

HE COMETH WITH CLOUDS

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Atheists have in various ways argued against the Christian religion. One of those ways is to argue that Jesus was not so wise as Christians believe, because He said He would establish His kingdom during the lifetime of His contemporaries, but He never did. Bertrand Russell, in His lecture, *Why I Am Not a Christian*, said:

I am concerned with Christ as He appears in the Gospels, taking the Gospel narrative as it stands, and there one does find some things that do not seem to be very wise. For one thing, He certainly thought that His second coming would occur in clouds of glory before the death of all the people who were living at that time. There are a great many texts that prove that. He says, for instance: ‘Ye shall not have gone over the cities of Israel, till the Son of Man be come.’ Then He says: ‘There are some standing here which shall not taste death till the Son of Man comes into His kingdom’; and there are a lot of places where it is quite clear that He believed that His second coming would happen during the lifetime of many then living. That was the belief of His earlier followers, and it was the basis of a good deal of His moral teaching. When He said, ‘Take no thought for the morrow,’ and things of that sort, it was very largely because He thought that the second coming was going to be very soon, and that all ordinary mundane affairs did not count.

More recently, Christopher Hitchens argued the same. He wrote, “The late C.S. Lewis helps make this point for me by emphasizing that the teachings of Jesus only make sense if the speaker is the herald of an imminent kingdom of heaven. Otherwise, would it not be morally unsafe to denounce thrift, family, and the ‘taking of thought for the morrow’?” (*Is Christianity Good for the World?*) Of course, this criticism only makes sense on one particular interpretation of Christ’s teaching. Either that interpretation is mistaken, or Jesus was; but Christians believe that Jesus was never wrong in His teaching. So, some must revise their interpretation of what Jesus taught about his coming kingdom. Saint Augustine wrote about the infallibility of Scripture:

... I have learned to yield this respect and honour only to the canonical books of Scripture: of these alone do I most firmly believe that the authors were completely free from error. And if in these writings I am perplexed by anything which appears to me opposed to truth, I do not hesitate to suppose that either the manuscript is faulty, or the translator has not caught the meaning of what was said, or I myself have failed to understand it. (Letter to Jerome, Chapter 1, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Volume 1)

In the Revelation of Saint John, the apostle greets the churches to whom he wrote with this greeting:

John to the seven churches which are in Asia: Grace *be* unto you, and peace, from him which is, and which was, and which is to come; and from the seven Spirits which are before his throne; And from Jesus Christ, *who is* the faithful witness, *and* the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth. Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, And hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him *be* glory and

dominion for ever and ever. Amen. Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they *also* which pierced him: and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him. Even so, Amen. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty. (Revelation 1:4-8)

Saint John did write to the each of the seven churches of Asia: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. Yet, what he wrote to each of them applies to every church, for he gives in each letter the exhortation, “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.” He greets them with the traditional blessing from God of grace and peace, and but the way he refers to God, although trinitarian, is hardly traditional. He refers to the Father as “him which is, and which was, and which is to come.” When God commissioned Moses to deliver the children of Israel from the land of Egypt, Moses asked God His name, so that He might reveal it to the children of Israel. “And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you.” (Exodus 3:14) God is the unchanging God and everlasting. “The seven Spirits which are before His throne” is a reference to the Holy Spirit, the number seven indicating both the fullness of the Holy Spirit, and also his manifold ministry, particularly to the seven churches to whom the epistle is addressed. The prophet Isaiah states the sevenfold ministry of the Spirit to Christ: “And the spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD.” (Isaiah 11:2) So Saint John in this same epistle writes, “And out of the throne proceeded lightnings and thunderings and voices: and *there were* seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God,” and he also wrote, “And I beheld, and, lo, in the midst of the throne and of the four beasts, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent forth into all the earth.” (Revelation 4:5; 5:6) Finally, the blessing comes from Jesus Christ, whom Saint John calls “the faithful witness.” He is the one who is true, and can be trusted in all things. He is that prophet which Moses said would come, and to whom all must give heed. (Deuteronomy 18:15) The Pharisees told Jesus He could not bear witness of Himself that He is the Christ, the Son of God, but He answered, “Though I bear record of myself, *yet* my record is true.” (John 8:14) Before Pontius Pilate, prefect of the Roman province of Judea, He confessed that He is the true king of the world. (1 Timothy 6:13) When Pilate asked Jesus, “Art thou a king then?,” Jesus answered him, “Thou sayest that I am a king. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth.” (John 18:37; 1 Timothy 6:13) Although Jesus is King of the Jews, the Jews demanded that Pilate execute Him, and Pilate, although he believed Jesus did not deserve to die, gave in to their demands. Yet, God raised Him from the dead, because He is the Son of God, and the Son of David, and the true heir to the throne. So God has given Him that throne, which is His by right, and His alone, and God has exalted Him above every earthly authority. Jesus is prophet and king, and also priest. He made sacrifice for the sins of the people. Because of His great love for them, He died for in their place. He shed His own blood, that they might be forgiven their sins. He has made His people kings and priests, as Saint Pewter calls them, “a royal priesthood,” who have conquered sin and death and hell, and who offer spiritual sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God. (1 Peter 2:9; Romans 21:1; Exodus 19:6) Jesus is the true ruler of the world to whom all must pay homage.

When Jesus was on trial before the Sanhedrin, the high priest asked him, “Art thou the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?” Jesus answered Him with reference to the prophecy of Daniel. He said, “I am: and ye shall see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven.” (Mark 14:61, 62) Daniel had prophesied of the coming Christ:

I saw in the night visions, and, behold, *one* like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him. And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion *is* an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom *that* which shall not be destroyed. (Daniel 7:13, 14)

The coming of the Son of man with the clouds of heaven, spoken of by Daniel, is not His descending from heaven to earth to establish His kingdom, but His ascending from earth to heaven to receive it. Jesus's disciples saw Him ascend into heaven, but no one saw Him receive His kingdom. (Mark 16:19; Luke 24:51; Acts 1:9) Yet, Jesus told His disciples there would be a sure sign that He had indeed ascended the throne. That sign was His destroying Jerusalem, both the city and the temple of those who tried to destroy Him. (Matthew 24:30; Luke 21:28) Jesus, after His resurrection, ascended into heaven on clouds with glory, and He received from His father an eternal kingdom, just as He had promised king David. When Jesus caused the Romans to destroy the city of Jerusalem, all His enemies saw His judgment, and they all mourned because Him. They had pierced Him by nailing Him to a cross, and, after He died, a Roman soldier with a spear pierced Jesus's side to make certain He was dead. But this was in fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah who said, "But he *was* wounded for our transgressions, *he was* bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace *was* upon him; and with his stripes we are healed," (Isaiah 53:5) and it was a fulfillment of the prophecy of Zechariah who said, "They shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him." (Isaiah 53:5; Zechariah 12:10; John 19:37) What the Jews and Romans meant for evil, God meant for good. Jesus is king now, not later. His reign is not future; it is present, and His destruction of His enemies is the proof of it. He said to His disciples, "Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled." (Matthew 24:34; Luke 21:32) What Jesus taught about His coming on clouds is not a cause of skepticism, but of faith. Jesus is no fool. "The fool hath said in his heart, *There is* no God." (Psalm 14:1; 53:1)

Everyone agrees that the world is not as it should be. Not everyone agrees, however, on how it should be, neither do they agree on how to change it. Some believe in the use of force to bring about change; others oppose it. In the Christian view of things, there is warrant for using force, but only under certain circumstances. The foundation for this is the distinction between the Creator and the creature. God is eternal and uncreated; everything else He has created. He has created man in His own image, and no man may inflict harm on another man without God's permission. So, God commands, "Thou shalt not kill." (Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17) Yet, the instruction of a child sometimes requires corporal punishment. The Proverbs say, "He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes." (Proverbs 13:24) Yet, God gives a man the right to kill in defense of himself. In the law of Moses, it says, "If a thief be found breaking up, and be smitten that he die, *there shall* no blood *be shed* for him." (Exodus 22:2) This means that a man may kill in defense of life or property. If a man breaks and enters into a house by night, then he not only invades a man's residence, but he does so by cover of darkness, so as to conceal his evil deed. A man may use force, even lethal force, to prevent the evil of theft or murder. Jesus, shortly before His arrest, warned His disciples that that they would be opposed everywhere they went, and that they had a right to defend themselves. He said to them, "He that hath no sword, let him sell his garment, and buy one." (Luke 22:36) God commanded death for a number of sins, like idolatry, blasphemy, adultery, and murder. Yet, these, while necessary, are all inferior means of changing the world. In the case of one who is killed, he is never changed, only destroyed. For others, coercion may change their behavior, but it does not change their hearts. True change is inward, by the Spirit of God. God told the

children of Israel through the prophet Ezekiel, “A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do *them*.” (Ezekiel 36:26, 27) Saint Paul wrote to the Romans, “But he *is* a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision *is that* of the heart, in the spirit, *and* not in the letter.” (Romans 2:29) Some have misunderstood the nature of Christ’s kingdom. True, He is heir to the throne of King David; yet, his kingdom is fundamentally different. Christ’s kingdom is one wherein the actions of men are changed, because their hearts are changed. When the Jews brought Jesus before Pilate, Pilate asked Jesus, “Art thou the King of the Jews?” Jesus answered him, “Sayest thou this thing of thyself, or did others tell it thee of me?” Jesus asked Him, in other words, if his interest was personal, or professional. Pilate answered, “Am I a Jew? Thine own nation and the chief priests have delivered thee unto me.” Pilate replied that, as he was not a Jew, he had no personal interest in the matter. He did not seek out Jesus; rather, Jesus’ countryman brought Jesus to him. Pilate asked Jesus, “What hast thou done?” Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence.” Christ’s kingdom is an earthly kingdom, in that it is in the world. It is not a worldly kingdom, however. It is a kingdom in that it has a sovereign, and laws. Yet, Christ’s kingdom is neither established by force, nor maintained by it. So Pilate understood Jesus, and therefore he announced to the Jews that he found in Jesus no fault at all. (John 18:33-38) Little did Pilate understand that Jesus would not violently overthrow the Roman Empire, but would gradually transform it, by transforming the people in it. And so He will transform all the nations of the world.

Let us give thanks to God that He is true to His Word. Let us praise Him for sending His Son into the World, not to condemn the world, but to save it. And let us pay homage to the one who has defeated death and Hades, and who is even now conquering the world, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now unto the King of kings, and Lord of lords; who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen nor can see: to whom be honor and power everlasting. *Amen*.