JESUS AND ISRAEL’S ESCHATOLOGICAL CONSTITUTION

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1. Introduction

In his justly praised book, *Jesus and Judaism*, E. P. Sanders argued the influential thesis that Jesus was a prophet of Israel’s imminent national restoration. He set this thesis against his perception that scholarship had moved decisively toward the conviction that the uniqueness of Jesus lay in his assertion that the kingdom was now present in his exorcisms, healings, and miracles, even if there remained a sense in which the kingdom of God was yet to come.1 Twenty-five years later, it would perhaps be fair to say that the pendulum has swung the other way. For while there remains a very significant portion of scholarship which maintains that for Jesus the kingdom was in some sense present, it is also the case that a broad swath of historical Jesus studies now places the emphasis on the futurity of the kingdom in the ministry of Jesus. This is seen not so much in a groundswell of support for an eschatology that is as “consistent” or “thoroughgoing” as Sanders’, though there are those who argue the case.2 Rather, it is seen in the fact that for most of those who see in Jesus’ eschatology a tension between the already and the not-yet, the emphasis falls unmistakably on the not-yet, particularly as measured by a comparison between indications of the kingdom’s

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presence in Jesus’ ministry and Jewish expectations of the time when God would restore the kingdom to Israel. And so it is common for scholars to use terms such as “pledge” or “foretaste” or “proleptic realization” or “preliminary” or to use analogies such as “a train drawing into a station” or of “the day beginning to dawn.” Such descriptions place unmistakable emphasis on future realities which Jesus believed were merely anticipated in his ministry. This development is to a very significant degree a measure of the influence of Sanders.

As with much of contemporary New Testament scholarship, Sanders perceived the central issues in the study of Jesus with such clarity that the questions he posed continue to set the agenda today. For Sanders, the key problem related to Jesus’ understanding of the kingdom is simply this: if for Jesus, as in Second Temple Judaism generally, the kingdom of God is identified with the concrete social order to be introduced by God through a cataclysmic intervention on behalf of Israel, then Jesus could hardly have considered that the kingdom of God

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3 Note, for instance, the view of J. P. Meier, who argues that though Jesus believed that “the kingdom was already present for at least some Israelites by his exorcisms and miracles of healing,” it is nevertheless evident “that his message focused predominantly on the imminent future.” A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, ABRL (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 2:452, 454. A similar tendency is seen in many works which emphasize Jesus’ role as a prophet of the imminent action of God while minimizing in some way the distinctiveness of Jesus’ announcement of the kingdom’s presence.

4 Meier, Marginal Jew, 2:453.

5 James D. G. Dunn, Jesus Remembered, 1: Christianity in the Making (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 479.

6 George Beasley-Murray, who, more than most, asserts the significance of the presence of the kingdom in Jesus’ eschatology, complains about the tendency of many to subordinate the presence of the kingdom to its futurity, a tendency “evident when, for example, the work of Jesus is regarded only as a ‘sign’ of the coming kingdom, or an ‘adumbration’ of it, or ‘dawning’ of the kingdom (an ambiguous term, apparently intended to exclude the light of day).” “Matthew 6:33: The Kingdom of God and the Ethic of Jesus,” in Neues Testament und Ethik, ed. Helmut Merklein (Freiburg: Herder, 1989), 93.

7 It is perhaps true that Sanders’ study of Jesus has not had quite the impact of his study of Paul, Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion (London: SCM Press, 1977). Nevertheless, in his study both of Paul and of Jesus, Sanders’ lasting influence has been the result of his knowledge of the Jewish sources which have enabled him to set the parameters with particular clarity. As with his study of Paul, Sanders’ innovative proposals concerning Jesus—e.g., that Jesus did not call sinners to repentance and that priority must be given to Jesus’ actions over his sayings—have not been so widely accepted as has his interpretation of the context within which Jesus must be interpreted. As with his interpretation of Paul within the context of Jewish conceptions of the covenant, Sanders’ interpretation of Jesus within the context of Jewish restorationism was not wholly without precedent. See especially G. B. Caird, Jesus and the Jewish Nation, Ethel M. Wood Lecture (London: Athlone Press, 1965), and Ben F. Meyer, The Aims of Jesus (London: SCM Press, 1979).