

The Work of Incarnation – Manifesting the Kingdom

I. Introduction

1. After His baptism, His anointing as Messiah and the proving of His sonship in the wilderness, Jesus embarked on His messianic mission of announcing, manifesting and ultimately inaugurating the kingdom of God. *This kingdom was the realization of all that Yahweh had promised to Israel* – all that He would accomplish when He returned to Zion to liberate, forgive, cleanse, renew and reestablish His reign in their midst.
2. This was the kingdom Jesus heralded as “good news” and manifested in His own person, as well as by His words and works. But because the sons of Israel had a very different expectation of God’s kingdom, Jesus’ message perplexed and disturbed them and many resented and rejected Him as a false prophet and messianic pretender.
3. Nevertheless, Jesus’ presence in Israel as Yahweh’s Messiah meant that the promised kingdom was at hand, and thus He accompanied His proclamation with the *invitation and challenge* to embrace Yahweh’s kingdom by embracing Him as its King.

II. Manifesting the Kingdom

Jesus manifested the in-breaking kingdom first in His own person. Most significantly, He embodied Yahweh’s return to Zion to again dwell in the midst of His covenant people. But He also embodied Israel in truth as faithful son, servant, disciple and witness. *When the Israelite people observed Jesus, they were observing the fundamental reality of the kingdom – Yahweh again dwelling with His restored covenant people in perfect, loving intimacy.*

And what Jesus embodied in His person, He affirmed with His instruction and deeds. He proclaimed and depicted the kingdom with His preaching and teaching, and also disclosed its nature and power through His works. Jesus was heralding a kingdom that was going to supplant the kingdom of the world and its ruler – the kingdom that even Israel was subject to, and this truth was a key aspect of His disclosure. Thus He proclaimed the kingdom, not just through His preaching and teaching, but through His conflict with and triumph over the reigning powers and the implicit indictment and warning that that conflict carried.

C. Conflict and Victory

1. The kingdom Jesus came to inaugurate is fundamentally and radically different from all human kingdoms because it functions according to a different set of principles; it is the kingdom *of God* and reflects and expresses His nature and character. And because all human kingdoms are grounded in man’s alienation from God and subjection to the powers that contradict and oppose Him, they have no place alongside God’s kingdom; *the existence of the one disallows the existence of the other*. Thus Jesus’ witness to the in-breaking kingdom was a battle cry to the contradicting powers (human and supra-human), and they were all-too eager to rise to the conflict. * cf. Mat. 12:1-45, 15:1-20; Luke 9:18-62; John 8:31-59; etc.
2. At the heart of Yahweh’s kingdom promise was His assurance of a *second exodus*: He was once again going to rise up and overthrow the enslaving powers and so liberate and restore His captive people. Israel understood this in terms of their Gentile overlords, but God was referring to the powers that oversee, inform, and direct all human authorities and powers.

Indeed, Israel's prophets indicated that Yahweh's ultimate design in this second great exodus was the *creation's* liberation, reconciliation and renewal. He was going to overthrow the curse and the powers that enforce it, and this could not be achieved by conquering human kings and kingdoms. No, He needed to vanquish the powers behind the human powers if His kingdom was to be installed on earth as in heaven.

3. This doesn't suggest that God had been misleading His people about His intentions. Yes, He pledged to end His people's exile, renew the covenant, reunite Israel and Judah, return to His sanctuary on Mount Zion, and restore and glorify Jerusalem as the seat of His sovereign kingdom that would encompass the whole earth. But all of these promises reflected Israel's election as the Abrahamic people and their central place in God's designs for the world. He had determined to bind up the creation's destiny in Israel, and thus the nation's history and covenant life were the proper context for God to disclose and interpret His purposes and work in the world. *Viewed from this perspective, the Israelite shape and features of God's kingdom promises weren't the least bit misleading, but in perfect accord with the truth of what He was going to do. It was only the inability to foresee the messianic person and work that created the apparent disconnect between God's promises and the manner of their fulfillment.* * cf. Rom. 9-11 with Gal. 3-4 and Eph. 2-3
4. Jesus had come to fight Yahweh's decisive battle against the true enemy and ultimate enslaving power, and that for the purpose of liberating the creation and ending its exile, not simply restoring the people of Israel. *This, then, is the lens for interpreting Jesus' confrontations with and triumph over natural and supra-natural powers, whether casting out demons or calming the sea, whether healing human bodies or raising the dead.*

All four gospel writers emphasize this diverse ministration of authority and power, but there was one occasion that provided unique insight into Jesus' designs. That occurred at Caesarea Philippi, and it marked a crucial turning point in Jesus' ministry to His disciples. *For there He revealed to them the actual battle He'd come to fight and what His victory would secure* (Mat. 16:13-20; cf. Mark 8:27-30). This is a familiar passage to many, but grasping its full significance depends on reading it in terms of its setting and historical context.

- a. Caesarea Philippi was a town northeast of the Sea of Galilee, named by Herod Philip as his tribute to Caesar Augustus. It was located in the north of the region of Bashan on a fertile terrace near the southern slope of Mount Hermon. The settlement had a long history and was renamed Dan when it became part of Dan's tribal inheritance at the Israelite conquest. Later, after the division of David's kingdom, it was one of two sites where Jeroboam I built altars and set up calf images for worshipping Yahweh, and so became synonymous with Israel's idolatry and apostasy (1 Kings 12).

But the area's notoriety extended beyond Jeroboam's desecration; for centuries before Jesus' birth it had been a focal point of pagan religion and lore. The Canaanites called Mount Hermon *Baal Hermon*, named for their god *Baal* who was thought to live on that mountain. Afterward, the Greeks associated the area with their god Pan, and the Romans referred to it as "the rock of the gods," even building a temple there to Caesar Augustus.

But most significantly, there is a large rock escarpment at the site of Caesarea Philippi containing a grotto that various pagan traditions taught was an entrance point into the underworld – *the gate into Hades*, as it were. This is the context for Jesus' assertions about His messiahship and the triumph associated with it.

- b. Caesarea Philippi is about 25 miles northeast of the Sea of Galilee, well out of the way of Jesus' Galilean ministry. The gospel texts don't explain how Jesus and His disciples found themselves that far north, but it seems clear that the Lord intentionally led them there – the place believed to be the entrance into the underworld realm of death – as the appropriate setting to instruct them concerning His messiahship and its triumphal work.

For when Jesus confronted His disciples about His identity and confirmed that He was Israel's Messiah, He specifically associated His messianic work and its triumph with an absolute victory over “the gates of Hades.” Many have taken this statement as a kind of vague reference to hell and its defeat, but Jesus was making a much more profound point, and one that His disciples wouldn't have missed: Standing there at the pagan site that symbolized the realm of the dead and the dark powers that preside over it, Jesus was declaring that His victory, manifest in His Church, would render them powerless. *In effect, Jesus was telling His disciples that the messianic triumph – His triumph – would involve death's conquest and the destruction of the forces that wield its power.*

5. Viewed from this perspective, Jesus' statement about building His Church on “this rock” takes on a different quality. Christians have commonly understood the “rock” as referring either to Peter himself or his confession of Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God. Many are aware of Jesus' play on words – Peter the *little stone* versus the *bedrock* on which He would build His Church, but few recognize that He made that verbal play standing before the large rock escarpment filled with pagan images and believed to be the entrance into Hades, which He clearly intended to be the context for interpreting His meaning. *Jesus orchestrated this occasion to address His messiahship, but specifically regarding the battle He was about to fight – the decisive battle that the prophets had placed at the center of the messianic work, and that Israel (including His disciples) understood in terms of victory over Rome.*
 - a. Jesus was affirming to His disciples that He is indeed Yahweh's messianic son, but He'd come to fight an entirely different battle – a battle symbolized by the place to which He had brought them. *Unlike every other supposed messiah, He wasn't going to take up arms against the Gentile oppressors; His battle was with the powers behind those human oppressors – the dark powers who wielded the unbreakable chains of sin and death.*
 - b. These were the enslaving forces Jesus was going to fight, and when He had achieved complete victory He would establish His *ecclesia* – Yahweh's renewed covenant household brought out of death into life – on the very bedrock that had been the symbolic monument to death and its invincible power over all mankind. Moreover, this triumph would be final and irreversible; the gates of Hades would not be able to withstand it.
6. The messianic battle wasn't against human enemies, and it wouldn't involve conventional weapons. Israel's hope looked to a messianic warrior who would raise an army and prevail against human forces on the battlefield. But Jesus was going to defeat the enemy by fully yielding to it; *He would defeat death and its powers by letting them kill Him.* To human reasoning, nothing could be more absurd, and it was certainly true for Jesus' disciples. He took them to the gates of Hades to disclose the battle He was about to fight, and when they departed He began to explain how He was going to engage the enemy (16:21). Matthew recorded Peter's response (16:22), but no doubt all of the disciples felt the same way. Already forgetting the lesson at Caesarea Philippi, Peter returned to his own messianic notions – notions derived from human manifestations of power and triumph that reflect the rule of the satanic lord, not the living God and His King (16:23).