

Heaven on Earth

What do we learn about Jesus from the synoptic gospels, Mark, Matthew, and Luke? We learn that Jesus was a Jewish apocalyptic prophet. He adhered to Jewish law, even though he emphasized the spirit of the Law rather than insincere, mechanical, ostentatious devotion to the Law which he saw being practiced by the Pharisees and Sadducees.

If we pay close attention to Jesus' own words as presented in the synoptic gospels, we find that he is not the Christian savior at all. He saw himself as the Jewish Messiah. He was chosen by God to be the man who would usher in the kingdom of God, or the kingdom of heaven. And what did Jesus mean by that? His concept of the kingdom of heaven was an earthly kingdom, not the heavenly version hawked by Christians today. We see proof of that scattered throughout the synoptics.

(Matthew 8:11)

I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven,

It will be a place where people eat and where people have physical bodies that can be recognized. In Jesus' concept of heaven people will be people, not ethereal echoes of their former selves.

(Matthew 10:5-6)

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions. Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

Jesus was sent to save the Jews, not the whole world. So it would be primarily Jews in Jesus' concept of the kingdom of heaven.

(Matthew 10:34)

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace but a sword.

Jesus didn't come to secure the status quo. He came to shake things up. But what things, and why? He came to restore Israel as the sovereign nation that rules over the world in the kingdom of heaven. He was the Jewish Messiah.

(Matthew 11:12)

From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.

The kingdom of heaven referred to Israel. It had been subdued and oppressed by foreign powers for a long time, and Jesus was here to fix that by establishing a sovereign, all-powerful Israel.

(Matthew 15:24)

He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

Again, Jesus was here to save the Jews, not the whole world. He encountered a few Gentiles worthy of the kingdom of heaven, but it was to be a Jewish heaven.

(Matthew 19:27-29)

Then Peter said in reply, “Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?” Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my name’s sake will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life.

Jesus had just finished explaining to the disciples how difficult it was for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Yet he immediately follows that with this promise of wealth to the disciples. Jesus had taught his disciples to not worry about what they would eat or wear from day to day. Yet now he is promising them large families, plenty of land, and prosperity beyond their wildest dreams. How does that make sense? It doesn't unless you understand that the kingdom was to be an earthly kingdom, with the disciples sitting as judges over the twelve tribes of Israel. Wealth made it almost impossible to enter the kingdom because it diverted attention and devotion away from that very kingdom. But Jesus promised wealth to his disciples because they had already jumped that hurdle. They had already shown their devotion to Jesus and the kingdom. Therefore, they would be richly rewarded with large families and fertile productive land. Those are things that make sense only in an earthly kingdom of heaven, not the modern Christian nebulous concept of heaven.

(Matthew 25:31-33)

When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

In the final judgment people were to be judged by their conduct. Those who had obeyed Jewish law would enter the kingdom of heaven, and those who had not obeyed Jewish law would not enter. That's why Jesus said he had come to minister to Jews, not gentiles. Jewish law was meant for Jews, not gentiles.

(Luke 13:29)

Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God.

Again, eating makes sense in an earthly kingdom, but it makes no sense in the modern Christian paradigm.

(Luke 17:21)

nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For in fact the kingdom of God is among you.

What could that mean? The kingdom was already among them? But Israel was still under the thumb of the Romans. Yes, but Jesus had been very busy healing and performing other miracles. He was giving the Jews, primarily, a little taste of what his kingdom of heaven would be like. There would be no disease or hunger in that kingdom. Jesus was giving his followers and prospective followers an idea of what to expect if they followed him and earned their place in the kingdom of heaven. So a little bit of that kingdom of heaven was already there in the form of Jesus' miracles. And not just Jesus' healing. The disciples also went around healing people. And not just the 12 apostles. Jesus also commissioned the 70, who went out healing, casting out demons and doing other supernatural deeds. (Luke 10:1-12, 17-20)

(Luke 22:28-30)

You are those who have stood by me in my trials, and I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

Again, eating. Again, judging the twelve tribes. That makes sense only in an earthly kingdom of heaven.

And just when was that kingdom of heaven going to be in place? Jesus talked about that quite a bit. He stressed the fact that nobody, including himself, knew the exact date or time of day. But Jesus could and did narrow it down considerably. He said it would happen during his generation. It would arrive while many of his followers were still alive. It was not some murky promise of something at least 2000 years into the future. It was imminent.

(Mark 9:1)

And he said to them, “Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.”

(Mark 13:30)

Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.

(Matthew 16:28)

Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.

(Matthew 10:23)

When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next. for truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.

(Matthew 24:34)

Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.

(Luke 9:2)

But truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God.”

(Mark 13:32)

But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven nor the Son, but only the Father.

(Matthew 24:44)

Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

(Luke 21:32)

Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place.

It is obvious that Jesus was wrong. The kingdom of heaven he expected never materialized. When Jesus died, Jews had to rethink the whole concept of the messiah. As people died, it became ever more painfully clear that Jesus had been wrong, not just in his timing but his entire portrait of the kingdom of heaven. Paul, aware of the problem, said that Jesus had just been slightly off on his timing but the kingdom would come during **his** lifetime. But that was wrong as well. What were Jews to make of it?

Their solution was to reinvent the idea of the messiah and to give Jesus a radical makeover. They would transform him from the failed Jewish apocalyptic prophet that he had actually been into the fictional Jesus that formed the foundation of Christianity. We see evidence of it in the synoptics. The most striking example is Mark chapter 16. By the time the gospel of John was written, the transformation had progressed by leaps and bounds. No longer was Jesus who and what he said he was. Now Jesus was the product of imagination. Pure imagination.

Christianity was conceived and constructed from layers of fiction. Early Christians couldn't accept the fact that Jesus ended with Mark 16:8. So, they created their own Jesus.