THE GOSPELS & THE KINGDOM OF GOD

(1) What Is a Gospel?

The word Gospel (euaggelion) means "good news" and had been used of propaganda in the Roman imperial cult. In the NT a more precise Hebrew sense (*bissar* – euaggelizesqai) is invoked which implies "to announce news of salvation" (Is. 40:9; 52:7; 61:1; Ps 96:2, cf. Kummel 1974, 35-6). John gives a great summary of what a Gospel is meant to do towards the end of his own Gospel:

> "these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31, NRSV)

The Gospels are meant, from this :

- To give information about Jesus
- To encourage belief and faith
- To give life, or bring transformation.

Our Gospels primarily perform these functions by providing information about Jesus: what he did, said, his death and resurrection. They are not purely accounts of details, neither are they exhaustive. Rather, each gospel is an account of Jesus' life which includes comment and interpretation on what he means to the writer. This is reflected in their proper titles "The Gospel of Jesus Christ according to (kata)…whoever".

But let us pause, and realise that we cannot just pick up a gospel and start to read it without thinking about how to read it- for we read different types of literature in different ways. Consider a newspaper – we read news stories in a different way from editorials, and editorials in a different way from advertisements. We need to know what kind of writing the Gospels are so that we can be faithful to the purposes outlined by John. And that means we need to know how a work like the gospel might have been written and read by the evangelists and their congregations. That, in turn, means looking at different kinds of writing in the ancient world.

There are various literary types to which the Gospels can be compared. Though some argue that the Gospels really form a new distinct literary genre on the basis of content (Kummel 1974, 37) this cannot be sustained: content and technique are not the basis for deciding a literary genre (Carter 2006, 8). Nor, from a literary point of view, is there such a thing as a truly unique document (*Ibid*).

It is worth looking at the analogies shared with other ancient writings, particularly BIOS, Aretalogy and Ancient novels/romances.

BIOS

Bioj is the name given to Graeco-Roman writings which describe the lives of the famous. They focus on the history and development of a person, not their internal processes (a major difference from modern biography- Carter 2006, 9) It also overlaps with other kinds of literature (encomia (praise), philosophy, politics, novel etc.. Carter, on John's Gospel, summarises Richard Burridge's work, and suggests that the Gospel approximates to a Bios:

- Title and opening prologue
- Focus on actions of central character with significant proportion given to end of life.
- Prose narrative comparable in terms of size, structure, scale, literary units, sources and characterization.
- Seven internal features also resonate: setting, topics, style, atmosphere, quality of characterization, social setting and author's purpose.

However, it is not, like other Bioi, exclusive. It shares features of other literary styles. These have sometimes been put forward as the dominant literary parallel, but the arguments are, ultimately, unconvincing.

Bultmann was critical of such a view, arguing that there was little interest in the personality of Jesus, but a focus on the Cross as an existential event. This prompted the reply from C.S. Lewis:

" I begin to fear that by *personality* Dr Bultmann means what I should call impersonality: what you'd get in a DNB article or an obituary, or a Victorian *Life and Letters of Yeshua bar-Yosef* in three volumes with photographs" (quote in Mascall 1984, 73)

Aretalogy

An account, often in the first person, of the virtues, deeds and accomplishments of a deity, or heroic figure. There is an aretalogy of Isis (Jonsson). They often deal with miracles. However, they have substantial difficulties:

- There are very few examples to which the gospels may be compared.
- Birth stories are important in aretalogy, but only of significance in Luke.
- Shared miracles, yes, healing and bringing back to life, but not an exact parallel. Aretalogy has no equivalent of feeding miracle.
- Death of hero is significantly more important in gospels, and invested with specific meanings which are not shared
- Chronology is less important in the Gospel version
- Teaching is more important in the gospels than biographical material.
- Heroes may be saviours, but not by their death.

Note the conclusion of Weller:

"In all these ways, the Gospel of Mark cannot precisely be characterized as an aretalogy, as it differs subtly but pervasively in tone and specific detail. It seems extremely plausible, however, that Mark was written with the aretalogical genre in mind, making use of the characteristics of aretalogy while not precisely being an aretalogy in and of itself. Mark is, in this fashion, very similar to Philo's *Life of Moses*, which also has many aretalogical aspects but deliberately uses these features to persuade its readers about the validity of Moses and the Jewish religion as respectively a spiritual teacher in the line of Socrates and a legitimate philosophical and theological teaching. Mark functions in much the same fashion; it sets up Jesus in the aretalogical mode and context, making him palatable to Greek thought and drawing Greeks towards conversion." (2005)

Ancient Novel/Romance

Argued from two different perspectives. In the older view, the Gospel is judged to be a "spiritual romance" or a "poem not history"- and more like

works such as Pilgrim's Progress. This kind of overarching comment provoked the wrath of Lewis:

> "I have been reading poems, romances, vision-literature, legends, myths all my life. I know what they are like. I know that not one of them is like this. Of this text [sc. The Fourth Gospel] there are only two possible views. Either this is reportage- though it may no doubt contain errors-pretty close up to the facts; nearly as close as Boswell. Or else, some unknown writer in the second century, without known predecessors or successors, suddenly anticipated the whole technique of modern, novelistic, realistic narrative. If it is untrue, it must be narrative of that kind. The reader who does not see this has simply not learned to read."(quoted in Mascall 1984, 74)

More recent work has used the approach of Northrop Frye's uses of archetypes in storytelling, that the Gospel can be identified as an example of romance, as it is a successful quest in three stages: journey and minor adventures, struggle, and exaltation of hero (conflict death and recognition),. There are also glimpses of tragedy, satire and comedy (the last in the sense of overcoming obstacles to reach a successful resolution).

Like structuralism, this approach begs a number of questions about how texts are read. Here they are read using ahistorical theory.

Comparison to ancient tragedy, satire and comedy quickly reveals a major difference in form: the Gospels are primarily prose not poetry. And the subject matter is markedly different from the domestic romantic subject matter of New Comedy (Plautus, Terence), and the satire of Old Comedy (Aristophanes), the second of which pointed out problems but did not engage with how to resolve them.

The length of the gospels and their strong ethical content is also far removed from ancient romance and novel forms, which were also more picaresque, and primarily for entertainment. There the focus of events is on the trail of misadventures which befall the hero/ine with little or no influence in their personalities or inner processes.

In conclusion, it is suggested that the gospels approximate most closely, but not exclusively, to the BIOS form, admitting that they take it in a new direction in the combination of ethical and soteriological issues: a BIOS written for the purpose of giving the good news of salvation, not just to give us examples to shun or imitate. The Gospels may also echo other ancient forms so that they engage with the reading culture of the recipients.

Does this actually help us with what was important question for theology in the 20th century, namely, its basis in history? After all, calling something "history" need be no guarantee of reliability. We after all live in an age where "historians" can deny the Holocaust, and re-write the lives of the famous to change them from hero to villain or vice-versa.

Theologians have, surprise, been little help, but only added to the confusion. A scholar like Rudolf Bultmann for example, was able, using critical methods to suggest that much of the Gospels was legend, or fabrication by the early church. His reading left little, if anything, beyond the Cross. Conservative scholars, on the other hand, will argue that every saying and every action is based on an accurate reporting of history. This convention lies behind those bibles which print the words of Jesus in red. Somewhere in between lies territory with which most of us are perhaps more comfortable: that the gospels are a mixture of history and its interpretation: Mark's Jesus is different from Matthew's is different from Luke's is different from John's. Pieces of traditions, sayings and actions, originate with Jesus, but the finished product puts those pieces in a picture constructed by the evangelist, a bit like a biopic, or an historical novel.

Nonetheless we may still want some comfort that these are reliable writings. We get this from two directions:

- The first, and here I summarise a huge amount of literature quickly, is that our gospels originate with eye witness tradition. In the case of Mark and the Synoptics, the primary source is Peter. In the case of John, I would suggest that the primary source is the person mentioned in that book as the Beloved Disciple, who seems to have been a well-placed Jerusalemite- after all, he blags Peter into the hearing against Jesus, and that Gospel knows little of Galilee but a lot about Jerusalem. I realise that this means the evangelist is unlikely to be John, the son of Zebedee, but his relative anonymity does not diminish his closeness to Jesus. You can follow the arguments for eyewitness sources in Richard Bauckham's *Jesus & The Eyewitnesses.*
- The second is that the evangelists could not write anything they liked. Again, I summarise at high speed, evidence suggests that the Gospel

material were at first passed on orally, and then committed to writing. Writing may have started earlier, but our Gospels seem to have been first committed to paper about the late 60s AD, which makes sense if you think that until then Christians might have expected Jesus to return, but, by then, and the death of the first witnesses, realised that there might need to be a more fixed memory of the tradition. Being Jewish, for the most part, their ways of passing on material would have echoed their culture, and that meant that, whilst there was some flexibility in interpretation, changes were governed by strict customs about what were and were not acceptable alterations, and thus remain likely to be reliable: they could not, put simply, change that much. Here Gerhardsson's writing is important. His main work is a double collection called *Memory & Manuscript*, but the more populist *The Reliability of the Gospel Tradition* is cheaper, and will give all the information you need at this stage.

To finish, let me summarise my position, Gospels are like, but not identical to Graeco-Roman biography, and are historically reliable given their eye-witness foundations and methods of transmission: they simply could not have been made up, it seems to me.

But we also have to be careful how we read, so let me finish this section with a little brief word on miracles. Miracles have provided modern folk with all sorts of trouble. We have often got bogged down in their mechanics. Yet what matters for the Gospel writers, and what should matter for us is not how they happened, but what they signify. A story like the Feeding of the 5000 is important because it signifies Jesus bringing people to share at the Messianic Banquet: the heavenly feast anticipated for God's people, not as a way of cutting overheads in the bakery. Miracles of healing and exorcism are important because of the power they reveal and what they say about who Jesus is, not because of their mechanics. Another lecture, another time perhaps???

(2) The Kingdom of God

The idea of the "kingdom of God" is taken up from the Old Testament, and is variously defined as the "Kingdom", "Kingdom of God", or the "Kingdom of my Father".

They occur mainly in the Synoptic Gospels and rarely found in Paul (Rom 14:17; 1 Cor 6:9, 15:24) and John (3:3- he covers similar ground by the use of "eternal life"). However it's not a phrase invented by Jesus and has precedents both in the OT and in the Intertestamental and rabbinic literature. The number of references there is not huge, but enough to remind us that Jesus was not inventing something new, but drew on existing ideas and hopes.

There was, as Christopher Rowland, puts it:

> "a fundamental datum of Jewish eschatology that God would bring about an age of perfection in this world , when the dominance of foreign powers would be overthrown and God's righteousness revealed" (Rowland 2002, 132)

There were a number of different ways to express this: the Day of the Lord and the Kingdom were two. Important in fleshing these out was the concept of a Messianic Banquet at which God's people would feast with him on his holy mountain. Let us restrict ourselves for the moment to the Kingdom.

The idea of the Kingdom of God can be seen at the following points:

- The kingship motif develops in the context of Temple worship from ideas which originate in the Canaanite world. Thus Isaiah 6:5 [God as king]; the throne of the cherubim [2 Kings 19:14; Isaiah 37:14-6]; the king, the temple and Zion [Ps 25:7-10; 29:9 ff; 68:17 ff]
- The cultic community as the realisation of God's rule [Ps. 47,93, 96-9, 1 & 2 Chron; Josephus and Jerusalem as a theocracy (*Apion* 2 164-6)]
- The expectation of salvation from God in the post-exilic period [Isaiah 52:7; Obadiah 21; Zephaniah 3:15; also Isaiah 33; 24-7; Zechariah 12-4; Daniel 2 & 7]
- Apocalyptic statements about God in the IT period (Test Dan 5:10-3- God fights Satan/Beliar; 1QM VI,6 –victory of "sons of light" in battle; AssMos 10, judgment on Gentiles, cosmic signs; Sib 3.767kingdom established after a terrible war

- Non-apocalyptic sayings [Ps 145-timeless kingdom of God; Wisdom 6:4; 10:10 – all kings subject to God's will and judgment; PsSol 17- timeless rule
- The kingdom of God has an eternal quality implying a present dimension [Blessing formula; Jubilees 50:9- worship on Sabbath a confession of the kingdom; Qumran Sabbath liturgies; Pharisaic and rabbinic "yoke of the malkuth"
- And a future aspect [18 Benedictions- the 11th petition; Kaddish – see details of this summary in Theissen and Merz 1998, 246-52]

Different aspects of this have been seen as influencing Jesus' thinking and used to assist in modern interpretations- thus ethical interpretations of the Kingdom have often drawn on the rabbinic and Pharisaic analogies.

The Kingdom of Christian thought differs from previous Jewish thinking, inasmuch as it is connected to Jesus. Mbiti would see it further connected to the Incarnation:

> In Jewish thought there were two Ages: hzh Mlw(h (This Age) and Mlw(h)@% (The Age To Come). The former was evil, sorrowful, etc., but the latter would be the opposite, and with God's reign fully established. This is precisely the point at which the Christian differentia comes into the picture. Through the Incarnation, the Age to Come has intercepted This Age. Christian Eschatology becomes, therefore, fundamentally a Christological phenomenon. (Mbiti 1971, 32)

Also, Christian writings develop the idea that the Kingdom will "come". This may reflect another eschatological line of thinking: the idea that Jesus would come again. Thus Christian thinking involved a modification of Jewish Messianic expectation: the Messiah *had come* and *would return*. The coming of the Messiah would involve the institution of the Kingdom.

We need to be aware that the word used for "kingdom" (*basileia*) can be translated in two ways, and that there is a subtle difference between them:

- Kingly rule
- Kingdom

Kingdom implies a spatial dimension which may be lacking from kingly rule: a kingdom tends to be a place. Many have followed the lead of the great German exegete Gustaf Dalman who maintained that "kingly rule" was always meant, and not "kingdom". It is possible that reactions against theological

traditions which would give the Kingdom a precise political or geographical location may also have intruded at this point, given the troubles related to earthly kingdoms of God in the Holy Land. Whilst Dalman is right to say that "rule" is often meant, it is equally the case that many instances of that rule are over a designated realm (O'Neill 1993, 131). It is perfectly possible for God's rule to have a territorial element:

> "The Bible gives us a perfectly consistent pattern. God has absolute sway in heaven. He should have absolute sway also on earth" (O'Neill 1993, 131)

This geographical or territorial aspect is echoed in the OT imagery used of the kingdom which is frequently described as a town or a city.

And we also need to note a rabbinic convention that the Kingdom stands for a "coming kingdom" which is taken on by the believe, meaning,

> "acknowledging the effective sovereignty of God, an acknowledgment made by someone living in the world, but expecting the coming of the kingdom" (O'Neill 1993, 133).

With this background in mind, we can note a common schema in the NT:

> "(I) the Kingdom is like a delectable house or city or territory which people long to be able to enter when it comes; (II) people can talk about the kingdom; and (III) people can prepare to enter the Kingdom by taking its yoke upon themselves now."(O'Neill 1993, 134)

We will return to two factors mentioned in the above section later:

- The question of timing (and how to reconcile the future and present elements of the Kingdom)
- The cultic aspect of the Kingdom. This seems to me to have been neglected, and is of great significance for us as a Christian tradition (I speak here, hopefully, of the Anglican tradition) with a high regard for worship and cult.

For the moment we need to turn our attention to substance of the Kingdom: a description of what it is.

We find little direct information about the Kingdom itself: we certainly do not find a clear manifesto or description. Instead we find a number of similes and metaphors used to describe the Kingdom from which we can learn about it. A number of parables (*mashal* – riddles) give information about the kingdom, but should not be interpreted literally. We are not, for example, to look for a

seed to plant in the hopes that it will grow into the Kingdom. Nor are we to allegorise them into a completely new meaning as the Alexandrian exegetes did (remember their allegory which included a description of the two coins given by the Good Samaritan as Baptism and Eucharist). We can note that the following descriptions are made of the Kingdom:

- House, city, or land (O'Neill 1993, 134-5)
- A meal or celebration- includes wedding feasts, meals
- Seed

What they suggest about behaviour or timing is often more important than the actual details of description. We do better to look for recurring themes in the parables:

- A contrast of the new and the old (Mark 2). Disciples are to enjoy the Kingdom like the bridegroom feasting at his wedding. The two types of cloth demand new ways of life and behaviour.
- What is offered is significant (Matthew.13:44 ff) and should demand our energy and attention
- It is a challenge (Matthew 25; Matthew 24:42-50; Mark 13:33ff; Luke 12:35 ff, 19:12ff), and we are not to delay or procrastinate.
- It is a challenge to political authorities (?) , at least those who hold power, not to be complacent (Matthew 24:45f, 25:14f.; Mark 12:1f; Luke 12:41f.; 19:12f]). Complacency leads to death (Luke 12:16), and there is only one chance to take God's offer (Luke 14:15f.) All opportunities should be grasped (Luke 11:24; 13:6; 16:1)
- The signs of God's Kingdom may be insignificant now, but will later be glorious (Mark 4, esp. v.30ff). Seed imagery repeats this point, and it is also found in the parable of the leaven (Luke 13:20ff.)

Many of these parables are not so much about the nature of the Kingdom as the steps which the audience needs to take to enter the Kingdom. They imply that there are certain patterns of behaviour which people need to follow to enter the Kingdom. We can explore this further by considering how the Kingdom is a cipher for judgment and salvation, often linked to behaviour:

- Jesus makes it clear that only those who fulfill certain conditions will enter the Kingdom of heaven (Matthew 7:21; 19:23 ff)

- There are threats that people will not be admitted (Matthew. 8:1; Luke 13:28ff)
- Those who are invited exclude themselves from the feast (Luke 14:16-24/Matthew. 22:1-14)
- There are woes for those who do not repent in the face of Jesus' miracles (Luke 10:13-5; Matthew. 11:21-4) or his preaching (Matthew 12:41/Luke 11:31ff), or , by extension, the preaching of his disciples (Mark 6:7-13; Matthew 20:14/Luke 9:5; Luke 10:10ff)

These parables about judgment make clear that Jesus is the focus for a decision about salvation or damnation.

- God's kingship includes the role of judge (Matthew18:23ff; Matthew. 22:1ff) which may be exercised him or a representative: the Messiah or the disciples (Matthew 19:28)
- There is an element of reckoning, taken from the world of business (Luke 16:1ff.; Luke 19:15-24/Matthew 25:19-28)
- Harvest imagery may also include judgment (Matthew 13:30,41ff)
- Exclusion from an eschatological meal (Matthew 8:1ff; Luke 14:16-24; Matthew 25:1-13)
- Catastrophes may be metaphors for the last judgment: flood (17:26ff & //). Also Luke 13:1-5. Cloudburst ((Luke 6:47-9; Matthew 7:24-7)
- Note that statements about judgment often include an implicit criticism of conventional wisdom (e.g., about status at meals) or piety. They are thus key to setting up a new way of behaving in which, for example, concern about status (a major concern in the ancient world) is replaced by a motif of humility and service.

We can sum up the Kingdom teaching on Judgment as something like this:

> "Everyone in the audience hopes to be admitted to the kingdom when it comes, and not to be rejected. The parables must be offering insight or encouragement or warning about the nature of the steps the audience should take to be sure of entering the kingdom" (O'Neill 1993, 137)

Hand in glove with this judgment comes an understanding of salvation in which the Kingdom is open to all, and implicitly includes people who were

traditionally excluded. Thus both the Gentiles and outcast groups within Israel (social, physical or moral defects) are welcome. This new order of salvation picks up the departure from conventional norms mentioned above. Whilst it is tempting to think that the usual order is reversed (Matthew 5:19; 11:11; 18:4; Mark 10:37; Matthew 19:28), this would merely replace one stratified order with another. Luke 14:7ff suggests that all who are invited actually are given equal status, and share the status of the host. This may be difficult to see straightaway from the Synoptic traditions, but is manifested in Paul's reform of the Lord's Supper in Corinth. In those reforms, Paul urges the Corinthians to put aside the usual indicators of status at meals so that the entire congregation eats the same food at the same time.

(3) The Coming of the Kingdom

We have mentioned, but skirted round, a major question in the accounts given of the Kingdom in the Synoptic Gospels, namely, the timing of its coming. The gospels appear to lay before us two different scenarios:

- The Kingdom will come in the future (nearer or later)
- The Kingdom has already come

Schweitzer opened this up in the modern period with his *Konsequente Eschatologie* ("Thorough-going Eschatology"). This was the thesis that Jesus understood that his own death would bring about the coming of the Kingdom, and that it would come quickly. Schweitzer's radical re-interpretation of eschatology altered the shape of future study on the subject (Cf. Perrin 1963, 28-9). Yet his conclusions were not widely accepted. How could his Jesus, to whom he accords great spiritual acuity, be so right about his Messiahship and the details of the Kingdom, yet so wrong about its timing? There seems to be an inconsistency here.

The first reaction to Schweitzer's thesis came in Dobschütz's "Transmuted Eschatology". In this, the Kingdom is seen as present, inasmuch as it arrives in Jesus' lifetime. Thus, instead of a purely future Kingdom, Dobschütz suggested a Kingdom which had both future and present elements.

Other critics went even further. The "realised eschatology" popularised by Dodd put even more of a stress on the idea of the Kingdom as present. In this, Dodd viewed the terms e0ggi/zein and fqa/nein as implying that the Kingdom was already a reality. A major objection to Dodd's thesis comes in the interpretation of Mark 9:1, which he interpreted as meaning that the Kingdom had already come in the ministry of Jesus (Dodd 1980, 43, esp. fn.23). Campbell argued that such events had to refer to a future event, rather than a state of affairs which was already existent (1936, 93-4). Dodd later modified his position, basing his interpretation on the Resurrection, Pentecost and the new era which followed (Dodd 1951, 13, summary in Perrin 1963, 67). Manson brought decisive arguments against Dodd's later position: people in the early church did not identify themselves as living in the new era (Manson 1935, 281). Criticism of those who believed that they lived in the Last Age, that the Kingdom had come in all its glory, could be sharp. As O'Neill acutely observes, a trenchant example of this is found in 1 Cor 4:8:

> There are deluded people who think that the Kingdom has come already, who believe that they are full and rich and reigning; Paul wishes they were right, for then he would be reigning too, and his troubles would be over (1 Cor 4:8; cf. 2 Tim 2:18). These people held exactly the same view of the Kingdom as did everyone else at the time; they differed only in their perception of the state of the world.(O'Neill 1993, 135)

In John, the ambiguity of timing is found, using revelatory language, in the Farewell Discourses: Jesus has revealed much, but not all. Those "who struggle to rise from the things of this world" will discover more when the Spirit of truth comes to lead them to complete truth (John 16:13.Cf. Brodie 1997, 498-500).

The debate about the "timing" of the Kingdom highlights two different patterns: texts which suggest a future coming, and those which suggest that it is present, or has already arrived. Different writers or texts may highlight one or the other (Fitzmyer 1985, 231-5). A single writer may include pericopes of both kinds. Both patterns, for example, can be seen in John 6 where vv.27, 37 demand a realised eschatology, v.39 a "future", and v.40 combines both aspects (Brown 1988, 259; 276).

A developed understanding of the Kingdom needs, it seems, to incorporate both elements. Less controversial, but omnipresent, is the "past" element for

both Judaism and Christianity involve a definitive orientation to the past, focussing on their respective "founding fathers" (Russell 2004, 93).

I would like to finish this series of lectures by suggesting another way of looking at the problem which might resolve the tension between toe future and present descriptions of the Kingdom. This is very much untried work in progress, so please feel free to regard it as so much hokum if you wish- after hearing it. I hope you will take it as a mark of my respect for you as Christians and theologians that I try it out on you. I will be interested to hear whether you think this idea holds water.

Let us return to that original distinction between rule and Kingdom, and start first by suggesting that it is helpful to use Kingdom with its idea of space or place.

Let us then consider how we think about time: for we are part of the problem. We think of time as progress (things are getting better) and linear, like a line. So we have the problem that the Kingdom appears to appear at two different points on a line (according to the Gospel accounts), and our common sense tells us it can only start once. Our view looks something like this:

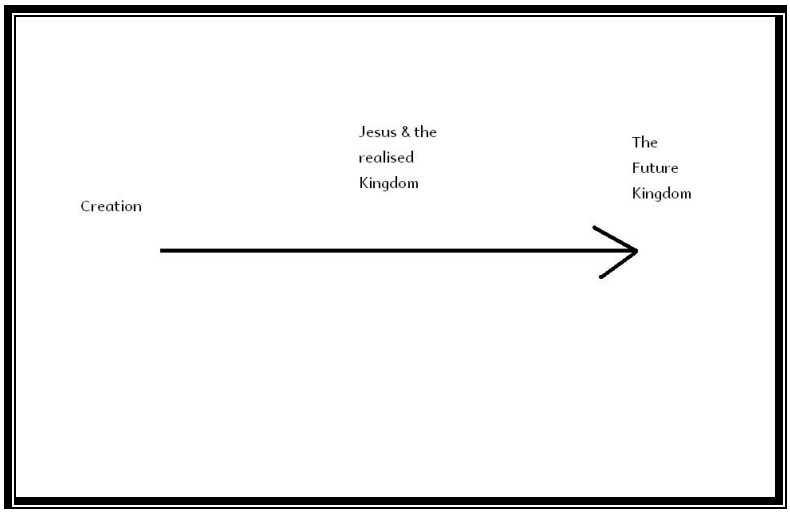

Fig. 1. A Linear View of Time

However, we must remember that there are other ways of viewing time. In fact our linear, progressive view is very much a product of our modern, post-Enlightenment society. It is not even held universally today:

> Consider time. Many languages use spatial terms to describe it. In English, we say things like "The best is *ahead* of us" or "We're *behind* schedule" or "let's move the meeting *forward*". To English speakers, in other words, time is horizontal and the future lies ahead. In Mandarin, however, time is vertical, springing up from the ground like oil from a well, and this is reflected in the phrases that Mandarin speakers use to talk about it….
>
> …people think of time in fundamentally different ways depending on their native tongue. (Motluk 2002, 37-8)

The timing of the Kingdom of God is problematic when looked at from our understanding of time. The Kingdom is seen as the culmination of a process, of salvation history, the series of events in which God engages with his creation and redeems it. Such a view may be perpetrated in the variety of time lines which adorn Bibles and textbooks, drawing a line from creation, through the OT, NT and history of the church to some distant, usually unspecified, point in the future. The Resurrection is a key point in this chain of events, and is seen as inaugurating the Kingdom of God, or the promises of redemption.

Here lies a major problem. For the linear view drives a wedge between the Resurrection and the full manifestation of the Kingdom. The Resurrection of Christ on that first Easter morning two thousand years ago is obviously separated by a long gap from the coming of the Kingdom which Jesus told his followers to expect. Furthermore, the Resurrection becomes divorced from the Kingdom as a locus of meaning and "truth". It may be an important point in the process of salvation history, but it does not reveal the ultimate goal which God has prepared for His people. The facts of the resurrection can be displaced by all kinds of speculation (Grenz 1992). Somehow, Resurrection and Kingdom must be held together.

People in the ancient world might have viewed time in a linear fashion (indeed this might even be suggested by a salvation history which culminates in the new creation), but they also thought of time as a history of decline (Hesiod, *Works & Days* 110-55; Daniel 2:31-45): the "it's all downhill from here" school of thought. Others thought of time as cyclic (creation, existence, fiery destruction beginning a new creation). This was found in the Graeco-Roman philosophy called Stoicism, and can also be seen in Ecclesiastes 1:4-11, 3:1-8,15. Most important in Scripture is a way of looking at time which is found particularly in the Johannine writings:

Here, Time is almost suppressed for the sake of eternity which lends new dimensions to the characteristic themes of Life, Light, Knowledge, Belief, Judgment and the like. It is almost ridiculous to discuss Time in the Fourth Gospel, and in any case it cannot be done in terms of a linear concept. (Mbiti 1971, 39)

In this mythic view of time, there is a lack of movement, no progress, no decline, no cycle, but rather the description of eternal realities which appear repeatedly in different eras and places. Margaret Barker gives a fine description of it:

The mythical world envisages another manner of being, a dimension in which there is neither spatial limitation nor time in our sense, but one which shares with this world the invisible forces of love, hate, obedience, rebellion and so forth. This world is often called Eternity, which does not mean an unbelievably long span of time but rather an existence without time, something which, because it lies outside our experience of time actually underlies in its entirety every perception that we have of time. It could perhaps be called a belief in certain basic principles on which the world was based, principles which could be used to interpret the experiences of life and to predict what was likely to happen. (Barker 1991, 59)

This view of ages can be described using a Greek word: "Aeonic".

This is a very different way of looking at the world and time from that with which we are familiar. However, it does resolve the problem of the "timing' of the Kingdom. For from this perspective we can view the Present Age and the Kingdom as realms which come to overlap because of the fact of Jesus, his life, death and Resurrection. From the moment he is incarnate in the womb of Mary, the realm of the Kingdom intrudes into the present age, so that his miracles and teaching, his death and resurrection manifest that reality, the truth of God's sovereign power in the world. I will try and illustrate this in a second diagram:

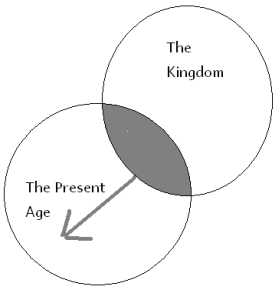

Fig. 2. An "Aeonic" View of Time

In this diagram, the two aeons, the Present Age (Mbiti's "This Age") and the Kingdom (Mbiti's "The Age to Come") overlap, but they are not full integrated. That is yet to come, and is indicated by the arrow: think of an eclipse in which the two spheres will remain one over the other. Eventually, the Kingdom sphere will envelop and transform the Present sphere. If that seems rather fanciful, I would suggest that it has a Scriptural precedent, though it may be no less fanciful, in the final chapters of Revelation which describe the transformation and incorporation of the world by the advent of the Heavenly Jerusalem. I personally find this a useful way of explaining how the Kingdom is, and yet is not, and it involves me in moving out of my own way of looking at the world, rather than doing violence to individual passages of Scripture, questioning their authenticity, or ignoring them altogether. It allows integration of all those events which the time lines will rip apart.

However, this is also an important insight for understanding the Church. For now that we can balance the present and future aspects of the Kingdom, we see that the church manifests the signs of the Kingdom, and indeed, is the Kingdom community.

This much is true in Acts where the apostles are depicted carrying on those same works as Jesus did which are the signs of the Kingdom. We need to be careful this does not make the Church arrogant.

Of course, it is made up of human beings, but here the parables of the Kingdom also provide a brake and check. For they should remind us that even within the Kingdom we cannot assume that we are saved and that that cannot be taken away: we must remember the wedding guest who, inappropriately clothed, that is, not behaving in accordance with the precepts of God, is removed from the banquet. His, or her, fate is potentially ours if we do not live according to the ethical principles placed upon us by our claims to follow Christ.

But if that is the downside, there is also an upside, and here we need to remind ourselves that the Kingdom always had a cultic expression in Judaism. That cultic expression remains. Where NT scholarship has marginalised it – that has been more to do with the ideological concerns of theologians and exegetes than the manifesto of Jesus, the apostles, and the evangelists.

These were people who were steeped in a sense of cult and ritual- and we should remember that they continued to exercise their faith in a cultic sense by their continued presence at the liturgies of the Temple- they never abandoned it. Jesus did not give up the values of the cult and Temple but he did realign and refocus them. The most sustained reflection on this theme is the letter to the Hebrews. Elements of the Christian church (and in many of them Hebrews is not a favourite text) have rejected this cultic dimension- but that is more to do with babies going out with bathwater in the giddy controversies of the Reformation. Unfortunately, the baby has often vanished from sight subsequently.

We need to reclaim the ritual dimension of the Kingdom, and realise that this is nothing less than our eucharistic worship. Our eucharist, which we so often trivialise, dumb down and take for granted, is nothing less than our sharing in the Messianic banquet, that glorious meal celebrated by God's people when they meet with him.

The evangelists were under no illusion about this: their accounts of miraculous feedings (of the 4000 and 5000) are stuffed full of Temple, Messianic and eucharistic imagery and language. When those people fed, the evangelists tell us, there was no confusion: they were eating the Heavenly Banquet with the Messiah. So too when we share the eucharist, we celebrate that glorious meal- here and now- that heavenly meal which includes all people of different eras and places who have been faithful in their response to God, and join in the worship of heaven.

When we talk about the Kingdom we do not talk about something that is invisible or far away. We should be talking about the Church which is where the heavenly realm is represented on earth: it prefigures the heavenly realm. St Paul concurs with this view when he addresses the faithful as "saints" and we should concur with it a those who are made a new creation, born again, in baptism. We are called to be the Church: heaven on earth. There is a fine description of what this entails in John Zizioulas' *Being as Communion*:

> The Church is not simply and institution. She is a "mode of being"….

This way of being is not a moral attainment, something that man *accomplishes*. It is a way of *relationship* with the world, with other people and with God, an event of *communion*, and that is why it cannot be realized as the achievement of an *individual* but only as an *ecclesial* fact.

However, for the Church to present this way of existence, she must herself be an image of the way in which God exists. Her entire structure, her ministries etc. must express this way of existence. And that means, above all else, that the Church must have a right faith, a correct vision with respect to the being of God. Orthodoxy concerning the being of God is not a luxury for the Church or for man: it is an existential necessity. (p.15)

I close with one final request, thanking you for your patience. If you take nothing else away with you from these three hours: remember that that funny service we celebrate so frequently, the eucharist, is nothing less than the glorious meal of heaven, the ritual sign of the enduring presence of God's Kingdom on earth. Signed, sealed, delivered- it's ours.

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For the Newcastle School of Theology for Ministry
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