What did Jesus mean when he said the Kingdom of God was at hand? Or to put it another way, what did the average Galilean villager hear when a young prophet strode into town and announced that Israel’s God was now at last becoming King? The great majority of scholars down the years have agreed that the kingdom of God was central to Jesus’ message; but there has been no agreement on what precisely that phrase and the cognate ideas that go with it actually meant. In this chapter, therefore, we must first outline the central core of meaning that the phrase would have for a first-century Jew and then explore Jesus’ announcement from three different angles.

Inside First-Century Judaism

To answer our question we have to make a journey as difficult for us in the contemporary Western world as that undertaken by the Wise Men as they went to Bethlehem. We have to think our way back into someone else’s world, specifically, the world of the Old Testament as it was perceived and lived by first-century Jews. That is the world Jesus addressed, the world whose concerns he made his own. Until we know how Jesus’ contemporaries were thinking, it will not just be difficult to understand what he meant by “the kingdom of God”; it will be totally impossible, as generations of well-meaning but misguided Christian readers have, alas, demonstrated.

At once I sense that some may say, with a measure of reluctance, “All right, I suppose we have to get into that first-century Jewish material; but the only point will be so that once we’ve seen how Jesus addressed his own culture we can learn to address ours in the same way.” There is a tiny grain of truth in that but a much larger hoop of misunderstanding. The most important truth lies much, much deeper. Before we can get to the application to our own day, we have to allow fully for the uniqueness of Jesus’ situation and position. Jesus, after all, was not just an example of somebody getting it right. Jesus believed and acted upon two vital points, without which we will not even begin to understand what he was all about. These two points are foundational to everything I shall say from now on.

First, he believed that the creator God had purposed from the beginning to address and deal with the problems within his creation through Israel. Israel was not just to be an “example” of a nation under God; Israel was to be the means through which the world would be saved. Second, Jesus believed, as did many though not all of his contemporaries, that this vocation would be accomplished through Israel’s history reaching a great moment of climax, in which Israel herself would be saved from her enemies and through which the creator God, the covenant God, would at last bring his love and justice, his mercy and truth, to bear upon the whole world, bringing renewal and healing to all creation. In technical language what I am talking about is election and eschatology: God’s choice of Israel to be the means of saving the world; God’s bringing of Israel’s history to its moment of climax, through which justice and mercy would embrace not only Israel but the whole world.

Put these two beliefs into the first-century context and see what happens. The Jews of Jesus’ day, as is well-known, were living under foreign rule and had been
for several centuries. The worst thing about that was not the high taxation, the alien laws, the brutality of oppression and so on, awful though that often was. The worst thing was that the foreigners were pagans. If Israel was truly God’s people, why were the pagans ruling over her? If Israel was called to be God’s true humanity surely these foreign nations were like the animals over which Adam and Eve were to rule. Why then were they turning into monsters and threatening to trample on God’s defenseless chosen people? This state of affairs had existed ever since the Babylonians had come and destroyed Jerusalem in 597 B.C., carrying away the Judaeans captive into exile. Thus, though some of them had returned from geographical exile, most believed that the theological stale of exile was still continuing. They were living within a centuries-old drama, still waiting for the turn in the story that would bring them out on top at last.1

Nor were local politics any better. Zealous Jews had long regarded their own local rulers as compromisers, and the Jewish leaders of Jesus’ day fell exactly into that category. The powerful Chief Priests were wealthy pseudo-aristocrats who worked the system and got what they could out of it. Herod Antipas (the Herod of the main body of the Gospels, as opposed to his father Herod the Great) was a puppet tyrant bent on wealth and self-aggrandizement. And the popular frustration with the overall rule of Rome and the local rule of the priests and Herod brought together what we must never separate if we are to be true to the biblical witness: religion and politics, questions of God and of the ordering of society. When they longed for the kingdom of God, they were not thinking about how to secure themselves a place in heaven after they died. The phrase “kingdom of heaven,” which we find frequently in Matthew’s Gospel where the others have “kingdom of God,” does not refer to a place, called “heaven,” where God’s people will go after death. It refers to the rule of heaven, that is, of God, being brought to bear in the present world. Thy kingdom come, said Jesus, thy will be done, on earth as in heaven. Jesus’ contemporaries knew that the creator God intended to bring justice and peace to his world here and now. The question was, how, when and through whom?

With a certain oversimplification we can trace easily enough the three options open to Jews in Jesus’ day. If you go down the Jordan valley from Jericho to Masada, you can see evidence of all of them. First, the quietist and ultimately dualist option, taken by the writers of the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran: separate yourself from the wicked world and wait for God to do whatever God is going to do. Second, the compromise option taken by Herod: build yourself fortresses and palaces, get along with your political bosses as well as you can, do as well out of it as you can and hope that God will validate it somehow. Third, the zealot option, that of the Sicarii who took over Herod’s old palace/fortress of Masada during the Roman-Jewish war: say your prayers, sharpen your swords, make yourselves holy to fight a holy war, and God will give you a military victory that will also be the theological victory of good over evil, of God over the hordes of darkness, of the Son of Man over the monsters.

Only when we put Jesus into this context do we realize how striking, how dramatic, was his own vocation and agenda. He was neither a quietist nor a compromiser nor a zealot. Out of his deep awareness, in loving faith and prayer, of the one he called “Abba, Father,” he went back to Israel’s Scriptures and found there another kingdom-model, equally Jewish if not more so. And it is that model we are now to explore. The kingdom of God, he said, is at hand. Through Jesus What could this mean?

God’s Plan Unveiled

Throughout his brief public career Jesus spoke and acted as if God’s plan of salvation and justice for Israel and the world was being unveiled through his own presence, his own work, his own fate. This idea of the plan being unveiled is, again, characteristically Jewish, and Jesus’ contemporaries had developed a complex way of talking about it. They used imagery often lurid and spectacular, drawn from the Scriptures, to talk about things that were happening in the public world, the world of politics and society, and to give those happenings their theological meaning.

Thus, instead of saying “Babylon is going to fall, and this will be like a cosmic collapse,” Isaiah said, “The sun will be darkened, the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling front heaven.” ?The Jewish Bible is full of such language, which is often called
“apocalyptic,” and we would be quite wrong to imagine that it was all meant to be taken literally. It was a way, to repeat the point, of describing what we would call space-time events and investing them with their theological or cosmic significance. Jews of Jesus’ day did not, by and large, expect that the space-time universe was going to come to a stop. They did expect that God was going to act so dramatically within the space-time universe, as he had before at key moments like the Exodus, that the only appropriate language would be the language of a world taken apart and reborn.

Jesus inherited this tradition and made it his own in one way in particular. He told stories whose many dimensions cracked open the worldview of his hearers and forced them to come to terms with God’s reality breaking in to their midst, doing what they had always longed for but doing it in ways that were so startling as to he hardly recognizable. The parables are Jesus’ own commentary on a crisis—the crisis faced by Israel, and more specifically, the crisis brought about by Jesus’ own presence and work.

Jesus was not primarily a “teacher” in the sense that we usually give that word. Jesus did things and then commented on them, explained them, challenged people to figure out what they meant. He acted practically and symbolically, not least through his remarkable works of healing—works that today all but the most extreme skeptics are forced to regard as in principle historical. In particular, he acted and spoke in such a way that people quickly came to regard him as a prophet. Though, as we shall see, Jesus saw himself as much more than a prophet, that was the role he adopted in his early public career, following on as he did from the prophetic work of John the Baptist. He intended to be perceived, and was indeed perceived, as a prophet announcing the kingdom of God.

But, like many of Israel’s prophets of old, in doing this he confronted other kingdom-dreams and kingdom-visions. If his way of bringing the kingdom was the right way, then Herod’s way was not, the Qumran way was not and the Zealot way was not. And the Pharisees, who in Jesus’ day were mostly inclined toward the Zealot end of the spectrum, were bound to regard him as a dangerous compromiser. We shall see the results of this in the next chapter. Let me, then, unfold briefly the main thrusts of Jesus’ kingdom-message under three headings: the end of exile, the call of a renewed people, and the warning of disaster and vindication to come.

The End of Exile

Jesus embarked on a public career of kingdom-initiation. His movement began with John’s baptism, which must have been interpreted as a coded dramatization of the exodus, hinting strongly that the new exodus, the return from exile, was about to take place. But Jesus soon became better known for healing than for baptizing. And it was his remarkable healings, almost certainly, that won him a hearing. He was not a teacher who also healed; he was a prophet of the kingdom, first enacting and then explaining that kingdom. I take the healings as read, then, and move on at once to the explanations.

Jesus’ parables were not simply shrewd stories about human life and motivation. Nor were they simply childish illustrations, earthly stories with heavenly meanings. Again and again they are rooted in the Jewish Scriptures, in the Jewish narratives that were told and retold officially and unofficially. We could look at these at great length, but there’s only space here to glance at two of the best known and to suggest dimensions to them that may be unfamiliar.

I begin with the parable of the sower in Mark 4:1-20 and its parallels. This parable is not simply a wry comment on the way in which many hear the gospel message and fail to respond to it appropriately. Nor is it merely a homely illustration taken from the farming practices of Galilee. It is a typically Jewish story about the way in which the kingdom of God was coming. It has two roots in particular, which help to explain what Jesus was about.

First, it is rooted in the prophetic language of return from exile. Jeremiah and other prophets spoke of God’s sowing his people again in their own land. The Psalms, at the very point where they are both celebrating the return from exile and praying for it to be completed, sang of those who sowed in tears reaping with shouts of joy. But above all the book of Isaiah used the image of sowing and reaping as a controlling metaphor for the great work of new creation that God would accomplish after the exile. “The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand for ever.” “As the rain and snow water the earth, so shall my word be. It shall not return to me empty but it will accomplish my purpose.” New plants, new shrubs, will spring up before you as you return from exile. All this goes back to the story of Isaiah’s call in chapter 6, where the prophet sees Israel like a tree being cut down in
judgment, and then the stump being burnt; but the holy seed is the stump, and from that stump there shall come forth new shoots.7

It is that last passage—Isaiah 6:9-10—that Jesus quotes in Matthew 13:14-15, Mark 4:12 and Luke 8:10 by way of explanation of the parable of the Sower.8 The parable is about what God was doing in Jesus’ own ministry. God was not simply reinforcing Israel as she stood. He was not underwriting her national ambitions, her ethnic pride. He was doing what the prophets always warned: he was judging Israel for her idolatry and was simultaneously calling into being a new people, a renewed Israel, a returned-from-exile people of God.

The second Old Testament root of the parable of the sower is the tradition of apocalyptic storytelling we find in, for instance, the book of Daniel. In Daniel 2, Nebuchadnezzar dreams of a great statue composed of four different metals, with gold at the top and a mixture of iron and clay at the bottom. The statue is demolished, the feet of clay being crushed by a stone, cut out of a mountain, which in turn becomes a mountain that fills the whole earth. So too, in Daniel 7 the four beasts make war on the human figure, one like a son of man, until God takes his seat and the son of man is exalted over the beasts. Even so, says Jesus, the story of God’s people is being encapsulated, recapitulated, in his own work. Some seed falls on the path; some on the rock; some among thorns. But some seed falls on good soil and bears fruit, thirtyfold, sixtyfold, a hundredfold. The kingdom of God, the return from exile, the great climax of Israel’s history, is here, Jesus is saying, though it does not look like you thought it would. The parable itself is a parable about parables and their effect: this is the only way that the spectacular truth can be told, and it is bound to have the effect that some will look and look and never see, while others find the mystery suddenly unveiled, and they see what God is doing.

The second parable that opens a dramatic window on the kingdom of God is the one we call the Prodigal Son, in Luke 15.9 Among the dozens of things people regularly and often rightly say about this parable, one thing is missed by virtually everybody, though I submit that it would be blindingly obvious to most first-century Jewish listeners. A story about a scoundrel young son who goes off into a far pagan country and is then astonishingly welcomed back home is—of course!—the story of exile and restoration. It was the story Jesus’ contemporaries wanted to hear. And Jesus told the story to make the point that the return from exile was happening in and through his own work. The parable was not a general illustration of the timeless truth of God’s forgiveness for the sinner, though of course it can be translated into that. It was a sharp-edged, context-specific message about what was happening in Jesus’ ministry. More specifically, it was about what was happening through Jesus’ welcome of outcasts, his eating with sinners.

This story too, has a dark side to it. The older brother in the story represents those who are opposed to the return from exile as it is actually happening: in this case, the Pharisees and lawyers who see what Jesus is doing and think it scandalous. Jesus’ claim is that in and through his own ministry the long-awaited return is actually happening, even though it does not look like what people imagined. The return is happening under the noses of the self-appointed guardians of Israel’s ancestral traditions, and they remain blind to it because it doesn’t conform to their expectations.

In these two parables and in dozens of other ways Jesus was announcing, cryptically, that the long-awaited moment had arrived. This was the good news, the euangelion. We should not be surprised that Jesus in announcing it kept on the move, going from village to village and, so far as we can tell, staying away from Sepphoris and Tiberias, the two largest cities in Galilee. He was not so much like a wandering preacher preaching sermons, or a wandering philosopher offering maxims, as like a politician gathering support for a new and highly risky movement. That is why he chose to explain his actions in the quotation from Isaiah: some must look and look and never see, otherwise the secret police will be alerted. Again, we should not imagine that politics here could be split off from theology. Jesus was doing what he was doing in the belief that in this way Israel’s God was indeed becoming king.

Throughout this work Jesus was seeking to gather support for his kingdom-movement. He was calling out a renewed people. This is the second aspect of the kingdom-announcement that we must study.

The Call of the Renewed People

When Jesus announced the kingdom, the stories he told functioned like dramatic plays in search of actors. His hearers were invited to audition for parts in the king-
They had been eager for God’s drama to be staged and were waiting to find out what they would have to do when he did so. Now they were to discover. They were to become kingdom-people themselves. Jesus, following John the Baptist, was calling into being what he believed would be the true, renewed people of God.

Jesus’ opening challenge as reported in the Gospels was that people should “repent and believe.” This is a classic example, which I mentioned in the previous chapter, of a phrase whose meaning has changed over the years. If I were to go out on the street in my local town and proclaim that people should “repent and believe,” what they would hear would be a summons to give up their private sins (one suspects that in our culture sexual misbehavior and alcohol or drug abuse would come quickly to mind) and to “get religion” in some shape or form—either experiencing a new inner sense of God’s presence, or believing a new body of dogma, or joining the church or some sub-branch of it. But that is by no means exactly what the phrase “repent and believe” meant in first-century Galilee.

How are we to unlearn our meanings for such a phrase and to hear it through first-century ears? It helps if we can find another author using it at around the same place and time as Jesus. Consider, for example, the Jewish aristocrat and historian Josephus, who was born a few years after Jesus’ crucifixion and who was sent in A.D. 66 as a young army commander to sort out some rebel movements in Galilee. His task, as he describes it in his autobiography, was to persuade the hot-headed Galileans to stop their mad rush into revolt against Rome and to trust him and the other Jerusalem aristocrats to work out a better modus vivendi. So when he confronted the rebel leader, he says that he told him to give up his own agenda and to trust him, Josephus, instead. And the word he uses are remarkably familiar to readers of the Gospels: he told the brigand leader to “repent and believe,” metanoesein kai pistos emoi geneisthai.

This does not, of course, mean that Josephus was challenging the brigand leader (who, confusingly, was called “Jesus”) to give up sinning and have a religious conversion experience. It has a far more specific and indeed political meaning. I suggest that when we examine Jesus of Nazareth forty years earlier going around Galilee telling people to repent and believe in him or in the gospel, we dare not screen out these meanings. Even if we end up suggesting that Jesus meant more than Josephus did—that there were indeed religious and theological dimensions to his invitation—we cannot suppose that he meant less. He was telling his hearers to give up their agendas and to trust him for his way of being Israel, his way of bringing the kingdom, his kingdom agenda. In particular, he was urging them, as Josephus had, to abandon their crazy dreams of nationalist revolution. But whereas Josephus was opposed to armed revolution because he was an aristocrat with a nest to feather, Jesus was opposed to it because he saw it as, paradoxically, a way of being deeply disloyal to Israel’s God and to his purpose for Israel to be the light of the world. And whereas Josephus was offering as a counter-agenda a way that they must have seen as compromise, a shaky political solution cobbled together with sticky tape, Jesus was offering as a counter-agenda an utterly risky way of being Israel, the way of turning the other cheek and going the second mile, the way of losing your life to gain it. This was the kingdom-invitation he was issuing. This was the play for which he was holding auditions.

Along with this radical invitation went a radical welcome. Wherever Jesus went, there seemed to be a celebration; the tradition of festive meals at which Jesus welcomed all and sundry is one of the most securely established features of almost all recent scholarly portraits. And the reason why some of Jesus’ contemporaries found this so offensive is not far to seek (though not always understood). It was not just that he as an individual was associating with disreputable people; that would not have been a great offense. It was because he was doing so as a prophet of the kingdom and was indeed making these meals and their free-for-all welcome a central feature of his program. The meals spoke powerfully about Jesus’ vision of the kingdom; what they said was subversive of other kingdom-agendas. Jesus’ welcome symbolized God’s radical acceptance and forgiveness; whereas his contemporaries would have seen forgiveness and a God-given new start in terms of the Temple and its cult, Jesus was offering it on his own authority and without requiring any official interaction with Jerusalem. (The exception proves the rule: when Jesus healed a leper and told him to go to the priest and make the required offering, the point was of course that an ex-leper needed the official bill of health in order to be readmitted to his community.)

Those who heeded Jesus’ call to audition for the kingdom-play that God was staging through him found themselves facing a challenge. Christians from quite
early in the church’s life have allowed themselves to see this challenge as a new rule book, as though his intention was simply to offer a new code of morality. This has then become problematic within the Reformation tradition in particular, where people have been sensitive about the danger of putting one’s human “good works” logically prior to the faith by which one is justified. But that was not the point. Jesus’ contemporaries already had a standard of morality to rival any and to outstrip most. They never supposed—and nor did Jesus—that their behavior was what commended them to God; for them—and for Jesus—behavior was what ought to follow from God’s initiative and covenant. Such anxious theological discussions miss the real issue. The key thing was that the inbreaking kingdom Jesus was announcing created a new world, a new context, and he was challenging his hearers to become the new people that this new context demanded, the citizens of this new world. He was offering a challenge to his contemporaries to a way of life, a way of forgiveness and prayer, a way of jubilee, which they could practice in their own villages, right where they were.

This is the context, I suggest, within which we should understand what we call the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5–7), though we do not have the space to look at it in detail here. The Sermon (whether or not it was delivered all at once by Jesus, it certainly represents substantially the challenge he offered to his contemporaries) is not, first and foremost, a private message for individuals to find salvation in Jesus, though of course it includes that in its wider reaches. Nor is it simply a great moral code (though it does of course contain some shining examples of great moral precepts). It makes the sense it does because it depends, all through, on Jesus’ kingdom-announcement and on the fact that Jesus himself was, through this announcement, summoning people to follow him in the new way of life, the kingdom-way.

The Sermon is a challenge, in particular, to find a way of being Israel other than the normal revolutionary way. “Do not resist evil”; “turn the other cheek”; “go the second mile”; these are not invitations to be a doormat for Jesus but constitute a warning not to get involved in the ever-present resistance movement. Instead, Jesus’ hearers are to discover the true vocation of Israel—to be the light of the world, the salt of the earth. The city set on a hill that cannot be hidden is obviously Jerusalem, designed to be the place where the one true God will reveal himself for all humankind. But at the heart of Jerusalem is the Temple, the house built on the rock. The sermon ends with a coded but very sharp warning. The real new Temple, the real house-on-the-rock, will consist of the community that builds its life upon Jesus’ words. All other attempts to create a new Israel, a new Temple (remember that Herod’s Temple was still being completed in Jesus’ lifetime), a pure or revolutionary community, would be like building a house on the sand. When the wind and storms came, it would fall with a great crash, Jesus was calling his hearers to take part in God’s new drama, the great play in which Israel would at last fulfill her ancient vocation to be the light of the world. This was to be the way of true love and justice through which Israel’s God would be revealed to the watching world.

Many of Jesus’ hearers could not follow him on his travels, but there were several whom he summoned to do just that. As well as the close circle of the twelve—itself, of course, a deeply symbolic number, clearly indicating Jesus’ intention to reconstitute Israel around himself—there were many to whom he issued a challenge to give up all and come with him. Some he commissioned to share in the work of announcing the kingdom, including the actions, the healings and the table-fellowship, which as we shall see later, turned the announcement into symbolic praxis. To take up the cross and follow Jesus meant embracing Jesus’ utterly risky vocation—to be the light of the world in a way the revolutionaries had never dreamed of. It was a call to follow Jesus into political danger and likely death, in the faith that by this means Israel’s God would bring Israel through her present tribulations and out into the new day that would dawn.

If, therefore, Jesus was embodying and announcing and summoning others to join in with the reconstitution of the people of God and their new direction at the great turning-point of history, the world of thought within which he lived indicated that he would also have expected that this would result in a great turnaround in the history and life of the non-Jewish nations as well. When Israel’s God finally does for Israel that which he has promised, then, in much Jewish thought, the effects will ripple out to reach the whole world. The coming King, in many Old Testament texts (e.g., Is 42), would bring God’s justice not merely to Israel but to the whole world. Many, said Jesus, will come from east and west and sit down with the patriarchs in the
kingdom of God. Jesus does not appear to have said much else on this subject. (This is in itself an interesting sign that, despite much current scholarship, the writers of the Gospels did not feel free to invent all kinds of new sayings to suit their own setting and place them on Jesus’ lips; the church was heavily involved in the mission to the Gentiles and its attendant problems, but we would hardly guess this from the Gospels.) He seems to have been conscious of a vocation to focus his own work quite sharply on Israel; once his decisive work was done, then the kingdom-invitation would go out much wider, but the time was not yet.12

What, then, did Jesus think was going to happen? How would his kingdom-announcement reach its decisive and climactic moment?

**Disaster and Vindication**

I have argued thus far that Jesus’ kingdom-announcement consisted of his telling and reenacting the story his contemporaries were longing to hear but giving it a radical new twist. The kingdom was coming, was coming indeed in and through his own ministry; but it was not going to look like what they had expected. In the final section of this chapter I want to highlight the conclusion of the story as Jesus was telling it.

He and his contemporaries were living within a controlling story, a great scriptural narrative through which the puzzles of their own times could be discerned (though how this should be done and what might be the results of doing so were of course fiercely contested). The controlling story was often told in terms of the new exodus: when the Egyptians of the day, not least their Pharaohs, vaunted themselves against God’s people, God would deliver Israel by mighty acts within history and bring his people through their great trials to vindication at last. Sometimes this story was told in apocalyptic terms: the Syrian crisis of the early second century B.C. precipitated one such retelling, with the megalomaniac dictator Antiochus Epiphanes portraying Pharaoh and (at least in some tellings) the Maccabean resistance fighters playing the gallant Israelites carving out a way for the slaves to be freed. The Syrians were the monsters; the Jews were the human beings, threatened, embattled, but to be vindicated. It was not difficult for Jesus’ contemporaries to reapply such stories and such imagery to their own day. The stories that formerly featured Egypt, Babylon and Syria now focused on Rome.

Jesus stood firmly against the retelling of the story that had become customary in his day. God’s purpose would not after all be to vindicate Israel as a nation against the pagan hordes, winning the theological battle by military force. On the contrary, Jesus announced, increasingly clearly, that God’s judgment would fall not on the surrounding nations but on the Israel that had failed to be the light of the world. Who then would be vindicated in the great coming debacle? Back comes the answer with increasing force and clarity: Jesus himself and his followers. They were now the true, reconstituted Israel. They would suffer and suffer horribly, but God would vindicate them.

A good deal of the material in the Synoptic Gospels is taken up with warnings about a great coming judgment. Christians from very early times have applied this material to the question of what happens both to human beings after their death and to the world as a whole at the great final judgment that is still awaited at the end of history. When we read such passages in their first-century context, however, a rather different picture emerges. The warnings that Jesus issued were, like those of the great prophets before him, warnings of coming judgments of YHWH within history; like Jeremiah he prophesied the fall of Jerusalem itself. Jeremiah saw Babylon as the agent of God in punishing his wayward people; Jesus seems to have cast Rome in the same role. And the judgment would come, not as an arbitrary “punishment” by God for Israel’s failure to obey some general moral standards but as the inevitable result (not that its inevitability meant that God was not involved in it) of Israel’s choosing the way of violence, the way of resistance, rather than following the way Jesus himself had grasped and articulated in his own life and message. If they would not follow the way of peace, they would reap the consequences.

Some obvious examples: In Luke 13 Jesus’ followers tell him about some Galileans whom Pilate had had killed in the sanctuary itself. Jesus’ response is interesting: Do you suppose those Galileans were worse sinners than all the others? No, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or what about the eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed? Were they worse sinners than all the others in the Jerusalem area? No, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. This is not a warning about frying in hell after death. This is the warning that if Israel refuses to repent of her present flight into national rebellion against Rome, Roman
swords in the Temple and falling masonry throughout Jerusalem will become the means of judgment. The warnings reach their height as Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey and bursts into tears (Lk 19:41-44). “If only you had known, even now,” he sobbed, “the things that make for peace; but now they are hidden from your eyes! For the days will come when your enemies will raise up a bank against you, and hem you in on every side, and dash you into pieces, you and your little ones, and leave not one stone upon another, because you did not know the day of your visitation.” Once again, this was not a warning about the judgment that faced individuals after their death, nor even, in the first instance, the judgment that, in most Christian tradition, awaits the whole world at the very end. It was the solemn and tragic warning about the fate that Jerusalem was courting for itself by refusing the way of peace that Jesus had held out. These warnings became very specific. Jesus seems to have regarded himself as the last prophet in the great sequence; part of his message was precisely that there would not be another chance. The generation that refused to heed him would be the generation upon whom the judgment would fall.

These warnings cluster together within the so-called Little Apocalypse of Mark 13 and its parallels in Matthew 24 and Luke 21. The whole chapter is to be read, I suggest, as a prediction not of the end of the world but of the fall of Jerusalem. The critical thing, here and elsewhere, is to understand how apocalyptic language works. As I said before, the language of the sun and the moon being darkened, and so forth, is regularly used in Scripture to denote major political or social upheavals—the rise and fall of empires, as we say—and to connote by the use of this language the cosmic or theological significance that they ascribe to these events.

The language in Mark 13, then, about the Son of Man coming on the clouds should not be taken with wooden literalism—as, of course, generations both of critical scholars and uncritical believers have taken it. The language here is taken from Daniel 7, where the events referred to are the defeat and collapse of the great empires that have opposed the people of God and the vindication of the true people of God, the saints of the most high. The phrase about “the son of man coming on the clouds” would not be read, by a first-century Jew poring over Daniel, as referring to a human being “coming” downwards toward the earth riding on an actual cloud. It would be seen as predicting great events in and through which God would be vindicating his true people after their suffering. They would “come,” not to earth but to God.

Jesus was thereby using some standard themes within second-Temple Jewish expectation in a radically new way. He was taking material about the destruction of Babylon, or Syria, or whomever, and was applying it to Jerusalem. And he was redirecting onto himself and his followers the prophetic predictions of vindication.

It is sometimes suggested that views of this sort are in some way anti-Jewish. This misses the whole point. One of the noblest and most deep-rooted traditions in Judaism is that of critique from within. The Pharisees were deeply critical of most of their Jewish contemporaries. The Essenes regarded all Jews except themselves as heading for judgment; they had transferred to themselves all the promises of vindication and salvation, while they heaped anathemas on everyone else, not least the Pharisees. That did not make the Pharisees, or the Essenes, anti-Jewish. The other side of the coin of Jesus’ free and open welcome to all and sundry was the warning that those who did not follow in the way he was leading were, by that very refusal, indicating their commitment to the way of being Jewish that involved confrontation with pagan Rome and so puffing down on their own heads the great historical devastation that would result. But the fall of Jerusalem, when it came, would indicate clearly enough that Jesus’ way had been right. This would not be the only vindication for Jesus and his kingdom-announcement, but it was a central and essential part of his message. It was a characteristic, if radical, position for a first-century Jew to take.

Conclusion
We may now sum up what we have seen so far about Jesus’ announcement of the kingdom. He told the story of the kingdom in such a way as to indicate that Israel’s long exile was finally coming to its close. But this was not simply to be good news for all Jews, no matter what their own attitudes to his agenda might be. His retelling of the story was deeply subversive, with sharp polemic reserved for alternative tellings of Israel’s story. Jesus was claiming to be speaking for Israel’s true ancestral traditions, denouncing what he saw as deviation and corruption at the very heart of Israel’s present life.
This picture, I believe, makes very good sense historically. It locates Jesus thoroughly credibly within the world of first-century Judaism. His critique of his contemporaries was a critique from within; his summons was not to abandon Judaism and try something else but to become the true, returned-from-exile people of the one true God. His aim was to be the means of God’s reconstitution of Israel. He would challenge and deal with the evil that had infected Israel herself. He would be the means of Israel’s God returning to Zion. He was, in short, announcing the kingdom of God—not the simple revolutionary message of the hard-liners but the doubly revolutionary message of a kingdom that would overturn all other agendas, including the revolutionary one. As we shall see in chapter four, he was thereby claiming both the role of Messiah and the vocation of redemptive suffering. As we shall see in chapter five, he was claiming that this was the vocation of Israel’s God himself.

It may seem a huge step from the historical Jesus of the first century to our own vocation and tasks, whether professional, practical, academic or whatever. Let me conclude the present chapter by pointing forward to the two ways, about which I shall say more in the final two chapters, through which Christians today might make all this their own.

First, all that we are and do as Christians is based upon the one-off unique achievement of Jesus. It is because he inaugurated the kingdom that we can live the kingdom. It is because he brought the story of God and Israel, and hence of God and the cosmos, to its designed climax that we can now implement that work today. And we will best develop that Christian vocation if we understand the foundation upon which we are building. If we are to follow Jesus Christ we need to know more about the Jesus Christ we are following.

Second, the foundation serves as the model for the building as a whole. What Jesus was to Israel, the church must now be for the world. Everything we discover about what Jesus did and said within the Judaism of his day must be thought through in terms of what it would look like for the church to do and be this for the world. If we are to shape our world, and perhaps even to implement the redemption of our world, this is how it is to be done.

Notes
1 The clearest example of this belief is Daniel 9:2, 24, where it is stated that instead of the exile lasting for seventy years, as Jeremiah had prophesied, it would actually last for “seventy weeks of years,” that is, 490 years. The same belief, in the continuation of a theological state of affairs that can fairly be described through the metaphor of “ongoing exile,” is witnessed in literally dozens of places in second-temple Judaism. See now the essay by Craig A. Evans “Jesus and the Continuing Exile of Israel,” in Jesus & the Restoration of Israel: A Critical Assessment of N. T. Wright’s Jesus and the Victory of God, ed. Carey C. Newman (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999), pp. 67–90; and cf. N. T. Wright, The New Testament and the People of God (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992), pp. 268–72; N. T. Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God (Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress, 1996), pp. xvii–xviii, 126–29 and frequently elsewhere.
2 Is 13:10.
5 See Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God, pp. 230–39.
9 See Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God, pp. 125–31.
10 Josephus Life 110.
11 Mk 1:44.
12 See Mt 10:6; 23; 15:24, alongside 8:11–12. This perspective seems to have been acknowledged and respewed in the early church; see, e.g., Rom 15:8–9.