

Who Will Rule the World?

2000 years ago a woman anointed Jesus head with expensive perfume. He, to the bafflement of his followers, that this was a preparation for his burial. But she did it because she believed he was the anointed one, Messiah, the ruler of the world. In her mind, in that day in that culture, she *believed* that.

But is Christian belief respectable today? At the beginning of the third millennium, can a rational person really believe that a man named Jesus died on a cross taking upon himself all human sin, and then rose again from the grave and then ascended into heaven where, in the words of the Apostle's Creed, he is "seated at the right hand of God the Father, the Almighty" in other words, that Jesus is Lord of all the earth? Is that belief really *justified* in contemporary society? Well, if that is a challenging question for us today, we must realize that even 2,000 years ago it was no *less* challenging for. . .

A Man named Theophilus

The book of Acts is the second volume Luke has written and dedicated to this same individual. We know nothing about him, except that he can, obviously, *read* and we can intuit from his Greek *name*, that he is a Gentile and not a Hebrew. Theophilus was most likely a well-educated, middle-class Roman. Luke addresses him as "*most excellent Theophilus*" the way you'd address someone of considerable social rank. (Cf Act 23:26). And great labours Luke has undertaken in writing these two books, and directing them to Theophilus, is sure evidence Luke is seeking to win this man over to a less prejudiced, more favorable opinion of Christian belief. We don't know if Theophilus is a believer yet, or even if he ever became one. But Luke will do his best to make the case that *any* intelligent, reasonable person, even one with absolutely no roots in the Jewish tradition or previous teaching in Hebrew Scriptures, one with no prior knowledge of Israel's god is perfectly justified in believing that Jesus is the ruler of the world.

Now, this was not an easy case to make in the first century. In the decades after the birth of the Church, *anything* originating in Jerusalem became more and more odious to Rome. That was because a Jewish *war* with the Rome was grinding on in Judea, a bloody rebellion that was bringing ever closer the inevitable the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A. D. So why would any respectable Roman ever believe that Jesus is Lord, ruler of the world?

Luke will make the case to Theophilus: first reminding him of the scope of the previous volume (the book we call "The *Gospel of Luke*"), which, he says, was "about all that Jesus *began* to do and to teach." Now this new book (the *Book of Acts*) will pertain to what Jesus *continued* to do and teach.

Theophilus is being asked to believe that a man crucified by Roman troops, dead and buried, *rose* from his tomb and continued to go about giving his followers further instructions during . . .

Forty remarkable days

"After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of *forty days* and *spoke about the kingdom of God.*"

In Judaism, the teaching of the resurrection has always been about a great revolution – a cosmic power-shift among the kingdoms of this world. At the heart of the Jewish struggle against Rome in the first century was the enduring hope that one day the *kingdom of Messiah* would come. A king would arise *in Judea* and he would rule the world. For Romans, people like Theophilus that must have sounded like utter nonsense. But for zealous Jews fighting in the hills

a losing battle for their homeland, the coming of Messiah and the resurrection of the dry bones of Israel into a mighty army was now their last and only hope. But nothing in Judaism ever foresaw just *one* man rising from the dead. A one-off resurrection of Jesus. But for forty remarkable days, they had been in conversation with that man: the resurrected Jesus.

Easter is about the *true* kingdom of the *true* god winning the ultimate victory over the all the other kingdoms of the world. And Luke says “Jesus spoke to them about *the kingdom of God*. But how will Luke convince the Theophiluses of this world of the *truth* of all this? So he begins his story back with the birth of Jesus, (the *true* king of the Jews), who poses a credible threat to Herod, (the *reigning* king of the Jews). But more than this: Luke notes that Jesus was born during the reign of *Caesar Augustus*, the reigning king of the *world*. But the moment he is born is the moment when, unknown to the powerful and mighty, the kingdom of the *true* god, in the *person* of the true *son* of this *god* is invading the world. The kingdom of God had come to earth in and through this baby Jesus.

Then, in Luke’s telling of this story, as Jesus’ life on earth reaches its final days, another showdown with yet another Herod *reigning* Jewish king and Pilate, serving Roman governor who represents *Caesar*, who *most people think* currently rules the world. And enigmatically, these two evil men, Herod and Pilate, become *friends* through their trial of Jesus. Any careful reader, like a Theophilus, could not read Luke and miss the point: *On the cross, was a showdown. The kingdom that Jesus brought to earth was finally confronting the combined powers that rule this world. And now, victorious over though powers, the risen Jesus is giving them convincing proof of that victory.* To say the least, this was. . .

A challenge to mainstream thinking.

What could be more *radical* to the Roman mind than someone proclaiming that a unknown peasant carpenter/ part-time rabbi was actually ruling the world and not Caesar. Why would anyone in his right mind *believe* anything like that?

Luke is often compared to the other great historian of the time, Josephus. Josephus was actually *a Jew* who had fought against Rome in the ongoing Jewish war, but had been forced to surrender and so decided to go over to the Roman side. So Josephus writes a history of the Jews, but he puts a *slant* on it. In the hands of Josephus, the history of the Jews becomes Roman war propaganda. According to Josephus, the whole history of the Jews had directly led to this disastrous war with Rome and inevitably towards the destruction of Jerusalem.

But Luke, *too* is aware of Jerusalem’s inevitable fall. (Jesus had clearly predicted it.) So both men agree on where Israel’s history is heading. Also, both agree about what the Jewish rebels should *do*: they should lay down their arms, give up all violence and seek a new way of in the world. But Luke and Josephus give very different reasons for this: *Josephus* claims they should give up the fight because Israel’s god had abandoned the Jews and, like him, had gone over to the Romans, put Rome in the position of sovereign power over all he world. According to Josephus, who knew his Scriptures well, the promised ruler that would come forth from Judea as prophesied in Daniel 2,7,9 was actually to be identified as *Vespasian*, who was declared to be he Roman Emperor *while on Jewish soil*, thus fulfilling the prophecy. This Caesar ruled the world, and therefore to fight against Rome was to fight against God.

But according to Luke, the followers of Jesus should abandoned armed violence for a very different reason. They should follow Jesus, the Prince of Peace. Because his kingdom would come, not by the sword but by . . .

Unlimited spiritual potential

I want you to note the setting in which Jesus gives this promise: “on one occasion, while he was *eating* with them. . .”

Although Luke goes out of his way to keep Old Testament allusions to a minimum to make things accessible to the Gentiles, it is very significant that Jesus gives the promise of the Spirit while *eating* with them. That’s because the *first* meal we ever read about in the Bible was the moment when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. The direct result of *that* meal was the universal, spiritual separation of humankind from God. But now, *these* people eat *this* meal with *Jesus*. The long exile of the human race from God is now over. This is the beginning of the *new creation*, and this is why repentance and forgiveness of sin are to be announced to *all* nations. Because in Jesus, what was *lost to all humanity* in the Garden of Eden has been restored – not just to Israel, but to every nation on earth.

And so he gives them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

But why did they have to wait? Why didn’t Jesus allow them to receive the Spirit right then and there and then they’d have it?

In the operation of a precision watch, the various parts work in a dynamic relationship. The movement of the hands we see on the face of the watch, can only happen because of the inner dynamics.

“Don’t leave town,” he says. “You need to wait right here.” Why? Well, there are certain unseen spiritual dynamics at work. And why wait in *Jerusalem*? Well, we can best understand this through the imagery of the Jewish Temple. Once a year, the entire Jewish community, assembled in Jerusalem for the Day of Atonement. On that day, the high priest would bring the blood of a lamb into the holy of holies symbolizing the very presence of God. The priest would disappear behind the Temple veil, and the entire community would wait outside with bated breath for that high priest to reemerge. This ancient temple ritual so important because it was the only way for Israel to know that the invisible spiritual dynamic we call “the Covenant” between them and their god still worked, that God was still faithful to them.

So imagine now the anticipation of the disciples as they waited those few more days. Jesus was about to go behind the veil into *heaven*, and they must wait for him to reemerge. What is about to occur, in just a few days on the Day of Pentecost with the coming of the Spirit upon them in tongues of fire was actually Jesus, the Great High Priest *reemerging* from heaven having restored humanity’s relationship with God to continue his work on earth through the Holy Spirit in his Church.

The gift of the Holy Spirit would give these people a whole new understanding of their existence. “Baptized by the Holy Spirit,” they would be *immersed* “in Jesus,” filled with his life within, and given authority to proclaim the Gospel. In Jesus, they would be seated with him above the rulers and powers of the world. However, until they actually received and understood the potential of the Holy Spirit, there remained a gap between Jesus and his followers. . .

Conflicting visions of coming kingdom.

So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority."

So, in other words, his answer is, “Yes. Yes I am going, at this time to restore the

kingdom to Israel". *But* first of all, you don't understand the *nature* of this kingdom yet, and furthermore, you don't understand my *new definition* of Israel. What *is* Israel? It is not a specific ethnic group, there's no specific genetic make-up. The boundaries of the *new* Israel will take in all the people who are living in a covenant relationship with Israel's god. In other words, "Israel," the kingdom of God, is made up of those from every nation who by the Spirit accept the Lordship of Jesus who rules the world. They don't need to know about any particular times or dates, the only thing they need to know is *how* this kingdom will come. And *Jesus* says it will come

By *their* Spirit-driven witness.

"But you will receive *power* when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my *witnesses* in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Geographically, this describes concentric circles spreading out from the centre of Jerusalem into all the world. This is how the kingdom of God will come: not by a the restoration of the *old* kingdom of Israel, as the disciples had hoped for (Luke 24:21), but by representatives of Jesus going out into the world proclaiming him as *Lord and living as if they really believed that*.

Sometimes it doesn't seem like much is happening spiritually. Sometimes the spiritual dynamic get all messed up. We can't see any fresh evidence of spiritual growth in our own lives or in the church. It's as if we can't hear the watch ticking anymore, no matter how much we wind it up or shake it. Or we can't see the hands making any movement across the face of the watch. Or those hands are just moving too fast for our liking or too slow for us and we wish things would happen more quickly. God moves in a mysterious way. . .

And in times like that, we even begin to wonder if we are really justified in our Christian belief. Do we actually have the power of the Spirit to be Christ's witnesses? Or is that just a cultural myth. Sometimes it doesn't seem even *appropriate* in a pluralistic society, with so many religions, and faiths, and non-faiths, to go around declaring "*Jesus is Lord*." In the contemporary Western world, there is a condescending secular elite that looks down their noses at the silly little people who still actually believe Jesus died and rose again. (They say they're broad-minded and non-judgmental, but in reality, they actually judging us all.)

But the problem isn't any different for readers today, than it was for our old friend Theophilus in the first century: here's Jesus, with a *body* that is both physical, in that it left an empty tomb; and yet a *body changed* – able to appear and disappear, and not always be immediately recognized by even his closest friends. . . But the real challenge the resurrection presents, both to Theophilus, so long ago and to people today, is . . .

Where did Jesus go?

Luke says, "he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight".

Now, to the mainstream of contemporary Western society, this claim seems like the product of the primitive ancient mindset in which people thought their gods lived a few thousand yards above the earth, just beyond the clouds. But actually this really shows an ignorance of the sophistication of Jewish theological thinking at the time of Christ. "The Jews were very comfortable with the speaking of an ascent into heaven without thinking their god lived in a mansion in the clouds. They regularly used sky above and earth below to describe the *interlocking universes* inhabited by the creator God on one hand and the human race on the other. (N.T. Wright, Resurrection of the Son of God p655)

It was between those interlocking universes that the resurrected Jesus moved before their very eyes.

Jesus ascent into the sky also sent a very clear message to Theophilus and his Roman world. For in the Roman world, at the death of an emperor, one or two witnesses would claim to have seen his spirit ascending skyward as a comet. At the funeral of Julius Caesar an eagle was released from the top of his pyre to soar aloft. All this to say that the dead Roman emperor had now become a god, and so the new emperor was now hailed as “son of god.”

But the ascension of Jesus was the answer to the disciples question: “will you at this time restore the kingdom to Isreal?” YES! The ascension of Jesus into the clouds was the fulfillment of Daniel 7, where “one like a son of man” is exalted from the earth to the throne of heaven. And in this Christianity took the place of Judiasim. Yes, the kingdom has been restored, but not to Isreal but to Jesus and his church.

One day, years later, in *Rome* so-called captial of the world, the apostle Paul would declare *Jesus is Lord* – king of the world. But for now, on that day, the big news was . . .

The eventual return of Jesus Christ.

“They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

This is the first time in the story we hear about the return of Jesus and the end of the age. This is something new for *everybody*. No thought existed in Judaism of any human being appearing from heaven like this. But if Jesus has been exalted to the highest position in heaven, if he is who he says he is, then it’s really inconceivable that the future of the world should be without him. But that is not the main thrust of the angels’ message to the disciples. *Their* question to the disciples is simply, “*why are you standing here?*” There is *work* to do. They must now go and . . .

Live the life

And herein is the message for our lives. If we are Christians for years, maybe for generations in our family, we can easily forget what it’s like to be Theophilus. Jesus died for our sins and rose again. Anyone who comes to him in faith can be forgiven and receive the gift of a new and eternal life. But people must see that in our lives. See that Jesus *rules* our lives.

This week ,you and I will meet a Theophilus, someone who really wonders if Christian belief is really justified. This week we will see news reports of tyrants around the world and angry people fighting against them. Why should they lay down their arms? This week, sadly, there will be new crimes and outrages. “They should do something about that,” we’ll say. “Someone should put a stop to this!” Ah, but who? Obama? The UN? If they could, they would. But they can’t.

But sometime this week, think back on this story. If Jesus *has* really ascended to the throne of heaven, if we *are* his witnesses, then we can make a difference in this world this week. And this week, someone in your life could begin to believe that Jesus is the *ruler of the world*.