



Born to Win

Thy Kingdom Come

by Ronald L. Dart

I've never been a student of Judaism, and probably have paid too little attention to their belief system. It's not that I consider Jewish beliefs to be the *norm* for Christians though; I don't. But the original gospel accounts were written in such a way as to be understandable to *Jews and practitioners of Judaism*. When I did my long series of broadcasts on *Christian Origins*, I often made the point that, in reading the New Testament, we are reading someone else's mail, and we need to keep that in mind or we're liable to go astray. Because we are reading somebody else's mail, we often make mistakes in understanding what we are reading. So, I read about Judaism, not to read an *authority* on what Christians should do or how they should understand the Bible. The Bible is the sole authority. But if the Bible is our sole authority, it's all the more important that we should be careful in interpreting what we are reading.

Years ago, when I was teaching public speaking, I came to realize how important it is that a man know his audience and that he speak to the audience in front of him—not to the audience that isn't there. If you've gone to church very much in your lifetime, I feel reasonably sure you've heard preachers preach sermons for the people who *aren't there*. Well, good speakers don't do that. They know who is in front of them, and they talk to them. Most Bible-based programs, TV or radio, are delivered in front of an audience of Christian people—usually a church. And that powerfully influences the man who is doing the program—or the woman, as increasingly we are seeing these days. They're talking to church members, they're talking to believers, and it influences the *whole approach* that they take to what they're saying.

Now, my radio program is done in a studio with an audience of one [producer and engineer, Gary], and I rarely think of him as I do the program. I'm thinking of a truck driver headed north out of New Orleans on his way to Chicago, or a housewife listening to the radio while she does her ironing, or a family on their way to church on Sunday morning.

Now, when the men who wrote the New Testament sat down to write, *their* audience was *very* familiar with two strong influences on their society. Those two influences were the Old Testament (which was the only Bible in existence at the time) and Judaism (the culture in which they learned the Bible—even if they were Gentiles). Now, when you read the New Testament, it's important to know this: The Gentiles you encounter in its pages were *already believers* in the God of Israel. They were even in synagogue attendance, because that was the *only* place they could hear the scriptures read. So, if they believed in God, and they wanted to know more about God, and they wanted to know what the scriptures said...got to go to the synagogue. It's not like today where you can buy a used Bible for pennies in a bookstore somewhere.

So, even Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, was writing his letters to people *well aware* of the scriptures, *fully aware* of Judaism. If memory serves, the letter to the Romans contains some 46 direct quotations from the Old Testament, and still more indirect allusions to the Old Testament. So a modern Christian reader who has neglected the Old Testament is at a severe disadvantage in reading the New Testament. And, sometimes I wonder if that's really occurred to many people.

Oskar Skarsaune said that the church did not begin to encounter “raw Gentiles”, as he called them, until about AD 120, when the Bible was well and truly finished and all the apostles were dead and gone. Only then did they begin to encounter Gentiles who knew *nothing* about the Bible. Thus, the New Testament was written to be read by people *strongly aware of the Judaism of the time*. One notable exception to this is the Gospel According to John, which was written for people with less knowledge of Judaism. It’s funny; you may not realize it as you read it, but when you think about it you will. There are *many* explanatory remarks in John about the Jews. Such as: “he went to seek out the Feast of Tabernacles, a Jewish festival.” [John 7:2] or the “Jew’s feast called the Passover” [John 2:13, 6:4, 11:55].

Now, it’s for this reason alone that I think a study of Judaism is useful. That is, to study the people to whom the gospels and the epistles were written and what kind of language they used, how they would respond to it, what their cultural structure was—so you will know how Paul, John, Peter, Matthew—all these writers of the New Testament—were trying to explain Christ to that crowd.

Not a few Christian folk, when they come to understand this, seek out Messianic Christian groups to worship with. That’s okay, but it’s not necessary. What you get there is a Jewish *culture*, not a religious authority. And the faith of Jesus Christ is intended to be comfortable in *any* cultural setting—not just a Jewish setting, not just a Hebrew setting. And Hebrew is, after all, not a sacred language.

Another problem with it is that what you see today as “Jewish” is not quite the same thing as the Judaism of the time when Jesus walked the earth. Which is why Jacob Neusner wrote his book entitled *Judaism When Christianity Began*. In other words, at a particular time and place in space, this Judaism was what he was discussing. In doing research for a new book I’m writing, I came across something in one of his books that was new to me and likely new to you as well (unless, of course, you’re an observant Jew). I was browsing the book titled *Judaism When Christianity Began* by Jacob Neusner, and in the chapter that dealt with the coming of the Messiah (which naturally caught my eye) I found that the Jews believed something I didn’t know they believe.

Before I discuss it, I should note that Neusner is writing about *Rabbinic* Judaism with the full awareness that there are other sects of Judaism. It’s almost as risky to say that “Jews believe” something as it is to say “Christians believe” a given dogma, because there’s just too much variation. Now, that caution considered, here’s one sentence that stopped me in my tracks. It is the first sentence in a section titled *The Messiah*. Neusner wrote this, and I quote:

When Israel really wants the Messiah to come, he will come.

Jacob Neusner - Judaism When Christianity Began: A Survey of Belief and Practice

It’s a *stunning* idea. Here we are, as Christians, looking for the second coming of the Messiah, and the Jews are waiting for the *first* coming of the Messiah, and the suggestion is offered that it hasn’t happened because we *really don’t want it badly enough*. And, you know, there’s a part of me that tends to agree with that. Remember what Jesus told his disciples on that occasion when they said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray.” “Okay”, he said, “here’s how to pray”:

Matthew 6

NKJV

⁹ [...] Our Father in heaven,
Hallowed be Your name.

¹⁰ Your kingdom come.
Your will be done
On earth as *it is* in heaven.

It is the first request in the Lord's Prayer: "Thy kingdom come." But, you know, if you adopt *one* aspect of a Christian point of view, that prayer seems *pointless*. Let me explain what I mean. I don't believe for a moment that there is anything we can do to bring about the kingdom of God on earth. I was surprised to learn—neither do the Jews. And here's what Jesus said about the time. He said in Matthew 24, verse 35:

Matthew 24

NKJV

³⁵ Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away.

³⁶ But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only.

Now, I think it's a common assumption that God has something like a big red "X" on his heavenly calendar on a date that he intends for Christ to return—somewhere out in our future. We don't know when it is. Christ, when he was on the earth, didn't know when it was. The angels didn't know when it was. But, you know, the scripture does not require that view of this. Paul hinted that even if there *is* a date or a time that God has assigned, it will likely be cut short. He wrote to the Romans, chapter 9, verse 28:

Romans 9

KJ2000

²⁸ For he will finish the work, and cut it short in righteousness: because a short work will the Lord make upon the earth.

Well, after all, God is sovereign. He can do whatever he wants. If he does have a calendar with a big red "X" on some date in the future and he decides, "I don't think so. I think I'll do it now", well, he's surely free to adapt to any set of circumstances he sees upon the earth and to do whatever it is he wants to do. And then there is this reply that Jesus made to his disciples when they came to him and asked him:

Acts 1

NKJV

⁶ [...] Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?

This was after his death, after his resurrection, and during that time when he was teaching them between his resurrection and his final ascension into heaven. They had a natural question: "Are we going to do it now? We know you're going to establish the kingdom. Is it now?" And he said to them:

Acts 1

NKJV

⁷ [...] It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority.

Ah! So, one of the reasons why nobody knows it is because it's within God's authority—and he may change it. So the Jews may have a point.

Indeed, I think perhaps the Jews do have a point on this issue. I know I can legitimately ask Christians: When you pray "Thy kingdom come", do you mean it? Do you really mean it? Or, do you mean "Thy kingdom come, Lord... but not right now—not right this minute"?

Now, I got another surprise continuing to read Neusner's discussion of this issue. He said:

When Israel really wants the Messiah to come, he will come. Then he will raise the dead, restore Israel to the land of Israel, and prepare the way for judgment and recovery of Eden. [...] What Israel must want is only what God wants. What Israel must do is give up any notion of accomplishing on its own, by its own act of will, the work of redemption.

Jacob Neusner - Judaism When Christianity Began: A Survey of Belief and Practice

I did not expect that last statement. I know Christian people who will insist that Judaism depends on salvation by works—redemption by works—while Christians depend on salvation by grace. Our problem is that we have accepted the definition of Judaism foisted on us by Christian preachers which may not be—strictly speaking—true.

As I said, I don't believe for a moment that there's anything we can do (or even *not* do) to bring about the kingdom of heaven. That said, the *moment* of Christ's return may rest on any number of variables, and I have to pause when I read the Lord's Prayer and I see the words "Thy kingdom come". For if I am to pray it with any meaning, I have to *want it*. I have to want an end to war. I have to want an end to suffering. And I have to want it *bad enough* to give up a lot. One thing I learned years ago, the people who pray most fervently "Thy kingdom come" are those who have lost hope in this world. It's one thing to deplore the sufferings caused by the endless wars in the Middle East while we carry on *our* lives in reasonable safety and comfort, while we enjoy the freedoms that people in other nations can only dream of, while we pursue success—whatever that may mean. As long as we are enjoying this life, we may not *want* Christ's kingdom to come. So, if it were true that all of God's people really have to *want* Christ to come...well, we obviously aren't there yet. The Apostle John wrote in one of his letters—it's in 1 John 2:

1 John 2

NKJV

¹⁵ Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

Now, Jesus said that no man can serve two masters. Here we have a strong either/or. You can't have two loves. If you're in love with the world, you won't have the love for the Father that *must be there*.

1 John 2

NKJV

¹⁵ Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

¹⁶ For all that *is* in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world.

¹⁷ And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.

You know, we sit here in this life, beating our brains out for some physical goal, and yet we *know* it's all going to be wiped away and shaken off like sweat from the brow. But we love the chase; we love the faster car—the sleek impressive ride—and we forget that a car is just a means to get to work. And the sad thing is, we have often forgotten what it is that we're *working for*—making it even stranger. Still, we'll go to church and recite the Lord's Prayer: "Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come."

Now, oddly enough (this is a strange thing when you think about it), one of the things that has to happen for God's kingdom to come is that we have to *fail*. You read it in Isaiah, chapter 33, verse 7:

Isaiah 33

AKJV

- ⁷ Behold, their valiant ones shall cry without: the ambassadors of peace shall weep bitterly.
- ⁸ The highways lie waste, the wayfaring man ceases: he has broken the covenant, he has despised the cities, he regards no man.
- ⁹ The earth mourns and languishes: Lebanon is ashamed and hewn down: Sharon is like a wilderness; and Bashan and Carmel shake off their fruits.
- ¹⁰ Now will I rise, said the LORD; now will I be exalted; now will I lift up myself.

You know, it's really something. We think that if we just do enough diplomacy—if we just send enough ambassadors; if we'll just sit down at the table and talk to people—that we can solve these problems and we can put an end to war. We can't. We won't. The truth is, for God's kingdom to come we *have to fail* as the human race. We also have to learn *personally* what failure is like. And, if we don't, we will never cease to trust ourselves. If we believe that we can get it done—if we believe that with just a little more effort we can push it over the top; if we believe that we've got it in our hands to get the job done—we'll trust ourselves and never come to trust God. Now, I've known this for a long time, and that's why it is that one line from Jacob Neusner's book struck me the way that it did. He said:

What Israel must do is give up any notion of accomplishing on its own, by its own act of will, the work of redemption.

Jacob Neusner - Judaism When Christianity Began: A Survey of Belief and Practice

When it comes to salvation, redemption, there is nothing we can do. And no man will ever come to that realization as long as he has never known *failure*. Our old friend, the Apostle Paul, did in his lifetime come *pungently* to know what failure was like, because his whole life had been bound up in Judaism and the pursuit of Judaism, And he wrote to the Galatians that he had exceeded in Judaism *far* more than many of his compatriots had done [**Galatians 1**]. But finally, in writing to the Philippians, in chapter 3, he says this:

Philippians 3

NKJV

- ⁷ But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ.
- ⁸ Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ[.]

You see what I'm driving at here? Before you will ever really be able to pray from the heart "Thy kingdom come", before you will ever come to where you *want* that kingdom so bad, you must first suffer the loss of all things. You have to fail.

Philippians 3

NKJV

- ⁸ [...I] count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ
- ⁹ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which *is* from the law, but that which *is* through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith;
- ¹⁰ that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death,
- ¹¹ if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Now, mind you, one of the things that Paul had lost was his confidence in Judaism. And wherever it is you and I have *ours* placed, we've got to lose that, too.

Jesus, on one occasion...he was talking to his disciples. There were no crowds there; it was just the men who were following him. He said this:

Matthew 16

NKJV

²⁴ [...] If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.

It's an interesting expression. The "take up his cross" comes a little strangely at this point in Jesus' ministry, but basically what he's looking forward to is the responsibility of the people to carry his burden. For us, who knows what it is for you and me as individuals? But there are responsibilities, there are burdens, that are going to be laid on us. And our task is to not respond to them selfishly. It is to lay aside ourselves, pick up the burden, and follow Christ. And then he made this famous statement:

Matthew 16

NKJV

²⁵ For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.

²⁶ For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?

²⁷ For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works.

It seems to me that people forget one fundamental thing about the return of Christ. It is a *rescue operation*. Mankind will be standing on the brink of annihilation. Talk about facing failure. Not only will we each have to face our own failures and overcome them, but the world is going to have to come right up against *complete, abject failure*. *Everything* will have failed. All the peace treaties, all the economic cooperation—the marvelous progress of civilization—all of it come crashing down in complete and utter ruin. One reason, perhaps, so we'll understand the important thing: Man. Man is the son of God and not all the *things* that we men can pull together.

Maybe one reason we don't really mean it when we pray "thy kingdom come" is that we know the road to the kingdom passes through the valley of the shadow of death [**Psalm 23:4**].

Years ago I was stricken with a debilitating heart problem. It wasn't life-threatening. I didn't know it at the time that it wasn't life-threatening. In fact, the doctors I saw didn't really quite know where it would go. All I knew was that I didn't have the *strength* to do a lot of the things I wanted to do. That's how it is when your heart's not working right. If you're weak, you don't have any energy; you don't have any drive. To me at the time, my future looked *bleak*. Since then, medical advances have brought the problem under control, but I can vividly remember one thing about that time of my life: I learned to pray "thy kingdom come" with a new sincerity. Why do you suppose that was? Well, it was because I was losing hope in this world. The valley of the shadow of death has a way of focusing the mind on what is really important. But what happens in the heart of one man is not the whole story. The same loss of confidence in this world has to happen on a much bigger scale. Because as long as men think they can hack it on their own, they will keep on trying. The Book of Revelation opens a window on what happens to the world between now and the kingdom of God. And I'll have to confess, I am not at all anxious to see this moment of time. In the Book of Revelation, we have this occasion where books are being opened—when a major scroll is brought before God and begins to be opened with one seal after another being broken. And in chapter 6 of Revelation, verse 12, we read:

Revelation 6

AKJV

¹² And I beheld when he had opened the sixth seal, and, see, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood;
¹³ And the stars of heaven fell to the earth, even as a fig tree casts her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty wind.

This is a *terrible* time—a time when there’s a great meteor shower, and so much dirt and dust are thrown into the air that it darkens the sun and darkens the moon.

Revelation 6

AKJV

¹⁴ And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places.

Talk about earthquakes and tsunamis—they are *huge*.

Revelation 6

AKJV

¹⁵ And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every slave, and every free man, hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains;
¹⁶ And said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb:
¹⁷ For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?

I feel certain that all of those who look for the kingdom of God will, on the day when all this happens, all be of one mind. We’ll be of one mind with faithful Christians—and even Jews—in that we will really, *really* want the Messiah to come. And, finally, our prayer will rise from a thousand lips: “Thy kingdom come.”

Until next time.

Transcript of a *Born to Win*
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