



Two

THE KING WHO RESTORES: THE KINGDOM COMES AS PROMISED

Some advocates of a kingdom-centred approach make much of rediscovering the Jewishness of Jesus. Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, for example, emphasize the need for us to go ‘back to our roots’ in ‘the Hebrew spiritual tradition’. ‘The Jewish heritage is the primordial matrix out of which Christianity was birthed, and which we would argue is the only matrix out of which it could be organically understood in its fulness.’¹

What this return to the Jewish roots of Christianity actually means, however, seems to be a rather speculative reconstruction of first-century Hebrew spirituality. This

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1. Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things To Come*, 115-123, and Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *ReJesus: A Wild Messiah for a Missional Church*, (Peabody, MA/Sydney, Hendrickson/Strand, 2009).



then sets up some polarities between concrete (Hebrew and good) versus speculative thinking (Greek and bad) or between right action (Hebrew and good) and right thinking (Greek and bad).

I want to suggest the more constructive way of exploring the Jewishness of Jesus would be to see how he fulfils the promises of the Old Testament.

The Bible story begins: ‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light’ (Gen. 1:1-3). It is an assertion of the sovereignty of God. But this is not just any god. This is the LORD, the covenant God of Israel. The readers of Genesis did not first encounter God as the Creator. They knew him first as the God of the exodus who had delivered them from slavery and covenanted with them at Sinai. Genesis 1 is the claim that the God of Israel is in fact the Creator God and therefore the God of the world. It is a claim that Israel’s God is King.

This claim is repeated throughout the Psalms, especially in Book Four of the Psalms (Pss. 90–106). These Psalms begin in Psalm 90 with a prayer of Moses, and together they seem to reflect the claim of the Pentateuch that the LORD is king. Again and again they assert that God reigns and that his reign is universal, extending even to ‘distant shores’. Moreover, often this claim is linked to God’s work in creation.

Before the mountains were born
 or you brought forth the earth and the world,
 from everlasting to everlasting you are God
 (Ps. 90:2)

The LORD reigns, he is robed in majesty;
the LORD is robed in majesty and is armed
with strength.
Indeed, the world is established, firm and secure.
Your throne was established long ago;
you are from all eternity (Ps. 93:1-2).

For the LORD is the great God,
the great King above all gods.
In his hand are the depths of the earth,
and the mountain peaks belong to him.
The sea is his, for he made it,
and his hands formed the dry land.
Come, let us bow down in worship,
let us kneel before the LORD our Maker (Ps. 95:3-6).

For great is the LORD and most worthy of praise;
he is to be feared above all gods.
For all the gods of the nations are idols,
but the LORD made the heavens ...
Say among the nations, 'The LORD reigns.'
The world is firmly established, it cannot be moved;
he will judge the peoples with equity
(Ps. 96:4-5, 10).

The LORD reigns, let the earth be glad;
let the distant shores rejoice ...
The heavens proclaim his righteousness,
and all the peoples see his glory.
All who worship images are put to shame,
those who boast in idols – worship him,
all you gods! (Ps. 97:1, 6-7).

The LORD reigns,
let the nations tremble;
he sits enthroned between the cherubim,
let the earth shake (Ps. 99:1).

My days are like the evening shadow;
 I wither away like grass.
 But you, O LORD, sit enthroned for ever;
 your renown endures through all generations ...
 In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth,
 and the heavens are the work of your hands.
 They will perish, but you remain;
 they will all wear out like a garment.
 Like clothing you will change them
 and they will be discarded.
 But you remain the same,
 and your years will never end
 (Ps. 102:11-12, 25-27).

The LORD has established his throne in heaven,
 and his kingdom rules over all (Ps. 103:19).

Genesis 1 not only asserts that God reigns, but also that humanity reigns. God places Adam and Eve in the garden to rule over creation under God's rule: 'Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground' (Gen. 1:28).

God's rule is a rule of blessing and prosperity, peace and freedom. God places humanity in a garden, protecting and providing for them in a home. In Babylonian mythology humanity is made by the gods to service their needs by bringing them food. But the creation of humanity in the Genesis account ends with God serving the needs of humanity and inviting them to eat from any of the trees (with just one exception).

The coming of God's kingdom cannot mean that God starts reigning. He already reigns.

But his kingdom has been rejected by humanity. The Serpent portrays God's rule as tyrannical: "You will not

surely die,” the Serpent said to the woman. “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:4-5). Adam and Eve reject God’s rule because they believe this lie. From that point onwards humanity has believed that God is holding us back, preventing us being like God. The irony is that humanity was already ‘like God’. In Genesis 1:26 God says: ‘Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness.’ We think we will be more free without God. But we end up enslaved by sin.

The Bible is the story of God re-establishing his rule – his rule that brings life, salvation, peace and justice. But all the time we are hostile to God’s rule because we think it will tyrannize us.

Not only does the Serpent persuade humanity to reject God’s rule, he also redefines the whole notion of rule. The rejection of God’s rule radically affects humanity’s rule over creation. While God’s rule was a rule of love, peace, freedom, blessing and life, the Serpent portrays it as oppressive and we have modelled human rule in the image of the Serpent’s lie. So humanity’s rule becomes oppressive. We rule over creation not as God rules – in a way that brings blessing, freedom and life. We rule in the image of Satan’s lie. We tyrannize the earth. We pollute and destroy.

At the same time as we are exploiting creation, we are being ruled by creation. The order of creation is reversed. Humanity was to rule over the animals, but in Genesis 3 the Serpent rules over humanity. This is what is happening, for example, in drug misuse. Instead of ruling over the plants, we are ruled by the hop or the poppy.

In Genesis 12 God promises Abraham ‘a nation’ – a word which suggests a political entity ruled over by a

king. God says to Abraham: 'I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you' (Gen. 17:6). This promise of kings anticipates the promise to David. But before David, there are only hints at the central role of God's king.

What we see instead is God himself liberating his people from the slavery of the rule of Pharaoh. God rescues his people through the exodus and brings them to Mount Sinai. There God enters into a covenant with Israel which constitutes them as his people and re-establishes his life-giving reign over them.

Believing the lie of Satan that God's rule is tyrannical, we often think of God's law as restrictive. But the psalmists had a very different perspective: 'Your law is my delight.' 'Oh, how I love your law!' (Ps. 119:77, 97). God's rule brings life, blessing, peace and justice. God rules through his word. The law of Moses is the word by which he would rule Israel – the rule which brings life, blessing, peace and justice. Israel had been liberated from the oppressive rule of Pharaoh. Now they were to live a way of complete contrast – a way of liberation. To the extent that Israel lives in obedience to the law given through Moses, they will demonstrate the goodness of God and his reign:

Observe [these decrees and laws] carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today? (Deut. 4:6-8).

When Israel began life in the promised land it was ruled directly by God through his word. But time and again the people did not walk in the way of obedience to the LORD, so God judged them by handing them over to the surrounding nations. When Israel cried out in repentance he sent the judges to rescue them and then to rule over them.

The LORD was with the judges: ‘Whenever the Lord raised up a judge for them, he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies’ (Judg. 2:18). Few of the judges are conventional heroes. Most are deeply flawed characters. The point is that behind them all is God. He is the true Judge and the true King. In Judges 11:27 Jephthah speaks of ‘the LORD, the Judge’. Because the judges were raised up by God, there is no succession. There was no succession because God himself is the true king. The only attempt at succession is the story of Abimelech and this ends in tragedy, if not farce. Gibeon is offered the throne but refuses (Judg. 8:22-23), but he names his son ‘Abimelech’ which means ‘son of the king’ (Judg. 8:31). Abimelech attempts to take the throne, but what he creates is civil war in which he is killed by a millstone thrown from the tower by a woman (Judg. 9).

The closing line of the book of Judges is: ‘In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit’ (Judg. 21:25). It is true that Israel had no king, but Israel had no human king because they had a divine King. The problem is that, as was the case in Eden and as has been the case throughout history, instead of acknowledging the kingship of God, ‘everyone did as he saw fit’.

In 1 Samuel 7:15-16 Samuel is described as a judge. Samuel is the last true judge. The problem is that he

attempts succession, appointing his sons as judges. But they are not raised up by God and they are not suited to the role:

When Samuel grew old, he appointed his sons as judges for Israel. The name of his firstborn was Joel and the name of his second was Abijah, and they served at Beersheba. But his sons did not walk in his ways. They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice (1 Sam. 8:1-3).

It is perhaps not surprising, then, when the people ask Samuel for a king: ‘So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah. They said to him, “You are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have” (1 Sam. 8:4-5). In Deuteronomy 17, Moses had described how kingship was to function in Israel. So a request for a human king was not intrinsically wrong. But for Israel this was a rejection of their identity as God’s people. They want a king ‘like the nations’. It is also a rejection of God’s identity. They will not acknowledge the kingship of God (1 Sam. 8:7-8).

Nevertheless God graciously gives the king they want. Samuel anoints Saul as the first king of Israel. Saul’s name means ‘asked for’. Saul is the king the people asked for. But Saul does not rule under the rule of God. So he is rejected as king. Instead Samuel anoints David. David is God’s choice.

David is anointed as the next king. The word ‘christ’ in Greek or ‘messiah’ in Hebrew means ‘anointed one’. Israelite kings were not crowned, but anointed with oil. So ‘the christ’ is God’s anointed King. David is, in a very

real sense, the christ. He is God's anointed king at that time. God makes a covenant with David, promising his descendants an everlasting kingdom (2 Sam. 7). The christ will always rule over God's people.

A generation later the kingdom of Israel divides into two: the ten northern tribes form the kingdom of Israel while the two southern tribes form the kingdom of Judah under the Davidic dynasty. In the north there is a succession of coups. But in the south God maintains the Davidic line on the throne, not because the Davidic kings are more worthy, but in faithfulness to his covenant with David.

Nevertheless both halves of the kingdom end in disaster. The kings fail to reign under God and lead the people in his ways. The northern kingdom ends in destruction at the hands of the Assyrians. The southern kingdom ends up in exile in Babylon.

GOD WILL RESTORE HIS REIGN THROUGH HIS COMING KING

Out of the ruins of the kingdom the prophets bring a word of hope. In a variety of ways God promises the coming of his reign. He promises to restore Israel and make her pre-eminent among the nations. He promises that he will come in judgment against Israel's enemies. He speaks of 'a day of the Lord' in which evil will be judged and God's name will be vindicated.

Alongside these promises of a new kingdom, God promises a new king. He will raise up a new David who will re-establish God's rule over his people. And he will rule not only over Israel, but over all nations.

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given,
 and the government will be on his shoulders.
 And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor,
 Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
 Of the increase of his government and peace
 there will be no end.
 He will reign on David's throne
 and over his kingdom,
 establishing and upholding it with justice
 and righteousness from that time on and for ever.
 The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this
 (Isa. 9:6-7).

In Ezekiel 34, God denounces the shepherds (the leaders) of Israel. Instead he promises to send a new David – the great shepherd king – gather his flock and reign over them: 'I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. I the Lord will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the Lord have spoken' (Ezek. 34:23-34).

But there is another side to the expectation of the coming kingdom. Isaiah speaks of 'the Servant of the LORD'. Sometimes it seems the Servant is Israel; sometimes an individual who represents Israel. What is clear is that the Servant will suffer and that his sufferings will be redemptive. Jeremy Treat says: '[Isaiah] 52:13–53:12 portrays an action of salvation that is *by a servant-king* (identity) and *for a kingdom of servants* (accomplishment).'² Treat concludes: 'Our journey through the Old Testament revealed an unfolding pattern of royal victory through atoning sacrifice.'³

2. Treat, *The Crucified King*, 85.

3. *ibid.*, 68.

THE KINGDOM COMES IN JESUS

In Mark 1 Jesus begins his ministry by announcing the coming of God's kingdom and calling upon people to repent (1:15). Jesus is re-establishing God's rule. Matthew talks about 'the kingdom of heaven', but this is simply an accommodation to the Jewish convention of avoiding the use of God's name.

Jesus is the son of David – the promised King. He is the Messiah. The kingdom has come because the King has come. Gabriel says to Mary: 'You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; his kingdom will never end' (Luke 1:31-33).

Jesus not only re-establishes God's rule over Israel. Israel was always intended by God to be the vehicle for the salvation of the world. And Jesus is not only the new David. He is the new Adam. He restores humanity's rule over creation under the rule of God. The antecedents for the kingdom of God that Jesus inaugurates are not simply the reign of God's king over God's people, but the reign of humanity in Adam over creation.

In 1:21-45 Mark presents a series of events that take place in a twenty-four hour period. It is as if Mark starts his portrait of Jesus with a snapshot of a typical day. The day is prefaced with Jesus calling disciples who leave all to follow him, thereby demonstrating his authority over people (1:16-20). On the Sabbath he teaches in the synagogue of Capernaum with an authority that his hearers find remarkable (1:21-28). He exorcizes a demon-possessed man. In the afternoon he heals Peter's mother-

in-law who is immediately able to serve him (1:29-31). Then in the evening he heals 'all who were ill and demon-possessed' (1:32-34). Finally, in the early hours of the following morning, he heals a man with leprosy, restoring not only his physical body, but restoring him to the social body of Israel (1:40-45). A few days later he even claims authority to forgive sins (2:1-12), a claim he can substantiate with the healing of a paralysed man.

In 4:35-5:43 Mark presents an even more co-ordinated account of the authority of Jesus through four pictures that together show how comprehensive it is:

1. Authority over the natural world (4:35-41)

Jesus calms the storm with just a word and the sea is immediately still. In the Old Testament only God can control the sea (Pss. 89:8-9; 106:9). Jesus is exercising the reign of God over nature.

2. Authority over the spirit world (5:1-20)

In the next story Jesus heals a demon-possessed man. The legion of demons in the man ask Jesus if they can enter some pigs and we are told 'he gave them permission' (5:13). The demons are subject to the reign of God in Jesus.

3. Authority over sickness (5:24-34)

Mark emphasis that the next person Jesus encounters has an intractable illness that has proved beyond the scope of doctors. It is also a disease that made her perpetually unclean and so involved social ostracization. To touch this woman was yourself to become unclean. But when she touches Jesus, instead of Jesus becoming unclean, the woman becomes clean.

4. Authority over death (5:21-43)

In the final story we see the authority of Jesus even over death as he raises the daughter of Jairus from the dead. Mark presents the stories of the woman and Jairus' daughter as a 'sandwich' which the story of the woman contained within the beginning and end of the story of Jairus' daughter. Jairus' daughter is also the same age as the length of time the woman has been suffering. Mark is tying these stories together to present a complete picture of the authority of Jesus. And he presents the story of Jairus' daughter to imply that Jesus can raise someone from death as easily as we might raise someone from sleep.

In Mark 4:41 the disciples ask themselves, 'Who is this?' The answer that Mark is driving us towards is that Jesus is the King with authority over nature, spirits, sickness and even death. The kingdom has come with the coming of the King. But this is not the full picture as we will see in the next chapter.