JEWISH EXPECTATIONS OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR NEW TESTAMENT INTERPRETATION

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Introduction

Guidelines for biblical interpretation include the "big three": (1) the principle of harmony, (2) the **principle of contrast**, and (3) the nature of the case. The first derives from the nature of scripture, which as a matter of principle we accept as true throughout and therefore harmonious. The second principle derives from the nature of language, which conveys ideas relative to a framework of thought. The last principle derives from experience, a prime resource for knowing the way things are. All three principles interrelate and impact the interpretation of human language in general and scripture in particular.

Bible backgrounds provide a crucial frame of reference for Bible study. Nowhere is this fact more important than in relation to the second principle. The world in which Jesus and the apostles worked had two major sets of beliefs in contrast to which they delivered their message. One came from the Jewish setting, the other from the Gentile world. Among Jews there was an established expectancy for what the Messiah and his kingdom would be. It was a universal political kingdom geographically located, centered in Palestine, and ruled by an eternal, political, military figure called "Messiah." Among Gentiles dualism pervaded much of the thinking. It was a dualism between good spirit and evil matter (Gnosticism), or at least a dualism in which the material realm was depreciated as a poor imitation of the realm of ideas (Platonism).

In this brief sketch, we propose reading the New Testament with these two errors constantly in mind. Quite likely the writer was opposing one or the other when he spoke of matters they misrepresented. The law/**principle of contrast**/negation/opposition says that a statement is clearest when set over against its intended alternative. That alternative relates to the writer's frame of reference more than the reader's. His statements are best understood and appreciated when viewed in contrast to what he was combating; otherwise, we may (un)consciously be supplying our own situation and beliefs as a background to what he was saying. When we do so, we construct a context that shapes the meaning we get from his statements. By keeping the author's likely alternatives in mind, we more consistently read him on his own terms. We more clearly understand what he was saying, appreciate his reasons for saying it, and avoid misinterpreting him. We gain clarity, appreciation, and accuracy.

This contrasting procedure relates to Gnostic thought. Jewish Messianic expectancies illustrate from Matthew's gospel the effects a contrasting method has on understanding of texts.

I. The Biggest Temptation

After Jesus' baptism, Satan showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. The devil offered them to Jesus if Jesus would worship him (Matthew **4**:8-10; cp. Luke **4**:5-8). This was more than a temptation to get quick glory the easy way. It was more than a call to relinquish authority and let Satan have it. It was a temptation to avoid the cross. Satan was

tempting Jesus to be the expected Messiah rather than the predicted Messiah. Had he been the kind of king the Jews anticipated and had he shown an interest in establishing the kind of kingdom they wanted, they would have accepted him as Messiah, and there would have been no cross.

II. The Good Confession

In the Good Confession Peter identified Jesus as Messiah rather than prophet (Matthew **16**:13-16). The subsequent account is sprinkled with comments whose punch comes from their contrast to what contemporary Jewish "flesh and blood" was saying. On the truth of what Peter had said, Jesus would build his "church," the true assembly of Yahveh (*gahal Yahveh*). Because of resurrection (**16**:21), not even his own death could frustrate: *"the gates of the grave will not be strong enough to resist it"* (**16**:18; cp. Acts **5**:35-39). By metonymy the "grave" (not "hell") stands for death (cp. *hades* in Acts **2**:27 from Psalm **16**:10, *sheol*; note Acts **13**:35). This result is not particularly his conquering death for people, because he would *"resurrect them in the last day."* It was not specifically for stopping death's inability to wipe out the church through persecution or snatch his disciples out of his hand as an indication that he was not the Messiah (John **10**:28-29; **17**:12; **18**:9; **6**:39; cp. Romans **8**:35-39). Rather, death could not prevent establishing and "building" the church/kingdom (**16**:18 + 19), nor discredit him as Messiah (Matthew **27**:42-43; Mark **15**:31-32; Luke **23**:35). A dead Messiah was a virtual contradiction of terms (cp. 1 Corinthians **1**:23, *etc*.). Jesus' speaking about his death became one of the reasons the Jews either rejected him outright as Messiah or were greatly confused by the idea. They believed that Messiah would *"abide forever"* (John **12**:34; see Daniel **7**:14; Isaiah **9**:6-7; Psalm **89**; **110**:4, *etc*.); yet from early on Jesus predicted his execution: John **3**:14; **8**:28; Matthew **16**:21-28 (= Mark **8**:31-**9**:1; Luke **9**:22-27); **17**:22-23 (= Mark **9**:30-32; Luke **9**:43b-45); **26**:1-5 (= Mark **14**:1-2; Luke **22**:1-2).

That was a problem for more than the general Jewish constituency. In Matthew **16**, when Jesus started explaining to the disciples and onlookers that the Jewish leaders were going to kill him, Peter objected. He was putting two and two together and coming up with zero; so he tried to "correct" Jesus on that point. In Jesus' reprimand, he called Peter "Satan" (**16**:23) because, like Satan during the temptation, Peter was suggesting that Jesus be a Messiah without a cross. Previously Peter had not been reiterating the things of "flesh and blood," but now he was representing "people's ides" in current Judaism (**16**:23). Satan indeed is the *"God/prince of this world"* (2 Corinthians **4**:4; John **12**:31; **14**:30; **16**:11; cp. **2**:2; **6**:12); so in a sense the kingdoms of the world were his to give (Luke **3**:6). Satan is always willing to offer a lesser good in place of the necessary good. Unwittingly Peter was proposing that same compromise, which would have made Jesus less than the righteous ideal the Father wanted as the basis for saving people from unrighteousness.

Not only would Jesus bear a cross, but his followers would be called on to do the same. What good does it do even to gain all the kingdoms of the world and their glory and lose his "identity" in the process (**16**:26; cp. Hebrews **12**:14-17)? That is bad enough as a concern for any of us. If we lose who we are, what do we have left? What can we gain to replace it? Why be? If Jesus had accepted the offer to keep his life, he would have been exchanging who he was for who he was not. He would have been a non-Messiah—an existing no one, a meaningless and powerless name. Existing was not the point. Accepting the offer to live would have meant becoming what the "offerers" had in mind; they would have been in charge; he would have been

serving their purposes. Even his living would have been reduced to "existing," because he would have forfeited the quality of existing called "life." What was true for him holds for his disciples as well.

At their current level of understanding, the Twelve were in no position to tell anyone that Jesus was the Messiah (**16**:20). They would have been telling the masses what the masses expected to hear. Besides, if they now announced in no uncertain terms that Jesus was the Messiah—even without a false explanation, the Jews would have jumped to their own conclusions and the whole country would have gone into a frenzy before Jesus had time to re-educate at least some of them into a new way of thinking about the Messiah and his kingdom.

III. The Great Commission

In the first gospel, Jesus' final words commissioned the Eleven to disciple the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father-Son-Spirit, teaching them to observe everything he had commanded them; and he would be with them till the end of the age (Matthew **28**:19-20). The methods for extending the kingdom correspond with the nature of the kingdom they extend. A political kingdom extends itself through military warfare. Accordingly, the Jews expected Messiah to be a military figure. They were concerned first that he throw off the current yoke of foreign domination and then lead them into conquering the other nations. Jews would rule the world and would impress the worship of Yahveh on all their subjects. Messiah would be the eternal ruler of that universal domain. What they envisioned for the whole earth under Messiah resembled the original conquest of Canaan under Joshua—extended from Canaan to the ends of the earth.

Unless we see the Great Commission in contrast to the expectancies of contemporary Judaism, we fail to see how revolutionary it was. We need to see the difference between the commission through Moses and the commission through Messiah. The latter is intentionally non-militaristic. It is a **"kingdom" spread by influence** rather than force. Its mission is an "educational" enterprise that deals with relationships, ideas, beliefs, and resulting behaviors communicated in words and demonstrated in the spokesmen: *"teach them everything I taught you."* It calls for conversion, not compliance. It preserves the integrity of persons in contrast to what happens with the use of physical force, legislative compulsion, social pressure, economic sanctions, or emotional manipulation. Therefore, it is not carried out by a church-state union, demands-making demonstrations, or high-pressure salesmanship.

Although the end does not justify the means, it does determine what means could be used. Interpersonal results come from interpersonal causes. As one final object lesson to stress the interpersonal manner of extending this kingdom, Jesus had the disciples take along a couple swords to Gethsemane (Luke **22**:35-39, 49-51; Matthew **26**:51-54; Mark **14**:46-47; John **18**:10-11). Before, he had forbidden swords in the mission of the Twelve and the seventy (Matthew **6**:9-10; Mark **6**:8-9; Luke **9**:3 and Luke **10**:4 + **22**:36). Having the swords in Gethsemane set things up for Jesus to have Peter put his sword away and to say with credibility to Pilate later, *"My kingdom is not of this world . . . otherwise, my servants would be fighting to keep me from being delivered to the Jews"* (John **18**:36). The kingdom of God does not establish itself by using the mechanisms of liberation theology. The methods correspond to the objects they are used to accomplish like the "law of the harvest" dictates. Means fits ends.

Christian mission deals with **interpersonal identity**, not physical identity: *"baptizing them into the name"* in contrast to circumcising them into a nation. There is no concern for

"glorying in someone's flesh" because they are of the same race or nationality (Galatians **6**:13). Being a descendant of Abraham does not count anymore (Matthew **3**:9). In fact, Jews themselves needed to be saved into this kingdom as Pentecost and following shows, so it was not a kingdom comprised of everyone in one nation: *"They are not all Israel that are of Israel"* (Romans **9**:6). Neither was the Messianic kingdom just for people in the one nation Israel; the people brought into it stayed in their nation of origin: *"in every nation the one that fears [God] and works righteousness is acceptable to him"* (Acts **10**:35).

In contrast to, say, Islamic mission, the great commission produces a **transcultural kingdom**: *"all the nations (as nations)."* In every nation, anyone that fears God is acceptable <u>as is</u>. They do not have to renounce their present citizenship or assume dual citizenship. When they become Christians, they do not get renamed or start wearing a certain culture's clothes or begin eating different foods or learning to speak another language. The concern is not to begin observing the customs that Moses delivered, because the kingdom is not culture bound.

The Messianic commission has a **non-territorial locus**. Acts and the epistles show that the spread of the kingdom was among some individuals in every place: *"they who believe"* (Mark **16**:16). It is simply a matter of "faith," one of the code words connected with the interpersonal realm. Christian "crusades" do not concern themselves with winning back "Christian territories" from other state religions. The commission is not to conquer territory, but to "conquer" hearts and minds. The kingdom of God is not here or there; it is "within you," "among you," interpersonal (Luke **17**:20-21; John **4**:20-21).

Messiah's presence with his people is an **interpersonal presence** more than a physical one: *"Go"* + *"I will be <u>with</u> you"* + his ascension. That kind of presence does not require physical proximity. He is not a visible general in front of a visible army bringing in a kingdom *"that comes with observation"* (Luke **17**:20). The Messianic kingdom itself cannot even be seen except with transcendent—that is, interpersonal—eyes (John **3**:3). Its citizens must adopt a whole new orientation even to get into it—an experience called being born again-from-above. Messiah is not a king on a tangible throne in an earthly Jerusalem that can be shaken (Hebrews **12**:22-29). His is a heavenly throne (Colossians **3**:1-3; Revelation **4**) and ours a heavenly citizenship (Philippians **3**:20). He is a king with spiritual power, a resurrected Lord that has ascended to the right hand of the Father. His is a presence he can promise the apostles in the very context of leaving them; hence, it is an interpersonal presence. It leads to an empowerment that can be produced by "spiritual presence" (cp. 1 Corinthians **5**:3-4), the interpersonal power of interpersonal presence.

Conclusion

Reading a book "on its own terms" means reading it first in reference to the issues its <u>author</u> is concerned to affirm, deny (exegesis), or elaborate rather than reading it relative to issues <u>we</u> readers bring to it for answers (eisegesis). Reading it on its own terms means reading in a way that harmonizes with the rest of what its author affirms and reading it in contrast to what he opposes. The negation principle used in the procedure demonstrated here sometimes **(a)** leads to new understandings, but its main values lie elsewhere. The principle of contrast **(b)** highlights the text and enriches it with relevance. It shows <u>why</u> something was said and suggests why certain events were chosen for the record when there were so many other things that surely could have been recorded (John **20**:30; **21**:35). Most importantly, the principle of contrast **(c)** helps us more accurately generalize principles to present-day situations that differ from the

original ones. Misapplication can otherwise happen because speakers and writers structure their comments to be clear in reference to what they are correcting. Their words may not be clear in relation to other contrasts because they were not guarding against being misunderstood on topics foreign to their frame of reference.

We encourage students of the New Testament to read it particularly in contrast to prevailing beliefs of the first century. The first contrast is with the Jewish belief in a political Messiah sets the primary alternative to the nature of the "kingdom" that Messiah really came to establish. The method of contrast we applied to the temptation account, the good confession, and the Great Commission in Matthew's gospel applies also to the parables of the kingdom, to many episodes throughout Jesus' life up through the final week, the post-resurrection period, and to many individual statements throughout the gospels, Acts, epistles, and even Revelation. The second contrast is with the prevailing dualism in Greek thought. That idea came especially in the teaching of the Gnostics that Paul had to confront. John's writings also have Gnostic ideas as that over against which many comments appear. The effect gives a more concrete feel for New Testament writings as living documents in the real world.