

The Quest for the Lost Jesus

HELPING MUSLIMS TO DISCOVER THE
HISTORICAL JESUS OF NAZARETH

Andy Bannister

All the papers from the popular series on the
Answering Islam web site in one handy PDF format

<http://www.answering-islam.org/Andy/index.html>
<http://www.geocities.com/questforthelostjesus/>

**The Quest for the Lost Jesus series is © Andy Bannister, 2001-2002.
You are free to photocopy and distribute this material, provided that
any copies you make clearly retain this copyright statement.**

All Bible quotations in this document are from the Revised Standard Version (RSV), © 1971 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

New parts of the series will be published regularly on Answering Islam. Please keep visiting to check for updates, or alternatively visit the Quest for the Lost Jesus micro-site at www.geocities.com/questforthelostjesus/. At that site you can sign up to be automatically emailed when updates occur.

You are welcome to email the author at **andybannister@mac.com**



Table of contents

Chapter 1	Asking Questions, Seeking Answers	4
	Introduction : the challenge of Jesus.....	4
	Five questions.....	4
	Rediscovering the power of story.....	5
	Jesus and his stories.....	6
	Conclusion.....	8
Chapter 2	The Mindset of the Messiah	11
	A brief recap.....	11
	Who did Jesus think he was?.....	11
	Back to the very beginning.....	12
	Adam, Israel, and God’s true humanity.....	13
	The hope of a nation.....	15
	Jesus and his understanding of the role of Messiah.....	17
	Conclusion.....	20
Chapter 3	The Coming of the Kingdom	22
	The story so far.....	22
	The Kingdom of God in the Old Testament.....	23
	Signs of the Kingdom.....	24
	Jesus and the Kingdom of God.....	26
	Means of its coming.....	26
	Timing.....	30
	Conclusion.....	34
Bibliography		36
Further Reading		37

Chapter I

Asking questions, Seeking answers

Introduction : the challenge of Jesus

Whether one is Christian or Muslim, there is no getting away from the challenging figure who is Jesus of Nazareth. Yet beyond acknowledging that he was indeed a remarkable figure, Christians and Muslims quickly begin to disagree when talking about Jesus. Christians believe that in Jesus, the God who created the world revealed himself fully to his creation. Muslims, on the other hand, believe him to be merely a prophet; important, yes, but nowhere near as significant as Muhammad himself.

Yet the problem is this. Most Muslims know very little about the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth. The Qur'an contains little about him, indeed most of what is recorded are merely extended birth narratives. Whilst it is said that he taught great crowds, little information is given as to the content of that teaching. The Qur'an records no sermons, no parables, none of his gentle words to the poor and dispossessed, none of his cutting challenges to the religious establishment of the day; it is all missing. For that, one needs to turn to the New Testament and to the gospels.

When one raises the question of Jesus, Muslims are often quick to ask “we honour Jesus Christ, why do you not honour Muhammad?” But I would challenge my Muslim friends and readers with this — if I were to say ‘oh, I honour Muhammad, he was a great racing car driver!’ you would look at me as if I were mad; you see, the key concern is not whether one claims to honour somebody or not, but *firstly whether one actually knows what they stood for*. Until Muslims know what Jesus said, did, and claimed to be, then for them to claim that they honour Jesus is at best misleading. The aim of this series is to help Muslims rediscover their lost Jesus — to investigate for themselves what he did, said, and taught.

Five questions

One of the world's leading New Testament scholars is N T Wright, whose massive works *The New Testament and the People of God* and *Jesus and the Victory of God* are required reading for anybody who wishes to be taken seriously in the academic arena. Wright suggests that there are five key questions that anybody wishing to form an opinion about Jesus needs to take seriously and be able to answer.¹ These are:

1. How did Jesus fit into the Judaism of his day? Did he believe the same as everybody else at the time, or did he stand out? And if so, how?
2. What were the aims of Jesus? What was he seeking to achieve as he was operating within the Judaism of his day?
3. Why did Jesus die? Why did the Jewish leadership seek to have him executed, and how did they persuade the Romans to go ahead with it?²

Chapter I : Asking Questions, Seeking Answers

4. How and why did the early church begin? What transformed a bunch of frightened men, after the loss of their leader, into a bunch of fearless preachers prepared to face martyrdom for their message? Why did they begin to preach that Israel's history had reached its promised climax in Jesus?
5. Why are the gospels the way they are? One can see that the gospels are, on the one hand, very different from the Jewish background of first century Palestine. Yet they are also significantly different from the early church. (For example, they contain no mention of issues that are of great concern in the later New Testament; speaking in tongues, circumcision, the debate concerning Gentiles and so forth).

To state somewhat simply, as Muslim polemicists tend to, that “Jesus was merely a prophet” or that “the gospels have been corrupted” is to miss the point — rather like travelling at great expense and effort to Disneyland, taking a photo of the ticket booth, and returning home again, assuming that is all there is to see. Unless one can explain Jesus in terms of his historical background, understand what motivated him and drove him to follow through his vocation, and then explain how this gave birth to a new movement called “Christianity”, then it must be a case of back to the drawing board.

Muslims have lost their Jesus, and the aim of this mini-series is to help them recover him, as we examine what he taught, what he did and said, and attempt to constantly hold Wright's five questions in the back of our minds as we seek to formulate some answers.

Rediscovering the power of story

Even a cursory glance through the gospels will reveal that Jesus was a man who loved stories. He communicated by parables and metaphor. Yet this is something that is singularly lacking in the Qur'anic presentation of him. Perhaps because the Qur'an does not really utilise the genre of “story”,³ Muslims often fail to appreciate that Jesus in the New Testament is a great storyteller — something that is lost when one reduces one's contact with him to merely hunting for proof texts in the New Testament.⁴

If story is one major aspect to the ministry of Jesus, there are two others that we need to take account of as we read the New Testament. The first of these is that of action. Jesus was a man of action; as one reads the gospels we read of arguments with the Pharisees, miracles, prophetic-acting-out, and a range of other things. But these cannot be divorced from what Jesus said and taught. Consider the famous story of Jesus cleansing the Temple in Jerusalem in Mark 11. Unless one reads this in its immediate context, then one cannot allow it to be mutually interpreted by the incident where Jesus prophetically curses the fig tree. Why did Jesus clear the Temple? The answer can only be found by reading the actions and statements together. This is cry for a unified Jesus, not a Jesus of the polemic and the proof text.

The third aspect of the ministry of Jesus requires getting your head around the Judaism of his day. In first century Judaism, symbols were one of the big things. And three of the biggest were the Temple, the Torah, and the Spirit. All three were ways of talking about God's dealings with his people, Israel:

- The Temple represented God's presence with his people; through its system of priests and sacrifices was how one gained forgiveness and was made righteous with the God of Israel.

Chapter I : Asking Questions, Seeking Answers

- the Torah represented the way God wanted you to live. It was, in one sense, the very embodiment of divine Wisdom. If as a first century Jew you wanted to live rightly, then you followed the Torah.⁵
- And most powerfully of all, the Spirit represented God's way of working in history. Like Islam today, first century Judaism believed in a God who was almighty and transcendent. To protect his transcendence, the Old Testament speaks of 'God's Spirit', inseparable from God himself, which is the way that God gets things done on earth. To speak of God's Spirit was to speak of God himself; for example, see Old Testament passages such as Genesis 1:2; 1 Sam 19:23; Job 33:4 and many more.

Why is this important? Because, as we shall see later in this series, Jesus himself was a strong advocate of symbols. The way that he acts towards these massively important Jewish symbols of the day, and indeed creates powerful symbols of his own, will help us as we seek to look more closely at Jesus and to ponder Wright's five questions which we encountered above.

Jesus and his stories

Jesus, then as we have seen, was a man who told stories. His stories often connected with the religious symbols of his day. They certainly utilised language, images, and metaphors that his contemporaries could understand. One of the most significant stories he told — one that gives us insight into his mindset — can be found in Mark chapter 12. The context is this; Jesus has just caused a ruckus in the Jerusalem Temple, cleansing it of traders, and prophesying its destruction. The religious leaders challenge him, and ask him from where he derives his authority to do all that is doing. And Jesus tells this story ...

"A man planted a vineyard, and set a hedge around it, and dug a pit for the wine press, and built a tower, and let it out to tenants, and went into another country. When the time came, he sent a servant to the tenants, to get from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. And they took him and beat him, and sent him away empty-handed.

Again he sent to them another servant, and they wounded him in the head, and treated him shamefully. And he sent another, and him they killed; and so with many others, some they beat and some they killed.

He had still one other, a beloved son; finally he sent him to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But those tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' And they took him and killed him, and cast him out of the vineyard."

Jesus asked, What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants, and give the vineyard to others. Have you not read this scripture: 'The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes?'"

(Mark 12:1-11)

The audience who heard this story would not have been in doubt as to what Jesus meant by it. Even 2,000 years later, it is very clear. What does need explaining however, is that in the Judaism of Jesus' day, a "vineyard" was a symbol for Israel herself. We can see this in a wide range of Old Testament texts, such as Isaiah 5:1. Indeed, Jesus' whole story is a very clever retelling of Isaiah

Chapter I : Asking Questions, Seeking Answers

5:1-7, a passage in which God's judgement on Israel was promised if they refused to do what was right. Once you pick up on that imagery, the rest of the story falls into place:

- If the vineyard represents Israel, who does the owner of the vineyard symbolise? The answer is God himself.
- The tenants in the story represent the people of Israel, to whom God had given the land (the vineyard).
- The servants represent the many prophets that God sent to his people, to persuade them to mend their rebellious ways (a story told in great detail in the many prophetic writings in the Old Testament).
- But after all the servants have been ignored, ill-treated, and killed, who comes next? The answer ... *the son of the vineyard owner*.

Why is this important? For a number of reasons, not least that Jesus saw himself as in a different class to the servants (prophets) who had come before. They were merely messengers sent by the vineyard owner (God) to the tenants (Israelites). Jesus, however, saw himself as the obedient son. This already has profound implications for an Islamic understanding of Jesus. Because Jesus does not see himself as one in a line of prophets, preceded by John the Baptist and followed by Muhammad. As far as Jesus is concerned, the line of prophets had ended — John was the last. He, Jesus, is in a different class ... he is the obedient son of the vineyard owner.

That Jesus saw himself as in a different league to previous prophets becomes clear when you look at other examples of his actions and his teaching. Remember those three key symbols of Judaism that we spoke about earlier. We mentioned Temple, Torah, and Spirit. No good first century Jew would have anything but the highest respect for those would he not? Yet we find the following ...

- That in regard to the Temple, Jesus considers it to be defunct — and he actively speaks against it. Indeed, his whole purpose of going to Jerusalem at the climax of his ministry seems to be to speak against it and the religious regime centred upon it.
- In regard to Torah, Jesus seems to consider himself free to abrogate or add to many aspects of the Old Testament. In the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew chapters 5-7, we have some of the greatest ethical teaching of Jesus. Several times he says of commands in the Old Testament “you have heard that it *was* written ...” and then precedes to respond “but *I* say to you ...” We see him change the Law regarding divorce, revenge, murder, adultery, and love for enemies. And all on his own authority.
- And in regard to God's Spirit, we see what for a first century Jew would have amounted to blasphemy. Jesus claims authority over the very Spirit of God itself; in John 15:26 Jesus promises that he will send God's Spirit ...

“But when the Counsellor comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness to me”.

21st century Muslims tend to miss what would have been blasphemy to a good Jew; how could Jesus, a carpenter from Nazareth, claim to send God's Spirit? Sending the spirit was God's prerogative alone In the Old Testament, as we have seen, the Spirit represented the very presence and activity of God himself. The claim of Jesus would have been similar to you or I saying “I can command God's power” or “I can send God's wisdom” ... utterly blasphemous.

Chapter I : Asking Questions, Seeking Answers

As N T Wright, who we encountered earlier, remarks:

Judaism had two great incarnational symbols, Temple and Torah: Jesus seems to have believed it was his vocation to upstage the one and outflank the other. Jesus acted and spoke as if he thought he were a one-man counter-temple movement.⁶

Whatever else he thought he was, Jesus clearly thought he was *no mere prophet*. In the Parable of the Vineyard above, we have seen that Jesus categorically drew a line between himself and the previous prophets. No more prophets could come after the obedient son of the vineyard owner, because after the son God would intervene and do something very different. This fundamental difference between Jesus and all other prophets is also marked out by his attitude to the great symbols of Judaism; Torah, Temple and Spirit. Jesus clearly considered himself, as the obedient son, to have authority over all three of them. This raises profound questions for the Muslim understanding of Jesus. Muhammad cannot, categorically and absolutely, stand in a line of prophets stretching back through Jesus. *Jesus did not consider himself as just one of many prophets, and as such he certainly did not expect any other to come after him.*

That is because Jesus understood that through him, the God of the Old Testament was bringing about his promised Kingdom, which the Old Testament prophets had looked forward to. One cannot understand Jesus without understanding his teaching about “the Kingdom of God”, a phrase that appears over one hundred times in the gospels. But that is a topic for the third part in this series.

Conclusion

We have seen how it is vital that Jesus be understood in the context of first century Judaism. Muslims commit a perverse twisting of history when they try to suggest he was effectively a seventh century Muslim, preaching an identical message to Muhammad. Jesus was not a Muslim, nor for that matter was he a 21st century American protestant! One needs to understand him in his context; and the only way to do that is to access him through the New Testament gospels.

Secondly, this paper has been a call to read the message of Jesus in its entirety. Sadly, my Muslim friends are very fond of proof texting (Christians are not immune to this error either). The most you will hear most Muslims quoting the gospels is one verse here, one verse there, simply to make a point. However, our understanding of Jesus is only correct if it fits *all of the material* in the gospels, and addresses the five key questions we studied above. If we can only support our picture of Jesus by quoting one or two verses, lifted out of context, then I would suggest we have the wrong picture of Jesus. A Muslim would rightly argue that a proper understanding of Islam needs to take into account the whole Qur’an; not just one or two favourite verses. I would likewise argue that any presentation of Jesus that does not take account of all of his parables, miracles, and actions is equally flawed and highly skewed. Thus this is a challenge for Muslims to rediscover the New Testament and engage with the Jesus it presents, not pull it apart.

Thirdly, we have seen how Jesus understood himself to be in a class apart from other prophets, and indeed the line of prophets to have finished. Jesus spoke of himself as the obedient son of the vineyard owner, sent by that owner (God) when the line of messengers had failed to prepare people for the coming Kingdom of God. Thus to call Jesus “a prophet like Muhammad” is not so much a travesty as a foolish misunderstanding. You may say Muhammad was a prophet if you wish, but he was certainly not one like Jesus, because **future prophets did not fit into the world view of Jesus**

Chapter I : Asking Questions, Seeking Answers

of Nazareth.⁷ If we are to properly understand Jesus, the man and his message, and ultimately who he claimed to be, then we need to understand the total uniqueness that underpinned all that he claimed and did.

Endnotes and References

¹ N T Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London : SPCK, 1999) p91-113.

² It is of course acknowledged that Muslims do not believe Jesus to have been crucified (on the basis of Surah 4:157). Hence this point will be extensively discussed in a further paper in this series. For now, it is enough to ask our Muslim friends three questions:

- (i) why does Jesus extensively talk about his death? (e.g. Mark 8:31; 10:33-34). To say that these are “later Christian corruptions of the gospel” entirely misses the point; if this was the case, why do none of these verses mention crucifixion, or atonement or any other later Christian ideas?
- (ii) what on earth possessed the first Jewish Christians to claim that their Messiah-figure had been crucified. As Muslim apologist Shabir Ally has highlighted, the very idea of a “crucified messiah” would have been a contradiction in Jewish ears (on the basis of Deuteronomy 21:22-23). Yet we find that in the very earliest Christian preaching, a crucified Messiah is exactly what is proclaimed (Acts 2:36). This is not the kind of claim that Jewish-Christians would have made up unless they were very sure of themselves.
- (iii) how did Jesus understand Old Testament texts that seem to speak of God’s anointed person (messiah) suffering; for example the Servant Songs in Isaiah and numerous examples in the intertestamental literature, such as Wisdom 2:12ff.

³ I use the term ‘story’ in the sense of *fictional narrative*. The Qur’an does, of course, contain sections of narrative; for example, the accounts of Joseph, Solomon and the ants, and so forth. However, orthodox Muslims would say these are not fictional, but reports of history. However, the Qur’an does not utilise the genre of ‘story’ like the gospels do. This lack of familiarity with the genre of story means Muslims often struggle when they turn to the gospels, where Jesus formulates most of his teaching in the form of stories — parables that his audience could relate to. One cannot lift proof-texts from stories, wrenching them out of their context. One needs instead to use the story responsibly, and read it as a single unit (what scholars would call a “pericope”).

⁴ Which sadly is what one tends to see when the gospels are quoted in Muslim polemics. But one cannot wrench single verses from Matthew, Mark, Luke or John in order to prove a point like this. Jesus told his message of the Kingdom of God (a topic for a future part in this series) in the form of parables and story, and to understand Jesus one must read what he says *in context*. I suggest to our Muslim readers that they may begin by reading Mark’s gospel in one sitting; something that can be done in about two hours. If they are not prepared to invest this time, then I would politely suggest they find an alternative pursuit to history and say no more.

5 Traditionally, the Torah was understood to mean the first five books of the Old Testament. However, by the time of Jesus, “Torah” had grown to mean all the books of the Old Testament.

6 N T Wright, ‘Jesus and the Identity of God’ in the journal *Ex Auditu* 14 (1998) 42-56, p53.

7 A popular Muslim get out clause, when faced with difficult questions about Jesus, is to say, “that is a later Christian invention”. The problem is that this answer does not help you with the Parable of the Vineyard, in which Jesus presents himself as the obedient son of the owner, sent when all the prophets have failed. If this was a later Christian corruption, a Muslim would need to explain:

- (i) Why there is no mention of crucifixion or resurrection (which the Church would clearly have added had these stories been late inventions) .
- (ii) Why we find no atonement theology whatsoever.
- (iii) The focus upon Israel. This only makes sense in its context if this parable was told before AD70, when Jerusalem was sacked by the Romans and the Temple destroyed. The problem with the “gospel has been corrupted” argument is that it is usually made by people who are unfamiliar with the whole of the New Testament, ignorant of first century history or, more often, both.

Chapter 2

The Mindset of the Messiah

A brief recap

In the previous chapter, we introduced the subject of Jesus by making the point that if Muslims wish to say that they honour him then, given the lack of information about him in the Qur'an, they need to invest some time searching for their lost Jesus — by getting to grips with his life and ministry as reported in the accounts contained in the New Testament.

We also looked at a key aspect of the self-understanding of Jesus — the fact that he considered himself to be utterly unique; not just one in a line of prophets, but indeed, in a category apart. We showed this by looking at just one of the parables that Jesus told. To stress the point again; to understand Jesus, it is not enough just to quote a verse here, a verse there, to try to prove your point. Whatever and whoever you understand Jesus of Nazareth to have been, if your understanding cannot deal with all of his teaching, actions, and ministry, then you are building castles in the air. Quoting mere proof-texts to try to show that “Jesus was a good Muslim” is not the way to study Jesus. And, indeed, there is a very good reason why attempts to make Jesus out to be a good Muslim do not work; it is because *this was not what he understood himself to be*.

Who did Jesus think he was?

So if Jesus did not consider himself to be just another prophet, one in a long line stretching from Adam to Muhammad, who did he understand himself to be? What categories did he use to explain his actions, his teachings, and his ministry? The answer is, at one level, simple. Jesus understood himself to be Israel's Messiah (in Arabic, 'al-Masih', the word that the Qur'an uses). That, however is where the simplicity ends. For to call Jesus the Messiah simply leads to another question; “what does ‘Messiah’ actually mean?” Sadly many Muslims have not given this question the slightest consideration. Yet it is foundational to understanding the identity of Jesus of Nazareth. Muslims are not helped in that the Qur'an makes no attempts to define what 'al-Masih' means, to discuss what it means for someone to be 'al-Masih', or what Jesus meant by the term.

To explore the answer to this central question concerning Jesus, you need to do some digging. Because when Jesus used the word “Messiah”, he was tapping in to a very ancient Jewish story; a story that informed, guided, and drove the nation of Israel of which Jesus was a part. It is a story that speaks of the God who created the world, who set mankind within it, who guided men and women in order that his purposes might come about. In one sense, this Jewish story recorded in the Old Testament is the oldest story of all! Hence to understand Jesus, indeed, to understand creation itself, you need to understand that story which Jesus, like any good first century Jew, would have been well versed in; it was a story told in the Jewish Scriptures (what we call the Old Testament), acted out at feasts and festivals, celebrated in Temple and Synagogue; it is a story that starts at the very beginning of it all.

Back to the very beginning

The Jewish story of God's relationship with the world starts at the very beginning of the Bible, in the book of Genesis. Shadows of this story can be found in the Qur'an, but as with the story of Jesus himself, fundamental aspects are missing from the Qur'an's account — this may well be why Muslims have often struggled to recover their lost Jesus, because the key pieces of the jigsaw cannot be found in the Qur'an. Rather you need to turn to the Old Testament, specifically to Genesis 1-3, to start to lay the framework for what Jesus meant when he spoke of being the Messiah.

We read in Genesis 1-2 of how God created the heavens and the earth, and everything that can be found in the created order. What is also significant is what we read after God has completed this creative process:

And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, a sixth day.
(Genesis 1:31)

Right at the beginning of the Bible, we read that God's creation was good — he was pleased with that with which he was made. This is a vital aspect of the Jewish-Christian story of beginnings; God does not divide things into 'spiritual and good' and 'earthly and bad', a way of thinking found in some religions today. Some religious people think that life is all about doing one's best to please God, so that you can escape to a 'better place' (paradise or heaven). However, this is not what Genesis says. Created things are not bad, indeed the whole of the universe is very good indeed — **creation as God first made it, was a very good thing.**

But it is what follows next that is of primary importance for understanding the Jewish story and, in our case, understanding what Jesus saw his Messianic role as being all about. For once he has completed the rest of creation, God then creates man and woman:

Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.
(Genesis 1:26-27)

God creates man and woman, the very pinnacle of his creation, according to the Bible; but the vital part of the narrative is that **mankind was created in the image of God**. The result of missing this has massive consequences — it will cause you to misunderstand God, misunderstand humanity, and misunderstand Jesus. Some Muslims have occasionally asked questions like "how can humans be in God's image — God is utterly different from his creation?" But mixing up creation and the creator is not what this story is about. I know of no Jewish or Christian scholar writing today who would say that this verse suggests humans are in any way divine. Rather, the image of God tells us about the role of human beings in God's creation. Just as an ancient king would place statues or images of himself throughout his empire, to pronounce to his subjects that it was his power that was supreme, so human beings are in the image of God:

Chapter 2 : The Mindset of the Messiah

Adam was meant to represent God within his creation.¹

When God makes men and women in his image, 'he does not mean them to look like him, or to be made of the same stuff. Rather he intends them to be a kind of extension of his own personality, and a fundamental part of his own activity in the world. They are his **representatives**.'²

The idea that human beings are God's image or representatives runs through the whole of the Bible like a golden thread. Why does God forbid human beings to murder? Because humans are made in God's image (Genesis 9:6). Why is God so concerned that human beings live sinless, righteous lives? In order that they may accurately represent him within creation; God is perfect and thus expects his representatives to accurately reflect that perfection (e.g. Matt 5:48).

However, the next part of the Genesis story tells of how Adam and Eve disobeyed God and broke the relationship between humankind and God. Once again, the Qur'an (Surah 2:30-39) has borrowed the biblical story, but misses many of the most important points. The result of the sin of the first human couple is not only that human beings are separated from God but that creation itself was damaged when they rebelled; we have seen how Adam and Eve were the high point of creation, God's representatives within it. They not only failed God in sinning, but failed their responsibility to creation as well:

Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. (Genesis 3:17-18).

And with sin also came, for the first time, human death, as God had warned (Genesis 2:17):

... until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken, and to it you will return. (Genesis 3:19)

Central to the whole Bible is the idea that mankind and creation are inseparably linked. Unlike the Qur'an's account of creation, God did not set Adam and Eve in some heavenly paradise from which they sinned and were cast down to earth (Surah 7:24). Rather, he created human beings to be responsible for and look after the rest of creation, to be his representatives within it. And, unlike the Qur'an, the Bible does not present paradise as an otherworldly place disconnected from reality, but speaks of **God restoring the whole of creation to the way it was intended to be**.

Adam, Israel, and God's true humanity

The creation and the sin of Adam is just the beginning of the Jewish story which we need to understand if we are to grasp the mindset of Jesus. God had intended humankind as a whole to be his representatives, but they had failed in this task. So the story of the Old Testament moves on to the person of Abraham (or Abram as he was called before he met God). God had a very special plan for Abraham, when he called him to leave his homeland and travel to a new country:

*God said to Abraham ... "I will make you a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and **all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.**" (Genesis 12:1-3)*

Chapter 2 : The Mindset of the Messiah

This promise to Abraham is foundational to the rest of the Old Testament and to the understanding that Jesus had of what it meant to be the Messiah. Indeed, one could trace the Muslim loss of Jesus right back to Abraham himself. Understand what God promised to Abraham and how that was fulfilled, the purposes of God behind that promise that the Old Testament reveals, and you are well on the way to correctly approaching Jesus. So important is this promise to Abraham that we find that God repeats it to him on a number of occasions where more of the details are fleshed out:

God said to Abraham, “know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and ill-treated for 400 years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterwards they will come out with great possessions.”
(Genesis 15:13-14)

God promises to turn Abraham into a great nation through the long-hoped-for son, Isaac. A nation who will indeed be enslaved; the story of Israel’s ill-treatment by the Egyptians and their rescue by God is one of the most important themes in the Old Testament. But a key question to ask here is why? Why did God choose to raise Abraham up into a nation, to miraculously provide him and his wife with a child, Isaac, to do so. What does it mean that all nations on earth will be blessed through Israel? These are important questions, and have to do with the role of Israel in God’s plans and purposes as revealed in the Old Testament.³ The Bible answers this question for us very clearly in a number of places. Here are just a few of the key verses:

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.
(Hosea 11:1)

God has declared this day concerning you that you are a people for his own possession, as he has promised you, and that you are to keep all his commandments, that he will set you high above all nations that he has made, in praise and in fame and in honour, and that you shall be a people holy to the Lord your God, as he has spoken.
(Deuteronomy 26:18-19)

*And God said, “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.’
‘It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”*
(Isaiah 49:3,6)

What, then, do we see in these verses and throughout the whole Old Testament? We see that God has chosen Israel to be his special people, that they will be holy and set apart, and, crucially, that they shall be a light to the other nations of the earth. Think back to what we saw concerning Adam and Eve, how God had created them to be his representatives. The Old Testament teaches that this role had now passed through Abraham to Israel. As leading biblical scholar Tom Wright has expressed it:

Abraham and his family inherit, in a measure, the role of Adam and Eve ...we could sum up this aspect of Genesis by saying: Israel are God’s true humanity.⁴

Jewish covenant theology claims that God has not been thwarted irrevocably by the rebellion of his creation, but has called into

Chapter 2 : The Mindset of the Messiah

being a people through whom he will work to restore his creation ... Israel is to be the people through whom the creator will bless his creation once more.⁵

The hope of a nation

Yet just as Adam and Eve rebelled against God, so too did Israel. The people that God had called as his special men and women, those through whom the rest of the world would see his glory fell into sin and rebellion. The prophetic books in the Old Testament recount time and time again how God called his people Israel, through the prophets, back into the kind of relationship with him that would mean they might fulfil their purpose and that the rest of the world might see God revealed through them. In the words of the prophet Jeremiah:

Return, faithless Israel, says the Lord God, I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful, I will not be angry for ever. Only acknowledge your guilt, that you rebelled against the Lord your God and scattered your favours among strangers under every green tree, and that you have not obeyed my voice, says the Lord God.

Return, O faithless children, says the Lord God; for I am your master; I will take you, one from a city and two from a family, and I will bring you to Zion. And I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding.

And when you have multiplied and increased in the land, in those days, says the LORD, they shall no more say, "The ark of the covenant of the Lord God." It shall not come to mind, or be remembered, or missed; it shall not be made again.

*At that time **Jerusalem shall be called the throne of the Lord God, and all nations shall gather to it, to the presence of the Lord God in Jerusalem, and they shall no more stubbornly follow their own evil heart.***

(Jeremiah 3:12-17)

Note the examples here of all the themes we have been discussing. Israel rebelled and disobeyed God, and in the process one of their most sacred religious objects — the ark of the covenant had been lost. Now the nation of Israel are in exile, yet God has not forgotten them. The promise is clear — if they cease their rebellion and return to God, then he will carry out his promises and prosper them. All nations will gather to Israel because through her they will experience the power of the Lord God himself. It was this kind of promise that kept God's people hoping and praying during the long years of oppression, exile, and persecution.

*This is what the Lord God Almighty says: "Many peoples and the inhabitants of many cities will yet come, and the inhabitants of one city will go to another and say, 'Let us go at once to pray to the Lord, to seek the Lord God Almighty. I myself am going.' **And many peoples and powerful nations will come to Jerusalem to seek the Lord Almighty and to pray to him.**"*

(Zechariah 8:20-22)

By the time of the first century, the time period in which Jesus lived, Israel had already lived through one exile, when God carried out what he had promised above and used the Babylonians to punish his people. But now Israel was living under a new oppressor — the Romans ruled Palestine and to those Jews who were still loyal to God, it seemed like they were living in exile once again. But the Old Testament was very clear — God would not abandon his people to their fate but would one day, soon, intervene dramatically in history to vindicate and rescue Israel just like he had done

Chapter 2 : The Mindset of the Messiah

when he had rescued them from Egypt in the time of Moses, over a thousand years before. See how in this passage from the prophet Isaiah, God reminds his people of their time in Egypt, and promises a new rescue plan — a new kind of Exodus. When God acted to rescue his people Israel, all the nations of the earth would see God’s salvation plan in action ...

*For this is what the Sovereign Lord God says, “At **first my people went down to Egypt to live; lately, Assyria has oppressed them.** And now what do I have here?” declares the Lord God. “For my people have been taken away for nothing, and those who rule them mock,” declares the Lord God. “All day long my name is constantly blasphemed. Therefore my people will know my name; therefore in that day they will know that it is I who foretold it. Yes, it is I.”*

*How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, “Your God reigns!”. Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices; together they shout for joy. When the Lord God returns to Zion, they will see it with their own eyes. Burst into songs of joy together, you ruins of Jerusalem, for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. The Lord will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations, and **all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God.**”*

(Isaiah 52:4-10)

Passages like those from Zechariah, Jeremiah and Isaiah formed the backbone of a passionate hope that was a central feature of Judaism of the first century. And **to understand Jesus you need to understand this key idea. The Jews of his day were living in tremendous hope.** They knew God had promised to act to rescue them once again, to restore them to kind of people he intended Israel to be. He would restore the fortunes of Israel so that the rest of the world would see God’s power and sovereignty demonstrated through his chosen people. This was a tremendous hope and it was all focussed in the person of the Messiah. The Messiah would be the one who God would use to restore Israel, to defeat the Romans, and to bring his all powerful rule to bear on all the earth:

This, then, was the hope of Israel. And it was a strong one. Its roots went far back into their national and religious identity. It was fed by the belief that one day the Lord God would restore the fortunes of Israel. Such an event would take place through the nation in general and through the agency of his chosen leader, the anointed one, the Messiah, in particular.

Their God, then, would rescue them, restore them, make good the desolation, despair and depression they had long experienced. Ruling nation after ruling nation oppressed them, but still the hope remained. A national and collective hope that was located in one particular figure. This figure would be their saviour. **The evidence would be seen in what was done.** And what was achieved would happen by virtue of being empowered by the very Spirit of God. There had to be the Spirit’s anointing. As such, this individual would be the “Anointed One”: in Hebrew, the word “Messiah”, in Greek, the word “Christ”.⁶

Note the words in bold above. A key thing one must always remember about the word ‘Messiah’ is that to a first century Jew, such as Jesus, it was a very practical word. Being the Messiah was something one was by virtue of what one did. This is why we have spent so much time establishing

Chapter 2 : The Mindset of the Messiah

the Jewish story in the Bible up to the point of Jesus. Because, from a biblical point of view, it is very clear what the Messiah had to do:

- Restore Israel so that God's glory was reflected by his chosen people.
- A properly restored Israel would function as Adam should have done, as God's representative.
- Thus a properly restored Israel would be, in effect, a properly restored humanity; the mistake made by Adam and Eve that wrecked the relationship between humankind and God, that spoiled the perfect creation that God had made, would be reversed when God acted through his Messiah.

So what did Jesus make of this concept of Messiah, a word on which were pinned the hopes of over a thousand years of Old Testament history? The answer is a *very great deal indeed*.

Jesus and his understanding of the role of Messiah

Both Christians and Muslims agree that Jesus understood himself to be the Messiah. But what we have done so far in this paper is to examine what "Messiah" meant to a first century Jew. The Qur'an does Muslims a great disservice in not explaining what Messiah (or 'al-Masih') means, because without this background, you will not understand the significance or the uniqueness of Jesus. Here is one of the most famous passages in the Bible where Jesus talks about being the Messiah:

Jesus and his disciples were on the way to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say that I am?"

His disciples replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."

"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say that I am?"

Peter answered "You are the Christ."

Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him. He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."

(Mark 8:27-33)

The passage is extremely interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, the disciples answer to the question of Jesus ("who do people say that I am?") revealed the wide range of opinions that people had about Jesus. Differing opinions about who Jesus was (as Muslims and Christians disagree today) is not new, but had begun during the ministry of Jesus himself. The popular view seems to have been that Jesus was a famous prophet risen from the dead, perhaps John the Baptist (recently executed by King Herod), or Elijah. But Jesus rejects those answers, pressing the disciples further — "Who do you say that I am?" Peter answers clearly, that Jesus is the Messiah. So far, so good. But look what comes next. Jesus begins to outline some of the things that must happen to the Messiah, as far as he is concerned. Jesus states clearly that the religious establishment of the day will reject him, kill him, but that he will then be raised from the dead. This is all too much for Peter. In Peter's mind, being killed is not what should happen to the Messiah. Quite what Peter exactly

Chapter 2 : The Mindset of the Messiah

believed about the Messiah is unclear, but it seems very likely that, along with many first century Jews, he would have believed that the Messiah should be a powerful military leader, through whom the Romans would be overthrown and God's people vindicated. This was perhaps the most popular idea of what the Messiah would be like in the first century, yet it was one that Jesus went to lengths to separate himself from. His understanding of what it meant to be the Messiah did not include leading a military campaign against the Romans:

Then Jesus said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's".

(Matthew 22:21)

Then the men stepped forward, seized Jesus and arrested him. With that, one of Jesus' companions reached for his sword, drew it out and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear. "Put your sword back in its place," Jesus said to him, "for all who draw the sword will die by the sword."

(Matthew 26:50-52)

Jesus said to Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place." "You are a king, then!" said Pilate.

Jesus answered, "You are right in saying I am a king ..."

(John 18:36-37)

So if Jesus rejected a highly political interpretation of what being the Messiah meant (the popular interpretation, that which would seek to overthrow the Romans by force and bring God's Kingdom about by violence) what did he understand by the term "Messiah". How did he interpret "Messiah" in the light of all of the Hebrew story that we have studied? This is the crucial point that Muslims need to grasp. When you speak of Jesus, whatever understanding you have of him needs to make sense of creation and Adam, of Israel and God's true humanity, and of God's promises to his people to save them and vindicate them, to use them as a light to draw all the nations to himself. What did Jesus say about his understanding of Messiahship? To answer that question, we need to look at the first public occasion where Jesus announces, for those who are aware and are listening, that he is Israel's promised Messiah:

Jesus went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

*"The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor,
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to release the oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."*

Then Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

(Luke 4:16-21)

Jesus' words must have shocked the first hearers, but two thousand years on we have lost something of the impact. **"Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."** Jesus was not

Chapter 2 : The Mindset of the Messiah

quoting any old section of the Old Testament, but was reading from Isaiah 61:1-2. The passage is a crucial one because it speaks of many of the key themes that we have already seen in our study of the Hebrew Old Testament story. Here is the entire of the passage that Jesus read bits from that day in the synagogue in Nazareth:

*The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because God has anointed me to preach good news to the poor,
He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour and the **day of vengeance of our God**,
to **comfort all who mourn and provide for those who grieve in Zion** -
to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
a planting of the Lord God for the display of his splendour.
They will **rebuild the ancient ruins** and restore the places long devastated;
they will renew the ancient cities that have been devastated for generations.
Aliens will shepherd your flocks; foreigners will work your fields and vineyards.
And you will be called priests of the Lord God,
you will be named ministers of our God.
You will feed on the wealth of nations, and in their riches you will boast.
Instead of their shame my people will receive a double portion,
and instead of disgrace they will rejoice in their inheritance;
and so they will inherit a double portion in the land,
and everlasting joy will be theirs.
For, I, the Lord God, love justice, I hate robbery and sin.
In my faithfulness I will reward them, and make an everlasting covenant with
them.
Their descendants will be **known among the nations** and their offspring among
the peoples.
**All who see them will acknowledge that they are a people the Lord God has
blessed.**
(Isaiah 61:1-9)*

Like all of the Old Testament passages we examined before, Isaiah 61:1-9 speaks of God acting dramatically to vindicate and save his people, causing all the nations to look to them to see what God has done. When Jesus quoted this passage, and said “**today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing**” what he was saying was this — that the promises of God that you have been hoping, longing, and praying for are coming true. Jesus was not proposing a political Messiahship, one that saw the overthrow of the Romans as an end in itself. He was interested in something else entirely; bringing to pass those age old promises of God concerning his people. God intended that Israel would represent his true, normal humanity, as Adam was supposed to have done, and God promised that he would act to bring that about. Jesus was saying that the waiting was over, that this was happening now. And as we shall see in a later part in this series, what was so radical about Jesus was that he said that *these promises of God were coming true in and through his own life and ministry*. His understanding of what it meant that he was the Messiah can be summed up thus:

Jesus' whole announcement of the kingdom of God indicates that he believed that kingdom to be present where he was, and operative through him personally. He **believed that Israel's destiny was reaching its fulfilment in his life**, that he was to fight Israel's

Chapter 2 : The Mindset of the Messiah

battles, and that he should summon Israel to regroup, and find new identity around him ... Jesus, then, believed himself to be the focal point of the people of God, the returned-from-exile people, the people of the renewed covenant, the people whose sins were now to be forgiven.⁷

In the first part of “The Quest for the Lost Jesus”, we showed why Muhammad cannot possibly have been a prophet after Jesus, unless one is to reject everything that Jesus believed and stood for. Having begun to examine what Messiahship is all about, what Jesus was thinking and doing in claiming to be the Messiah, we see this point even more clearly. If Jesus was right, and he was indeed Israel’s Messiah, then there would be no more prophets. There would be no need. The Parable of the Vineyard that Jesus told (which was quoted in full last time) falls perfectly into place. Jesus understood that his job as the Messiah was to complete the history of Israel, to conclude the story of God that began with creation and God’s desire to have a humanity who accurately represented him within that creation. The job of the Messiah was to restore Israel to be the true humanity she was called to be, and then through Israel the world would know who God was and would come to be saved. **There is no room in such a scheme for later prophets, because that was never God’s plan. Jesus was the climax of God’s dealing with the world, his restoring the true Israel to be his people, that all the nations of the world might see him represented by those true people.** And what did Jesus consider the badge of membership of God’s true people to be? It depended upon how you reacted personally to him:

Jesus answered, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me”.
(Matthew 19:21)

“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.”
(John 3:17-18)

Conclusion

If Jesus was the true Messiah, if he achieved what he set out to do, then God has acted dramatically in the world — and whether or not one is part of God’s true humanity, **a “normal human being” as opposed to a broken human being, still trapped in rebellion and sin, all hangs on how one responds to God’s Messiah, Jesus.** An invitation to respond that God throws open to all the world.

Endnotes and References

- ¹ Graham McFarlane, *Why do you believe what you believe about Jesus?* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2000) p77.
- ² John Drane, *Introducing the Old Testament* (Oxford: Lynx, 1987) p250.
- ³ When I speak in this paper of “Israel” be careful not to confuse the word with the political nation-state of Israel today. They are two utterly different concepts. In the Bible, “Israel” refers to the nation that God raised up through Abraham, whom God called to be his special people, revealing him to the other nations of the world. As we shall in a later part in this series, Jesus radically redefined the term “Israel”. But in many Muslim minds “Israel” has all kinds of connotations in the 21st century world; this mental baggage should be left behind when we turn back to examine the first century.
- ⁴ N T Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998) 22-23.
- ⁵ N T Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992) 260-262.
- ⁶ McFarlane, 44.
- ⁷ N T Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1999) 530-539.

Chapter 3

The Coming of the Kingdom

The story so far ...

In the first chapter we looked at why it is important for Muslims to discover more about the historical Jesus of Nazareth. The Qur'an contains such a small amount of information about him that if Muslims wish to truly say that they honour and respect him, then it is important that they try to get to grips with history. Since even a cursory reading of the historical data about Jesus of Nazareth reveals that he certainly did not consider himself to be merely one in a long line of prophets, the vital question for any student of history becomes *who did Jesus consider himself to be?*

The answer is that Jesus considered himself to be the Messiah — a title which both the Bible and the Qur'an affirm. In chapter two we looked at a crucially important question which Muslims sometimes overlook. What does it mean to say that Jesus is the Messiah? What does the word Messiah mean? What did Jesus consider his role as Messiah meant? And what does that mean for us today?

Now, in the third part of the Quest for the Lost Jesus series, we turn to another important question, one that not only sheds more light about Jesus' messianic identity, but also upon what Jesus understood his ministry to have achieved. The question *what did Jesus accomplish?* is a vital one. Muslims would say that he was simply an important prophet, speaking what Allah commanded him to say to the people of Israel. However, as we have seen in the previous two parts of this series, Muslim definitions of Jesus often fall short because they are not grounded in history. To understand what Jesus understood himself to be doing, one needs to look at two distinct areas:

- His preaching and teaching
- His actions and deeds

Particularly when one studies the teaching of Jesus recorded in the New Testament gospels, something very striking leaps out. A phrase that is found on the lips of Jesus more than perhaps any other — **the Kingdom of God**. Jesus referred to the Kingdom of God over 100 times in his preaching and teaching, for him it was a vitally important concept:

The central aspect of the teaching of Jesus was that concerning the Kingdom of God. On this there can be no doubt and today no scholar does, in fact, doubt it. Jesus appeared as one who proclaimed the Kingdom; all else in his message and ministry serves a function in relation to that proclamation and derives its meaning from it.¹

The majority of his parables were told to explain aspects of the Kingdom of God. Jesus refers to the coming of the Kingdom, speaks of his actions as signs of the Kingdom, and so on and so forth. If Muslims are to understand both what Jesus taught and did, then it is important to get to grips with what Jesus meant by this mysterious phrase. So what is the "Kingdom of God"? To answer that question, we need to discover what the Old Testament has to say about the idea — and what it would have meant to a first century Jew.

The Kingdom of God in the Old Testament

The Old Testament is filled with a rich imagery that Jesus drew upon when he spoke about the Kingdom of God. Central to the whole message of the Old Testament is the idea of God as King, not merely of Israel but of the whole world:

“O Yahweh,² God of our fathers, are you not God in heaven? Do you not rule over all the Kingdoms of the nations? In your hand are power and might, and none is able to withstand you.”
(2 Chronicles 20:6)

But Yahweh is the true God; he is the living God and the everlasting King. At his wrath the earth quakes, and the nations cannot endure his indignation.
(Jeremiah 10:10)

However, as well as speaking of God as King of all the nations, there is also a major strand of teaching in the Old Testament prophets that speaks of a day when God will *become* King. Whilst it may indeed be true, argues the Old Testament, that God is King of every nation, what do you see when you look around at the world? Human sin and rebellion, pride and disobedience, injustice, disease, famine and war. The Old Testament prophets looked forward to a day when God would act in power to demonstrate his kingly rule, to right wrongs, deal with injustice and sin, and assert his kingship. One of the best examples of this is spoken by the Old Testament prophet Zechariah:

*Behold, a day of Yahweh is coming, when the spoil taken from you will be divided in the midst of you. For I will gather all the nations against Jerusalem to battle, and the city shall be taken and the houses plundered and the women ravished; half of the city shall go into exile, but the rest of the people shall not be cut off from the city. Then Yahweh will go forth and fight against those nations as when he fights on a day of battle. On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives which lies before Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley; so that one half of the Mount shall withdraw northward, and the other half southward. And the valley of my mountains shall be stopped up, for the valley of the mountains shall touch the side of it; and you shall flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah. **Then Yahweh will come, and all the holy ones with him.***

*On that day there shall be neither cold nor frost. And there shall be continuous day (it is known to Yahweh), not day and not night, for at evening time there shall be light. On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea and half of them to the western sea; it shall continue in summer as in winter. **And Yahweh will become king over all the earth; on that day Yahweh will be one and his name one.***
(Zechariah 14:1-9)

As history rolled on, this hope that God would act dramatically in history to assert his reign and his kingship grew stronger in Judaism. As God's people went through the trauma of exile and return, and then oppression by the more powerful nations which surrounded them, this hope was shaped and refined. Slowly the Jews grew to believe that things on earth were so bad, that sin and injustice and oppression were so out of control, that when God acted dramatically in history what would actually occur would be the *end of history itself*. When the Kingdom of God came, it was believed, then a line would be drawn under human history. (To some extent this idea can be compared to the

Chapter 3 : The Coming of the Kingdom

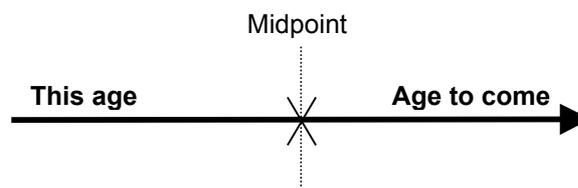
strong belief in Islam of the final Day of Judgement, often spoken about in the Qur'an. When that day comes, according to Islamic belief, human history will be at an end).

The Kingdom of God in the Old Testament involved an inbreaking of God into history when God's redemptive purpose is fully realized. The Kingdom of God is always an earthly hope, although an earth redeemed from the curse of evil. However, the Old Testament hope is always ethical and not speculative. It lets the light of the future shine on the present ... God would act in the near future to save or judge Israel ... to act for his people.³

This belief was strong among Jesus' first century contemporaries, as can be shown by examining the historical evidence from the time, for example the Dead Sea Scrolls written by the Essene community at Qumran. This first century Jewish belief in God's kingly rule, in the coming of his Kingdom, can be summarised then like this:

- First century Jews believed that God was king and ruler of not just Israel but the whole world.
- The people of God were, however, beset by oppression and injustice. Whilst in the wider world, sin and rebellion against God seemed to be everywhere.
- Therefore a day was coming when God would dramatically act in history to right wrongs and to restore his people. In short, his kingly rule would be put into final practice.
- When the Kingdom of God came, it would not be the end of earthly existence, but rather the earth would be cleansed of sin and evil, and God would rule his people directly from then on.

George Ladd, who we quoted above, has helpfully illustrated this powerful Old Testament and Jewish understanding of history with the following diagram, which shows how the Judaism of Jesus' day believed in what can be described as *two ages*; **this age** characterised by evil, sin and suffering, and the **age to come**, brought in when God's Kingdom comes in power.



Signs of the Kingdom

We have seen how the Judaism of Jesus' day looked forward to the day when God would act decisively in history, when he would dramatically exercise his kingship. But this was no vague, undefined, content-less hope — Jews of Jesus' day understood what this coming of the Kingdom of God would entail. They found this information in the Old Testament prophets, and expressed their hope in their own writings. One of the most valuable discoveries for unlocking more of the history of the first century was the discovery in the 1940s of the Dead Sea Scrolls. These were copies of the Old Testament and community writings from a Jewish sect known as the Essenes, a radical separatist movement who lived out in the desert at Qumran around the time of Jesus. Because so

Chapter 3 : The Coming of the Kingdom

many of their writings have been preserved, historians have another unique window⁴ into the hopes and beliefs of Jews living at the same time as Jesus.

Here is the text of a fragment of manuscript from Qumran which gives us an insight into some of the fervent hopes that Jews at the time of Jesus were placing upon the coming of the Kingdom of God, an event which the Qumran community clearly linked with the work of the Messiah:

*[the hea]vens and the earth will listen to His Messiah,
and none therein will stray from the commandments of the holy ones.
Seekers of the Lord, strengthen yourselves in His service!
All you hopeful in (your) heart, will you not find the Lord in this?
For the Lord will consider the pious and call the righteous by name.
Over the poor His spirit will hover and will renew the faithful with His power.
And He will glorify the pious on the throne of the eternal Kingdom.
He who liberates the captives, restores sight to the blind, straightens the b[ent]
And f[or] ever I will cleav[ve to the h]opeful and in His mercy ...
And the fr[uit ...] will not be delayed for anyone.
And the Lord will accomplish glorious things which have never been as [he ...]
For He will heal the wounded, and revive the dead and bring good news to the poor
(Qumran fragment 4Q521)*

Notice some of the key ideas — the blind will see, the poor will be filled with God's Spirit, the wounded healed, dead raised, and the poor will be given hope and good news. This message of hope and expectation was not invented by first century Jews but drawn from the Old Testament prophets. There we find prophets like Isaiah prophesying:

*The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted;
he has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
to grant to those who mourn in Zion — to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit;
that they may be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord,
that he may be glorified.
(Isaiah 61:1-3)*

*Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert;
the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and
rushes.
And a highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not pass over it, and fools shall not err therein.
No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;*

Chapter 3 : The Coming of the Kingdom

*they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there.
And the ransomed of Yahweh shall return, and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.
(Isaiah 35:4-10)*

This then was the hope that was burning in Jesus' contemporaries in first century Palestine. They believed in a God who had acted dramatically in history in the past and who would do so again in the future. Despite the oppression of Roman rule, they clung to their faith in God's coming Kingdom. To speak of God's Kingdom coming was to speak of ...

... the action of the covenant God, within Israel's history, to restore her fortunes, to bring to an end the bitter period of exile, and to defeat, through her, the evil that ruled the whole world. This restoration of Israel, celebrated in the regular liturgy [such as the Psalms], is part of the meaning of her God's becoming king. Israel herself is the people through whom the king will rule.⁵

This then was the background against which Jesus taught and ministered. When Jesus spoke of the "Kingdom of God" as he did time after time, this is what he would have evoked at first in the minds of his listeners. But the next question is this; did Jesus teach anything new about the Kingdom of God, or did he simply believe exactly the same as his contemporaries did? When one looks in depth at what Jesus said about this vital subject, one finds that as with many topics, Jesus was unique.

Jesus and the Kingdom of God

What was original about Jesus' teaching concerning the Kingdom of God was not its content — he spoke of forgiveness, of healing, of the restoration of God's people. No, what was original with Jesus was two aspects; the **means by which the Kingdom of God would come** and the **timing of the Kingdom**. On both of these subjects, Jesus departed radically from his first century contemporaries.

The means by which the Kingdom would come

We have seen how the Jews of the first century knew that God's Kingdom was coming. The question was not *whether* or not God would dramatically act in history, but *how and through whom*. Messianic movements were rife in the first century. Whilst Christians and Muslims agree that Jesus is the Messiah,⁶ there were plenty of other candidates for messiahship in first century Palestine. The various Jewish groups wildly differed on the means by which the Kingdom of God would come. For example:

- The Essene community at Qumran, whom we met earlier, believed that the rest of the world was totally wicked and evil. The only way that God's Kingdom would ever come would be if the righteous (themselves) were to withdraw completely and have as little contact as possible. Hence why they set their community up way out in the desert and waited for what God would surely do soon.
- Other groups, such as Herod and the Jewish ruling aristocracy, tried the method of compromise. They worked with the ruling Romans, trying to keep the peace between the

Chapter 3 : The Coming of the Kingdom

Roman overlords and the peasant masses, hoping that God would act and bless their best political efforts.

- The third option was that of warfare, advocated by groups such as the Zealots and Sicarii. Pray hard, sharpen your swords, and get ready to fight a holy war against the Roman oppressors and those who collaborated with them. Such groups believed that God would give them military success over their enemies, and thus his Kingdom would come.⁷

Jesus, on the other hand, rejected all three of these popular options. Whilst he may have shared the assessment of contemporary society as evil and sinful, he did not believe that the way to deal with that was to withdraw. Indeed his enemies were fond of attacking him for his habit of mixing with the outcasts of society:

And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

When Jesus heard it, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."
(Mark 2:16-17)

One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house, and took his place at table. And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment.

Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner."

And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And Simon answered, "What is it, Teacher?"

Jesus said, "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he forgave them both. Now which of them will love him more?"

Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, to whom he forgave more." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly."

Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house, you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little."

Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."

Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?"

(Luke 7:36-49)

The "holy war" option for bringing in the Kingdom of God was perhaps the most popular one at the time. Rebel leaders were often popular heroes, enjoying widespread support amongst the common people. Yet Jesus was not afraid to distance himself from the very idea of using violence and revolution to bring in the Kingdom of God. As on many other subjects, Jesus was outspoken:

Chapter 3 : The Coming of the Kingdom

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if any one forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.”

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

(Matthew 5:38-39, 41, 43-44)

In first century Palestine, it would have been very obvious to anyone in the audience at Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount who was being referred to. One type of person in particular was likely to force you to go a mile — and that was a Roman soldier. The soldiers of the occupying power would regularly conscript young Jewish men to carry heavy equipment for them; no wonder then that talk of revolution was always in the air, this was just one more insult among many. Yet Jesus did not align himself with the revolutionary cause, he issued no rallying cry to holy war, but rather gave the hard instruction that enemies were to be loved and prayed for. Whilst his view of warfare and bloodshed in particular is famous:

While he was still speaking, Judas came, one of the twelve, and with him a great crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, “The one I shall kiss is the man; seize him.” And he came up to Jesus at once and said, “Hail, Master!” And he kissed him.

Jesus said to him, “Friend, why are you here?” Then they came up and laid hands on Jesus and seized him.

And behold, one of those who were with Jesus stretched out his hand and drew his sword, and struck the slave of the high priest, and cut off his ear.

Then Jesus said to him, “Put your sword back into its place; for all who live by the sword will die by the sword.”

(Matthew 26:47-52)

So if Jesus rejected the popular options of violent revolution or total withdrawal, how did he believe that God’s Kingdom would break into history? How would liberation and forgiveness, healing and hope, come pouring out on the people of God and onwards to a wider world. **Jesus believed, quite simply, that the Kingdom of God would break into history not by war or withdrawal, but through him.**

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee preaching the gospel of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.”

(Mark 1:14-15)

Commenting on the above verse, New Testament scholar George Beasley-Murray writes:

There is a whole range of sayings of Jesus that compel us to interpret [the above verse] as declaring the inauguration of the Kingdom of God through the presence, the deeds, and the word of Jesus as the instrument of the Kingdom ... [many] actions of Jesus refer to the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God through his action and his imperious word.⁸

Chapter 3 : The Coming of the Kingdom

In a moment, we will examine some examples of the “range of sayings” to which Beasley-Murray refers. Jesus consistently showed that he believed the Kingdom of God to be especially wrapped up with and coming in his teaching, ministry, and miracles. He was no mere prophet, announcing like all those who had gone before that the Kingdom of God would one day come, that the culmination of Israel’s hopes would come *eventually* — rather Jesus announced that in him, the long hoped for Kingdom was breaking into history. You could reject him and reject the Kingdom, or accept him, follow him, and accept the Kingdom.

Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?”

And Jesus said to them, “Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come, when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.”

(Matthew 9:14-15)

The point that Jesus is making here is that fasting is for those who are awaiting the Kingdom of God to come, but it is not however appropriate for the one who is actually bringing it.

And a ruler asked Jesus, “Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: ‘Do not commit adultery, Do not kill, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honour your father and mother.’

And the ruler replied, “All these I have observed from my youth.”

When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.”

But when he heard this the man became sad, for he was very rich.

Jesus looking at him said, “How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the Kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God.

Those who heard it said, “Then who can be saved?”

But he said, “What is impossible with men is possible with God.”

(Luke 18:18-27)

Once again we see key themes of Jesus’ preaching and teaching linked — entry to the Kingdom of God is linked to following him. The rich young ruler was presented with the opportunity of following Jesus, of entering the Kingdom, yet was held back by his great wealth. The issue of riches is not what concerns us here; rather what is striking is the way that Jesus claims to be not only the one who brings the Kingdom but the one who controls access to it.⁹

Now Jesus was casting out a demon from a man who could not speak. When the demon had gone out, the man was able to speak, and the people marvelled. But some of them said, “He casts out demons by Beelzebub, the prince of demons”; while others, to test him, sought from him a sign from heaven.

*But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said to them, “Every Kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and a divided household falls. If Satan also is divided against himself, how will his Kingdom stand? For you say that I cast out demons by Beelzebub. And if I cast out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they shall be your judges. **But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you.***

(Luke 11:14-20)

Chapter 3 : The Coming of the Kingdom

Jesus explicitly links his ministry to the coming of the Kingdom of God. The two are inseparable. This makes Jesus not only unique among his first century contemporaries, but a unique figure within history. The Old Testament prophets spoke again and again of the time when God's Kingdom would break into history — Jesus went far further, claiming that through him this great hope was coming true.

Jesus clearly believed that with his own work something dramatically new was already happening. The days of preparation were over; Israel's God was now acting in the way he had promised of old.¹⁰

The timing of the Kingdom

We saw earlier how most Jews of Jesus' time thought in terms of two "ages" - a present evil age, characterised by suffering and sin and the oppression of God's people by their enemies, and a glorious future age to come, when God's Kingdom would break into history, God would right wrongs, end suffering, and vindicate his people. It was something that Jews consistently looked forward to, for they saw the Kingdom of God as something that would occur *in the future*. When it came, then that would be the end of history as we know it. A concept similar to the Day of Judgement in Islamic thinking. Yet once again, we see that Jesus differed over this point with his contemporaries. He taught that the Kingdom of God was not something located at some distant point in history, but was very dramatically breaking into history right there and then.

[Jesus said to his disciples], "But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it."

(Matthew 13:16-17)

This theme of Jesus being not merely a pointer to something greater that was to come, but rather the very one who was actually bringing in the Kingdom, is picked up elsewhere by the gospels:

Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them."

(Matthew 11:2-5)

By now you should recognise some of the list of miracles that Jesus uses to explain to the disciples of John what he is about — the blind seeing, dead being raised and so forth — these were some of what the Old Testament promised would mark the Kingdom of God coming. Jesus did not see the Kingdom of God as being purely a future thing, but a very real, here and now, tangible reality.

Being asked by the Pharisees when the Kingdom of God was coming, he answered them, "The Kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say 'Lo, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the Kingdom of God is in the midst of you."

(Luke 17:20-21)

Jesus considered that the Kingdom of God was breaking into history through his ministry and teaching. Unlike any prophet before him, Jesus did not speak of the Kingdom as purely a future reality, a hope to cling to and long for. Rather he saw God's Kingdom breaking into history through

Chapter 3 : The Coming of the Kingdom

him. Sickness and death, sin and suffering, and the power of the devil — these Jesus considered to be defeated and subject to him as the inaugurator of God's Kingdom. Parable after parable of Jesus speaks of the nature of this Kingdom, the way that, despite the popular expectation, God's Kingdom has not come with dramatic explosions that split the sky in two, but quietly. Jesus believed that he had ushered in God's Kingdom, and that its nature was to grow slow and quietly amongst those who were his faithful followers.

And Jesus said, "The Kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed upon the ground, and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he knows not how. The earth produces of itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."

And he said, "With what can we compare the Kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

(Mark 4:26-32)

Jesus consistently taught that the Kingdom was a present reality, he acted to show it was operating, and he demonstrated with works of power — healings and miracles and exorcisms — that the Kingdom was here and now. We see it too in his offer of forgiveness to the outcasts of society, his willingness to share table fellowship with sinners, and in his challenge to the religious hierarchy of his day. However, Jesus went further than that:

The Kingdom is seen in and through Jesus. Jesus was bold enough to announce that it was he, and not others, who was ushering in the Kingdom. Whether one wants to call this ego-centeredness or incipient Christology is besides the point; Jesus firmly believed that he was he whom God had appointed to usher in the Kingdom.¹¹

Yet it would be overly simplistic to say that Jesus regarded the Kingdom of God as wholly in the present. Jesus also laid out some clear teaching on future aspects of the Kingdom of God. For example:

1. Jesus regarded his own death and resurrection as playing a crucial role in the unfolding of God's Kingdom. (The subject of Jesus' death will be covered in a future part in this series, but at this point it is sufficient to point to the numerous texts where Jesus predicts his suffering and execution at the hands of his enemies; for example Matthew 12:40; 20:18; 27:63; Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34; Luke 9:22; John 2:19-22).
2. Jesus taught his disciples to watch and wait for the signs of the Kingdom of God drawing near in more of its fullness:

[Jesus said], "There will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and upon the earth distress of nations in perplexity at the roaring of the sea and the waves, men fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world; for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

Chapter 3 : The Coming of the Kingdom

And he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree, and all the trees; as soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the Kingdom of God is near."

(Luke 21:25-31)

3. Jesus looked forward to a time in the future when those who had followed him would share the benefits of the Kingdom which he was in the process of inaugurating:

A dispute arose among the disciples concerning which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. And Jesus said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For which is the greater, one who sits at table, or one who serves? Is it not the one who sits at table? But I am among you as one who serves. You are those who have continued with me in my trials; and I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a Kingdom, that you may eat and drink at my table in my Kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel."

(Luke 22:24-30)

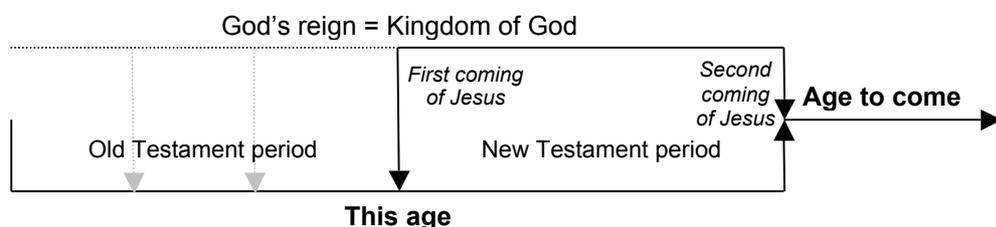
4. Jesus refused to reveal to his followers exactly when the Kingdom of God would finally come in all its fullness — when, in short, the Day of Judgement itself would fall. His disciples consistently tried to get this information out of him:

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the Kingdom to Israel?"

Jesus said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth."

(Acts 1:6—8)

How then can we sum up what Jesus taught about the time scale of the Kingdom? Whatever one thinks about Jesus and the Kingdom — and, as we have seen, being the most regular thing Jesus taught about, it is important for Muslims to begin thinking about it — it is vital to hold together these future and present elements. George Ladd has offered another diagram to illustrate Jesus' view, replacing the traditional Jewish two-age model we encountered earlier:¹²



Jesus clearly believed that he was inaugurating the long-promised Kingdom of God. That entry to it was determined by how one responded to him, and those who entered and enjoyed eternal life in God's Kingdom when it finally came in all its splendour and glory would be those who had followed him. The Kingdom had broken in *now*, it was urgent to respond to Jesus *now*, yet the Kingdom would only finally complete its breaking into history in the future, with Jesus' second coming.

Chapter 3 : The Coming of the Kingdom

Jesus said, "A man once gave a great banquet, and invited many; and at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, 'Come; for all is now ready.' But they all alike began to make excuses.

The first said to him, 'I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it; I ask you, have me excused.'

And another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them; I ask you, have me excused.'

Still another said, 'I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.'

So the servant came and reported this to his master. Then the householder in anger said to his servant, 'Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and maimed and blind and lame.'

Then the servant said, 'Sir, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.'

So the master said to the servant, 'Go out to the highways and hedges, and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.'"

(Luke 14:16-24)

Jesus' message was direct and clear in this and other similar parables. One could summarise it like this:

The original audience could hardly have missed the thrust of the parable. Jesus is saying to them, God's Messiah is here. He is inviting you to the messianic banquet of the day of salvation. The banquet is now ready. Do not refuse! For if you do (with your ridiculous excuses) others will fill your places from among the outcasts of Israel, and (in the future) an invitation will go out to the gentiles. The banquet will proceed without you. It will not be cancelled or postponed. The [Kingdom of God] has dawned. Respond to the invitation or opt out of participation in God's salvation.¹³

Perhaps the question that readers today are faced with is a similar one: "what weak excuses might I be placing in the way of Jesus' invitation to participate in the Kingdom of God?" I hope and pray that as this series of papers leads you to think afresh about the historical Jesus, the real flesh and blood first century Jew who preached and taught and demonstrated with works of power the Kingdom of God, the excuse "I never thought about Jesus other than the few references in the Qur'an" might not be one that keeps you from the messianic banquet to which Jesus welcomes all those who follow him, and that on the day of salvation, when God's Kingdom breaks dramatically into history in all its fullness, you might share a place at that table.

Conclusion

To understand the historical Jesus of Nazareth you need to understand his preaching about the Kingdom of God, so central was it to his message. Jesus taught that the Kingdom was breaking in now, through his ministry, and that by following him, one could enter that Kingdom:

In his proclamation of the Kingdom of God Jesus was standing firmly on Old Testament ground. At the same time he was proclaiming a subject that made every Jewish heart throb. Yet Jesus took this concept and transformed it from a narrow-minded nationalistic hope to a universal, spiritual order in which humankind could find the fulfilment of its ultimate desires for righteousness, justice, peace, happiness, freedom from sin and guilt, and a restored relationship to God. Given the fact that the basic human problem of sin and alienation from God is as true today as it ever has been, the message of the Kingdom of God ought to have as great a relevance today as it ever had.¹⁴

Once again, this raises serious questions for Muslims as they consider Jesus, especially in the light of how the Qur'an presents him. Even laying aside the issue of Jesus' relation to God — a question that usually lies at the heart of discussion between Christians and Muslims — the historical Jesus does not fit the hole into which the Qur'an wishes to file him. Jesus does not fit the label "simple prophet", he considered himself much, much more than that. We have seen already in this series how Jesus did not believe a future prophet like Muhammad would come after him and how if one understands what it means to call Jesus "Messiah", then you cannot believe that any future prophet like Muhammad was needed. Once again we face the issue: you can have Jesus and his teaching and preaching, or you can have Muhammad. But you cannot have both, because the two are incompatible.

The real, historical Jesus of Nazareth proclaimed that God's Kingdom was breaking into history and that one could follow him and be part of that. With the Kingdom comes the promise of forgiveness of sins, of the breaking of the power of sin and evil and, ultimately, the promise and hope of life beyond death in God's Kingdom. One can either accept Jesus and his message or, like those who offered the weak excuses in the parable, reject it and have no part in the Kingdom of God on the glorious Day of Salvation.

Endnotes and References

- ¹ John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew (Volume 2) : Mentor, Message, and Miracles* (New York: Doubleday, 1994) p237.
- ² Yahweh is the name of God, according to the Old Testament, first revealed by God to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3). The name is used in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament over 6,000 times.
- ³ George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 1994) p58.
- ⁴ We say *another* unique window because of course we also have the writings of Josephus, Rabbinic materials which reflect the period, Roman historians such as Tacitus and, of

Chapter 3 : The Coming of the Kingdom

course, the gospels themselves. The days when historians viewed the gospels with extreme historical scepticism are, thankfully, behind us.

⁵ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1997) p307.

⁶ Although many Muslims do not understand what it means to call Jesus “Messiah” (al-Masih). See chapter two for an in depth explanation of what the term “Messiah” meant and what Jesus understood by it.

⁷ See N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus* (London: SPCK, 2000) p20-21. This book is recommended reading for those following this series.

⁸ George R. Beasley-Murray, ‘The Kingdom of God and Christology in the Gospels’ in Joel B. Green & Max Turner (editors), *Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ : Essays on the Historical Jesus and New Testament Christology* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1994) 22-36, p26-27.

⁹ A theme that also occurs in a famous passage in another of the gospels:
Jesus said to his disciples, “Do not let your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. You know the way where I am going.”
Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?”
Jesus replied, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me.”
(John 14:1-6)

¹⁰ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1999) p467.

¹¹ Scot McKnight, *A New Vision for Israel: The Teachings of Jesus in National Context* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) p118.

¹² George Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p67.

¹³ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) p111.

¹⁴ Chrys C. Caragounis, ‘Kingdom of God/Heaven’ in Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight & I. Howard Marshall (editors), *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Leicester: IVP, 1992) 417-430, p430.

Bibliography

- Bailey, Kenneth E., *Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980.
- Beasley-Murray, George R., 'The Kingdom of God and Christology in the Gospels' in Joel B. Green & Max Turner (editors), *Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ : Essays on the Historical Jesus and New Testament Christology*, Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1994, pp22-36.
- Caragounis, Chrys C., 'Kingdom of God/Heaven' in Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight & I. Howard Marshall (editors), *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Leicester: IVP, 1992, pp417-430.
- Drane, John, *Introducing the Old Testament*, Oxford: Lynx, 1987.
- Ladd, George E., *A Theology of the New Testament*, Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 1994.
- McFarlane, Graham, *Why do you believe what you believe about Jesus?*, Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2000.
- Meier, John P., *A Marginal Jew (Volume 2) : Mentor, Message, and Miracles*, New York: Doubleday, 1994.
- McKnight, Scot, *A New Vision for Israel: The Teachings of Jesus in National Context*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.
- Wright, N. T., *The Challenge of Jesus*, London: SPCK, 2000.
- Wright N T, *The Climax of the Covenant*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998.
- Wright N T, 'Jesus and the Identity of God' in the journal *Ex Auditu* no. 14 (1998) pp42-56.
- Wright, N. T., *Jesus and the Victory of God*, London: SPCK, 1999.
- Wright, N. T., *The New Testament and the People of God*, London: SPCK, 1997.

Further Reading

Since the Quest for the Lost Jesus series first appeared on the web, many Muslims have asked how best to carry on studying and learning about Jesus of Nazareth. Here are a few helpful suggestions.

- Read the New Testament and get to grips with Jesus. In terms of readability, I would usually recommend that you start with Luke, move on to Matthew, and then read Mark and John. As you read, constantly ask the question “why is Jesus saying this or doing that?” In other words, try to engage with and respond to the text. The gospels were not written to be read in a dry academic way; they are designed to bring the story of Jesus vividly to life. If you do not have access to a Bible, you can read one online at <http://bible.gospelcom.net/>.
- For practical information on how to study the Bible and the message of the prophets, have a look at <http://injl.org/TWOR/>. This helpful web site is written particularly with Muslims in mind, aware that they may never have tried to read the Bible for themselves before.
- An extremely helpful introduction to the historical Jesus of Nazareth can be found in N T Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus* (SPCK, 2000). Although reasonably academic, the book is much simpler than the other 1,200 pages Wright has written on Jesus. He is presently one of the world’s leading scholars when it comes to studying Jesus and this series has drawn upon his work. You can obtain a copy from any good bookstore.