

Historical Jesus 5: Kingdom Saturated Ministry

To begin, I want to look at three prophecies about the Kingdom of God from the Hebrew Bible:

Daniel 7:13-14, 27

13 "I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. 14 And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed... 27 And the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High; his kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey him.'

Isaiah 35:1-10

1 ...the desert shall rejoice...2 it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing...They shall see the glory of the LORD...4...Behold, your God will come with vengeance...He will come and save you. 5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; 6 then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert... 10 And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Isaiah 61:1-11

1 The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; 2 to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; 3 to grant to those who mourn in Zion-- to give them ...the oil of gladness instead of mourning...4 They shall build up the ancient ruins; they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. 5 ...foreigners shall be your plowmen and vinedressers; 6 but you shall be called the priests of the LORD...you shall eat the wealth of the nations, and in their glory you shall boast. 7 ...in their land they shall possess a double portion; they shall have everlasting joy... 11 For as the earth brings forth its sprouts, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to sprout up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to sprout up before all the nations.

Here is a summary of Kingdom elements:

- God gives Kingdom to the Son of Man
- God's Kingdom encompasses all nations and lasts forever
- God's people receive the Kingdom
- God will heal the land (deserts blossom)
- God will bring vengeance and salvation
- God will heal the people of all ailments
- God's people will sing and rejoice with no more sorrow
- God will comfort, enrich, and bless His people
- God's people will possess the land with everlasting joy

The Kingdom is the age when God sets everything wrong with the world right, when He heals our world, when He judges the wicked and rewards the righteous, and when He restores the world back to the way it was in the

beginning. Sadly, many are confused about God's plans for His people, thinking instead that God wants to bring us to heaven. This gets the whole idea upside down. God doesn't want to bring us up to heaven; rather, He wants to bring heaven down to us. He created our world to be inhabited (Isaiah 45:18). He's not abandoning it or evacuating it; instead, He's going to rescue it and restore it. It is important to get our understanding about this straight because we cannot understand Jesus without understanding the Kingdom of God.

Let's take a look at Jesus' inaugural sermon in Nazareth, his home town.

Luke 4:13-21

13 And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time. 14 And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and a report about him went out through all the surrounding country. 15 And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all. 16 And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. 17 And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, 18 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." 20 And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. 21 And he began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Jesus claimed he was fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy about the Kingdom. This was his mission statement. He was claiming to be God's agent to heal the world. From this day forward, his preaching focused on proclaiming God's coming Kingdom from village to village.

Matthew 4:11-17

11 Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him. 12 Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee. 13 And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali... 17 From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."...23 And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.

The phrase "kingdom of heaven" means when heaven's Kingdom comes to earth. It is identical to the Kingdom of God.¹ Not only did Jesus travel about preaching the Kingdom, he also sent his twelve apostles out to preach Kingdom ("proclaim as you go, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand'" Matthew 10:7). Later on, he sent out seventy to preach the same message ("the kingdom of God has come near to you" Luke 10:9). In his teaching about the end-times, he said the end won't come until "this gospel of the kingdom" is proclaimed through the whole world as testimony (Matthew 24:14). Even after his resurrection, Jesus continued with his disciples for 40 days, "speaking about the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3).

In addition to his gospel preaching, Jesus constantly talked about the Kingdom when teaching how to live. In the Sermon on the Mount, an explanation of how to live now, he couldn't help but mention the Kingdom eight

¹ Matthew is the only one who uses the phrase "kingdom of heaven" in the Bible. Everywhere else, it is "kingdom of God." We can see that Matthew thinks of "kingdom of heaven" and "kingdom of God" interchangeably by comparing Matthew 19:23 with 19:24. In v23, he uses "kingdom of heaven" and in v24, "kingdom of God."

times. He summarized with the statement, “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (Matthew 6:33). Likewise, Jesus used parables to teach about the Kingdom. He would say that the Kingdom was like a mustard seed, or it was like leaven, or it was like a treasure hidden in a field, etc.

However, Jesus’ Kingdom ministry didn’t stop there. He enacted the Kingdom through his healing ministry. We can see this clearly in Luke 7. After he heals the widow of Nain’s son, John sends disciples to ask Jesus if he is the expected one. When they arrive, Jesus is in the act of healing many from diseases, plagues, evil spirits, and blindness. Jesus replied: “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me” (Luke 7:22-23). This statement includes quotations from both Isaiah 35 and Isaiah 61. John wants to know whether or not Jesus is the Messiah—the one to usher in the Kingdom age. Jesus responds by pointing to his Kingdom miracles. If someone wants to know what the Kingdom will be like, all he or she needs to do is look at Jesus in action. Jesus’ ministry gave people a taste of the coming Kingdom.

Jesus also understood his exorcisms in light of the Kingdom. He said, “But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Matthew 12:28). It was as if the future age was breaking into the present through Jesus’ ministry. When the Kingdom arrives, will people suffer from demonic possession? Of course not! So, Jesus shows what it will be like.

Lastly, Jesus preferred a particular title, “Son of Man,” for himself above all of the others. This term can simply mean a “human being” or it may refer to the one Daniel saw in his vision—the one destined to receive the Kingdom from the Ancient of Days (Daniel 7:13-14). “Son of Man” is perfectly ambiguous; it forces people to make their own decision about Jesus. Even so, its distinctive Kingdom flavor was behind why Jesus preferred it so much. He is a son of man to be sure, but he’s also the Son of Man—the one will rule over all peoples, nations, and languages whose Kingdom will last forever, not pass away, nor ever be destroyed.

Next, we’ll look at Jesus the rabbi.

Historical Jesus 6: Rabbi Jesus

The World of Torah

The people of Jesus' time cared a great deal about the Bible.² That is not say that they could all read, but it does mean that the Bible dominated their oral culture. Living at that time, God's people adhered to the Torah. This term can either refer to the instruction³ God gave Moses on how He wants His people to live in the land or the first five books of the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). Far from thinking of God's law as an impossible ideal they could never live up to, the Israelites regarded it as a superior way of life that God had graciously given His people. Here is how one psalm speaks of Torah:

Psalm 119:10-16

11 I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you...16 I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word...47 for I find my delight in your commandments, which I love. 48 I will lift up my hands toward your commandments, which I love, and I will meditate on your statutes...72 The law of your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces...93 I will never forget your precepts, for by them you have given me life. 94 I am yours; save me, for I have sought your precepts...97 Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day...103 How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!...136 My eyes shed streams of tears, because people do not keep your law...162 I rejoice at your word like one who finds great spoil. 163 I hate and abhor falsehood, but I love your law. 164 Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous rules...167 My soul keeps your testimonies; I love them exceedingly.

Rabbis

When we read about Jesus in the Gospels, he often explains his take on a Scripture and discusses other interpretations with his peers. This was a long established tradition for rabbis. Here are two examples.

Example #1: Summarize the Law

- "On another occasion it happened that a certain heathen came before Shammai and said to him, 'Make me a proselyte, on condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot.' Thereupon he repulsed him with the builder's cubit which was in his hand. When he went before Hillel, he said to him, 'What is hateful to you, do not to your neighbour: that is the whole Torah, while the rest is the commentary thereof; go and learn it.'"⁴
- Compare this to Jesus' way of saying it: "So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 7:12).

Example #2: Reason for Divorce

- "Beth Shammai say: a man should not divorce his wife unless he has found her guilty of some unseemly conduct, as it says, because he hath found some unseemly thing in her. Beth Hillel, however, say [that he may divorce her] even if she has merely spoilt his food, since it says, because he hath found some unseemly thing in her. R. Akiba says, [he may divorce her] even if he finds another woman more beautiful than she is, as it says, it cometh to pass, if she find no favor in his eyes."⁵
- Compare this to Jesus' understanding: "And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery" (Matthew 19:9).

² Their Bible is what we call the Old Testament today.

³ Torah is often translated "law," but this is probably too limiting. The Torah in fact was not merely a set of laws to follow but a whole way living and relating to God.

⁴ Babylonian Talmud: Tractate Shabbath, Folio 31a

⁵ Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Gittin, Folio 90a

People generally recognized Jesus as a rabbi.

John 1:37-38

37 The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. 38 Jesus turned and saw them following and said to them, "What are you seeking?" And they said to him, "Rabbi" (which means Teacher), "where are you staying?"

In addition to these two, Nicodemus (John 3:2), a blind man (Mark 10:51), the crowd (John 6:25), and, of course, his own disciples (Mark 9:5) called him rabbi.

Rabbi Jesus' Teachings

Jesus was simple, yet profound. In his hometown, they asked, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? Is not this the carpenter's son?" (Matthew 13:54-55). In Jerusalem, they marveled, saying, "How is it that this man has learning, when he has never studied?" (John 7:15-16). He spoke to common folks and educated thinkers alike.

Living in light of the Kingdom was very important to Jesus as we discussed last time (Matthew 6:31-33).

What he said was often paradoxical. For example, he said, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:10), "But many who are first will be last, and the last first" (Mark 10:31), and "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 10:39).

At times, his teachings were counter-cultural. Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, he went against standard interpretations of the Law. He said, "Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.' But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all" (Matthew 5:33-35). He also said, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:43-44).

Oddly, this rabbi spent a good deal of time with sinners and social outcasts (Luke 5:30-35). When asked why he ate and drank with tax collectors and sinners, Jesus replied, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick" (Lk 5:31).

He often illustrated his sermons, using elements from his environment. One time his disciples argued about who was the greatest (Mark 9:33-37). Jesus took a child and put him in the midst of them to teach them about humility. Once, he cursed a fig tree, causing it to wither to teach them about faith.

Additionally, he liked to tell parables for a variety of reasons. Parables are short, memorable, fictional stories illustrating a behavior or truth. When he told them to the crowds, he used them to hide the truth from those who did not have ears to hear (Mark 4:9-12).⁶ When he told them to his disciples, he used them to explain something.⁷ When he told them to his enemies, he used them to convict and reprove them.⁸

In his teaching ministry, Jesus did not shut himself behind closed doors or limit his communication to the most capable of his disciples. People were always coming to him; among them were the rich, poor, sick, outcasts, other teachers, and even foreigners. They were drawn to him. One time, parents brought their children to him to bless them, and his disciples rebuked them (Mark 10:13-16). Jesus became indignant and said, "Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:14). Then he took them in his arms and blessed them.

⁶ e.g. the sower and the seed

⁷ e.g. the wise man and the foolish man building houses

⁸ e.g. the good Samaritan, the prodigal son

Naturally, Rabbi Jesus also taught his students how to pray. He warned them not to pray like hypocrites who love to stand in synagogues and on street corners to be seen by others. He instructed them to pray in an inner room to their Father in secret. Furthermore, they should not repeat prayers mindlessly but should persist like a wronged widow before an apathetic judge. He taught them this prayer:

Matthew 6:9-13

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. 10 Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. 11 Give us this day our daily bread, 12 and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. 13 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”⁹

Jesus was not a radical, setting out to start a new world religion. He completely accepted the Hebrew understanding of God that his fellow Jews held.

Mark 12:28-34

28 And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, "Which commandment is the most important of all?" 29 Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 30 And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' 31 The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." 32 And the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that he is one, and there is no other besides him. 33 And to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." 34 And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

Jesus knew his Father was greater than he (John 14:28), that he could do nothing on his own (John 5:19), and that his goal was to do the will of his Father who sent him (John 5:30). He believed in Yahweh, the Creator of the universe who rescued His people out of Egypt and gave them the promised land. He taught that God was one and that we should love Him with everything. Next to that, we also ought to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Next time, we'll look at what it means to be a disciple of this rabbi.

⁹ The typical ending, "For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen." is a later addition to Matthew, not appearing in the earliest Greek manuscripts, the old Latin translations, or most of the early church fathers. Although, it probably did not go back to Jesus, it is a wonderful ending to the prayer, and I usually use it.