashed in the world. For them, the entire created order had become corrupt. And God the Creator was going to clean house and start anew. Judgment would affect everyone and everything.

Everyone. Note that in a number of the apocalyptic sayings of Jesus that we've considered, there is talk of non-Jews coming into the Kingdom. He speaks, for example, of people (whom I take to be Gentiles) coming from east and west, north and south to enter the Kingdom and dine with the Jewish ancestors Abraham and Co., while Jews are left outside. And he discusses the final judgment of the nations—the same word as "Gentiles," that is, non-Jews—in the story of the future separation of the sheep and the goats. The coming of the Son of Man is not an event to be beheld only by Jews, but by the whole world.

Moreover, his coming will have a universal effect. Sometimes this effect is spelled out in language that heightens its cosmic nature: "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven and the powers in the heavens will be

shaken" (Mark 13:24-25). It's not clear here whether these signs in the heavens are to be thought of as temporary markers of the new world—eclipses and falling stars—or whether Jesus, like his apocalyptic follower who later wrote the book of Revelation, envisioned an entirely new created order, a "new heaven and new earth" (Rev. 21:1)—complete with a new sun, moon, and stars—for the coming Kingdom. What is clear is that this kingdom will be universal in scope. The present world and all its powers will be overcome, prior to the arrival of the new realm in which God will rule his people and, through them, the entire world.

The Imminence of the End

Jesus appears to have thought that this coming judgment of God through the cosmic Son of Man is imminent. It is right around the corner. In fact, it is to happen within his own generation. The stress on the imminent end is independently attested in all of our earliest sources. The end will come suddenly and unexpectedly, and people need to be alert:

1 Mark

Whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of that one will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels. Truly I tell you, *some of those who are standing here* will not taste death before they see that the Kingdom of God has come in power (8:38-9:1).

Truly I tell you, *this generation* will not pass away until all these things have taken place (13:30).

Be awake, keep alert. For you don't know when that time is. It is like a man on a journey, who leaves his house and gives his slaves authority over their own work, and orders the doorkeeper to watch. Watch therefore—for you don't know when the master of the house is coming, whether in the evening, at midnight, at the crack of dawn, or in the morning—lest when he comes suddenly he finds you sleeping. But what I say to you I say to everyone: Watch! (Mark 13:33-37).

2 Q

But you should realize that if the homeowner knew the hour when the thief was coming, he would not allow him to dig a

hole through the wall of his house; and you also, be prepared, for the Son of Man is coming in an hour that you are not expecting (Luke 12:39-40; Matt. 24:43-44).

If a servant [whose master has left town for a time] says to himself, "My master is not coming for awhile," and begins to beat the servants, both men and women, and to eat, drink, and carouse, the master of that servant will come on a day he is not expecting and in an hour he does not know, and he will cut him to shreds (Luke 12:45-46; Matt 24:48-50).

- 3 M (at the conclusion of the story of the ten maidens waiting for their master, five wise who were prepared and five foolish who were not)

Watch therefore, for you do not know the day or the hour. (Matt. 25:13).

4 L

Let your loins be girded and keep your lamps burning, like people who are waiting for their master to return home from a wedding feast (Luke 12:36).

What matters for my purposes here is not whether Jesus spoke each and every one of these sayings exactly as they are recorded. What matters is that these themes are resounded repeatedly and independently in our earliest surviving sources. Jesus appears to have anticipated that the coming judgment of God, to be brought by the Son of Man in a cosmic act of destruction and salvation, was imminent. It could happen at any time. But it would certainly happen within his own generation.

Conclusion

In many ways, as I've indicated, this message was like that proclaimed throughout the writings of the prophets in the Hebrew Bible. Judgment was coming, people needed to repent in preparation or they would be condemned. Those who turned to God, though, would be saved. At the same time, Jesus' message was different, for his was framed within an apocalyptic context. As a first-century Jew, Jesus lived when many Jews expected God to intervene once and for all for his people, to overthrow the forces of evil that had gained ascendancy in the world and to bring in his good Kingdom on earth. There would then be no more war, poverty, disease, calamity, sin, hatred, or death. This kingdom would arrive in power, and all that was opposed to it would be destroyed and removed.

I do not want to leave the impression that these warnings of the coming judgment were the *only* things Jesus taught about during his public ministry. As we'll see in the next chapter, that's not the case at all. But it's important to understand fully the framework within which his other teachings are to be fitted. Many people—Christian and non-Christian alike—think of Jesus as a great moral teacher whose ethical views can help produce a better society for those of us who are determined to make our lives together as just, peaceful, and enjoyable as possible. On one level, I think that's probably right. But it's also important to realize that Jesus himself did not see it that way. He did not propound his ethical views to show us how to create a just society and make the world a happier place for the long haul. For him, there wasn't going to be a long haul. The judgment of God was coming soon with the arrival of the Son of Man—and people needed to prepare for its coming by changing the way they lived. Preparation for the Kingdom—that's what ultimately lies at the heart of Jesus' ethics, as we'll see now in the chapter that follows.

*a place for everything:
jesus' other teachings in their apocalyptic context*

CONTEXT MAY NOT BE EVERYTHING, BUT IT'S NOT FAR OFF. THE WORDS "JUST KIDDING" MEAN SOMETHING PRETTY DIFFERENT IF SPOKEN BY THE SELF-APPOINTED COMEDIAN WHO LIVES across the hall from you, a sheep farmer in the barn of his Wyoming ranch, or the president of the United States speaking into a red phone in the Oval Office.

And so I've tried as best I can to set the context within which Jesus' teachings were delivered. As I indicated at the end of the previous chapter, Jesus taught about a lot of things other than the coming judgment of God to be brought by the Son of Man. In this chapter, we'll be looking at some of these other teachings in light of the overarching framework of his apocalyptic message. In particular, I'll be examining Jesus' "ethical" teachings to show how they relate to his proclamation of the Kingdom. In short, Jesus' followers were to live in ways that prepared for this coming Kingdom and that embodied the values that would be manifest completely and finally when it arrived.

I should emphasize that I won't be able to discuss each and every word found on Jesus' lips in our earliest sources, but only sayings that I think can reasonably be established as going back to him (in most instances I'll be giving the grounds for this judgment). Even among