

The Kingdom of God

Clear Vision vs. Illusion

The Monastery of St. Macarius Scetis

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Clear Vision vs. Illusion

Father Matta El Meskeen *The Spiritual Father of the Monastery of St. Macarius the Great*

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The Kingdom of God: Clear Vision vs. Illusion originally appeared in Arabic, as editorial of "Markos" Review, September 1969. Translated into English in the Monastery of St. Macarius, September 1980, and published the first time in 1994.

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T, he ORIGIN OF THE EXPRESSION “Kingdom of God” is Hebrew, which is read: “Malikot Shamayem”; or “the Kingdom of Heaven”. Yet the purpose of this expression is to refer to the “Kingdom of God”, i.e., the absolute reign of God over man. The word “God” has been replaced by the word “heavens” to avoid mentioning the holy name of God; an act inspired by an extreme fear and awe for God as the Jews were wont to do. This is evident in the Gospel of Matthew, which was written for the Jews. As for the other gospels the name of God is mentioned without inhibition, not out of lack of reverence, but on account of the extreme intimacy and love shown by God toward the Gentiles in the person of Jesus the Redeemer.

The first to use this expression as recorded in Matthew was John the Baptist; yet its concept had been

common in the centuries which preceded the advent of Christ among the prophets as an apocalyptic expression of the expectation of God's direct intrusion into both the life of Israel and the whole world, because of the bitter failure which the prophets suffered by dint of the corrupt behavior of the kings, the hierarchy and the priests, and the failure of the people to follow God in their hearts.

* * *

The discourse on the Kingdom of God has always been associated in the writings of the prophets with the advent of the Messiah as the person who will prepare for this Kingdom and reveal it. The manifestation of the Kingdom of God in the person of the Messiah began very early before the age of the prophets, and even before that of kings and judges; for we read about it from the days of Jacob while blessing his children, "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until Shiloh comes; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples" (Gen. 49:10). Shiloh here is the "King of Peace". Here is the first reference to the nature of the Messiah and of that of his sovereignty.

It could thus be inferred from such an early reference to the Messiah that the aim of God in establishing the kingdom of Israel is the manifestation of the Messiah and the foundation of the Kingdom of Peace for all nations. The remainder of the Scripture is likewise fraught with this meaning; not a single book up to the time of the prophets lacks emphasis on this fact whether it be historical or spiritual. Thus the divine light began to be focussed on this fact in an articulate and alive manner.

All this alludes—without any vagueness—to the fact that the forming of the kingdom of Israel rested from the outset upon a theological basis. For in spite of the logical succession of temporal events and the contriving of historical eras to bring out the kingdom of Israel as a kingdom that thrived and died, rose up and fell many times, as is the case with every kingdom, there exists a fact which can by no means be ignored, and that is that God himself led such temporal events secretly and openly. This took place once behind the curtains and many times in daylight before the sight of the human eye.

Also evident—after examining the constitution of the kingdom of Israel and its law—is the nature of this kingdom and the complete difference between it and that of any other kingdom that has existed on the face of the earth. For it revealed (by dint of the ten commandments which begin thus: "I am the Lord your God" (Ex. 20:2) who the real King of Israel was, what this kingdom was, and consequently what the reason for its perishing was.

It is an unprecedented phenomenon throughout the history of states and kingdoms to hear of a kingdom whose constitution was based upon sanctity and righteousness, whose law focussed upon purification, whose works and aims consisted of offering oblations, and whose only King was God.

Yet Israel in reality failed to be a kingdom of God, for it was degraded far below the state in which it should have been; this by reason of the inferior quality of the judges, the kings, the hierarchy, the priests, and even the elders of the people. The problem of Israel always and intensely consisted in the corruption of the king, the shortcomings of the priest, and the feebleness of the prophet.

Hence, the vision of all the prophets began to focus upon, join together in, and look forward to a new King who would possess those attributes which would qualify him for absolute and righteous reign in a power that had to excel that of man, so that the kingdom of Israel might gain the integrity of its theological nature intended for it by God, and that it might attain to the end for which He brought it into existence! It is here that the image of the Messiah clearly appears in the vision of the prophets. And it is under such psychological, and even historical importunity that the prophets started declaring the attributes of the Messiah:

“There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with die breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked. Righteousness shall be the girdle of his waist, and faithfulness the girdle of his loins...”

“They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea” (Is. 11:1-9).

Such portrayal of the new King, the “Messiah”, well fits in with the divine nature which God intended for the kingdom of Israel. Such description is a revelation beyond all comprehension of the aim of God with regard to the kingdom of Israel.

It is noteworthy here that the portrayal of the Messiah as a King has become extremely figurative in terms of its human and political concept; for it is clear that the reign of this King would prevail over the whole world. His power would lie in his “mouth”, his weapon of chastisement would be his “lips”, and his might he would draw out from his righteousness and faithfulness.

As for the people of such a kingdom of remote frontiers, they would come not from among the great, the mighty or the wise; but they would be the poor. The only task of the King would be to be fair with the miserable of the earth.

As for the constitution of this new Kingdom, it lies not beneath the letter of the law, nor is it limited by words or articulations, but is a Spirit which overflows upon all with knowledge just as die waters cover the sea.

He would not invade nor harass nations in order to subdue them by sword and spear, but he would draw people forth to gather them around the banner of rescue. And the nations would compete for his favor!

From this prophecy and others we can perceive the extent of the correct vision and perception of the prophets as to the spiritual and divine attributes of the Messiah which were perfectly manifest in the person of Jesus Christ the King of Peace. It was he who said concerning himself, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is

he who take no offence at me" (Matt. 11:4-6).

It should be noted here that the saying of Christ after he displayed his deeds, "Blessed is he who takes no offence at me" is an indication that the attributes of the Kingdom and his attributes as a King are still secret and need insight, vision and inspiration, and that the Kingdom in this age is still at the level of the seed, the small leaven and the net.

However, because the fathers, prophets and rabbis in Israel began to speak on the coming Kingdom, schism also began to take place in thought and interpretation. The fanatics among the Jews who clung to land and borders, soil and gold, flesh and blood, titles and inheritance, were unable to understand the Kingdom of God except at this level. They waited in expectation for the Messiah as a revengeful king who would rid Israel of the Gentiles, enlarge their borders, crush their enemies and humiliate the necks of the nations under the feet of the Jews! Hence, they found in Christ nothing that may qualify him for being their king, nor did they find in his sayings anything which could gratify their lust.

Such fanatics found help for their extreme position in prophecies which use temporal articulations in elucidating non-temporal matters. A prophecy might state that Israel would inherit the Gentiles, or that the Messiah would subdue his enemies under his feet. They could not perceive that here the inheritance was a spiritual one, and that submission was in love and humility.

Their shameful inability to comprehend the prophecies spiritually was the result of:

1. Ignorance concerning the fact that the main aim of God in creating the temporal kingdom of Israel was that it might end in the manifestation of the eternal Kingdom of God.
2. The distress, humiliation and bitter bondage which Israel suffered at the end of its life after much glory and power. This caused them to covet earthly and carnal freedom and ignore that of the spirit. And this was despite the fact that the political straits, humiliation and bondage in which Israel had fallen was a wonderful theological expression of an open-minded humility toward the Gentiles!

Has Christ presented himself to the world seated on a golden throne?

As the world did not know Christ nor accept him nor even inherit him except after stripping and crucifying him, so was the case with Israel. For when it lays dead under the feet of the Gentiles, its glory, spiritual richness, ancestral heritage, divine constitution, ethical and moral law were poured out on the whole world and were inherited by the Gentiles as a precious spoil.

Of course it was not possible for the Gentiles to inherit the glory of Israel, nor was it possible for Israel to condescend and bequeath its glory to the Gentiles unless its temporal and perishable coating (i.e., its form as a temporal kingdom) be rent, so that its spiritual essence might come into the possession of every nation!

Henceforth, it is impossible to conceive Christ apart from Israel, and vice versa. For as Christ was wounded and his body torn on the cross in preparation for dissecting it for the four corners of the world, in the same manner was Israel torn asunder—as foreseen by the shrewd prophet Zechariah: "Half of them to the eastern sea and half of them to the western sea; ... And the LORD will become

king over all the earth" (Zech. 14:8, 9). And as the side of Christ was stabbed, at which blood gushed forth profusely and free of charge to every mouth, so is it with Israel whose heart was broken and of which gushed the "living waters of Jerusalem" gratuitously quenching the thirst of every man seeking truth.

We are now living in the Kingdom of Christ's humility which can be perceived only by the humble. Now the wedding guests are busy washing the feet of those invited, after the manner of their Bridegroom who, when he came to found his Kingdom on earth, did so by tears, roaming about in exile, and begging a Samaritan woman to give him water to drink.

There is now no room for the proud; for the master is known only in service; the master is known as a slave. And the first seat is coveted only by the rejected.

Here the gate-way to heaven is opened; yet it is narrow and inaccessible to sword-bearers, crown-wearers, or those demanding thrones and earthly kingdoms.

We are looking forward to the coming Kingdom of glory and are waiting for the appearance of the Lord—not in the flesh of his humility, but rather in the manifestation of Ms glory and splendor. Any other appearance without this glory is illusion, fraud and forgery.

Likewise, Israel should not be dressed—over the glory of her Bridegroom—in her earthly, temporal and corruptible garment; i.e., her earthly decadent heritage and her old political authority which she inherited with iron and fire with the shedding of blood.

Israel has been crowned with Christ, and is clad in her glory in the persons of her martyrs among disciples, apostles and believers from all its tribes. She is now in heaven waiting for a signal to descend from heaven as an adorned bride with her Bridegroom; a Church of saints, angels and righteous spirits crowned with glory.

* * *

The image that the pious Jews—and those who possessed a profound understanding of the spirituality of the prophets—had in mind differed considerably from the reality of Christ when He came.

The Jews thought that the Messiah would use his supernatural and miraculous power to elevate and magnify the kingdom of Israel so that it might reach the zenith of its visible glory as the Kingdom of God throughout the whole world. In view of the prophecies they believed that He would alter the order of affairs in the world, and create every thing anew, instead of the impotent and corrupt ruling systems which they were accustomed to. Consequently, they imagined the Kingdom of the Messiah to be the highest manner in which God could rule on earth, in such a way that this would be the termination of all reform and change and the last phase of the growth and evolution and mankind on the physical plane. Yet, whereas they saw that it was hard to perceive the prophecies as the application of God's promises (which are purely spiritual) to their physical environment they said that this kingdom would excel in its glory, majesty and subtlety all that might occur to man's mind. This was in consistency with the Messiah's superlative power which transcends mind and nature, and with His able and divine rule, by which He binds tilings together in accordance with his supreme

will.

Naturally, such a kingdom was projected into the future. The entirety of such hopes, together with all human efforts, were rolled up and placed in the darkness of the future, in expectation of what would be. Thus the system of the present world in their eyes—with all its evils and disabilities—was at odds with that golden future which would be void of all traces of such evil and impotence. They were fortified against any probability of the Messiah appearing as a man under the present law, or as a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, who would bear the sins of men and groan under their oppression! They were well fortified against any acceptance of a divine kingdom which might be sown as a mustard seed amidst the thorns of the world, which grows bit by bit under the elements of corruption.

It was thus that Christ came, and with Him His Kingdom—disappointing as it was to all the hopes of the Jews who expected a worldly glory for Israel and sought a spirituality that would serve the aims of man and his hopes on earth.

Christ entered into the world through its secret and invisible door: the heart of man. The Kingdom started from within man and not from without him! “Behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you” (Luke 17:21).

“Then if any one says to you, ‘Lo, here is the Christ!’ or ‘There he is!’ do not believe it” (Matt 24:23).

Thus, with the advent of Christ and with the disclosure of the reality of the Kingdom Christianity has radically altered the human concept of the Kingdom of God:

- + It is now a spiritual and heavenly Kingdom which has nothing to do with temporal settings, human governments or mundane homelands. Its celestial headquarters is the heavenly Jerusalem—our free mother; its headquarters on earth is the Church. As for the earthly Jerusalem it is now dead.
- + It is a divine, inner, mystical and hidden system unveiled only by faith within hearts. Yet it does have outward signs.
- + It belongs to the present as well as to the future, but it “is not coming with signs to be observed” (Luke 17:20).
- + It is not confined to a people, a nation or a system, but only to Christ who is unlimited; and thus it is to comprise every knee bent for Christ and every spiritual creation that believes in Him.
- + The Kingdom of God also exists now amidst the world within the hearts of believers despite the presence of evil, iniquity and sin in the world; for belief in Christ as Redeemer ushers us into his Kingdom and at the same time severs us from the evil in the world. For the redemption which Christ consummated by means of the divine blood is a new and living way which initiates us into the heavenly realm, and is at the same time a barrier which severs us from the evil world. The contention between the powers of the Kingdom which are within us and the powers of evil in the world will never cease until the world ceases! Moreover, the burden of evil and the contention against vanity in the world is laid upon Christianity as the proclaimer and herald of the Kingdom.

+ As Christianity rests upon faith and hope together (the belief in partial salvation in the present and the hope of total salvation in the future as well) so is the case with the Kingdom. We communicate with the partially manifested Kingdom within our hearts by means of the faith which we now possess in the person of Christ as well as communicate with the Kingdom in its complete eschatological manifestation.

+ We can by no means be certain, in a complete and perfect manner, of the Kingdom and its nature; for it is still not perfectly manifested due to the fact that we are still imperfect in faith, hope and knowledge: "Now I know in part" (1 Cor. 13:12). However, the total manifestation of the Kingdom will not come into being gradually out of an evolutionary process in the natural or temporal system, nor by evolving in faith, hope or knowledge. Rather, it will appear suddenly at the advent of Jesus Christ in His glory and "Kingdom". For as the incarnation of Christ (or His first advent) to nullify the power of sin was a medium of the partial manifestation of the Kingdom of God by faith and hope, so is the case with the complete manifestation of the Kingdom of God which will not take place except through the mediation of the second advent of Christ in His glory. As for the partial manifestation of the Kingdom of God now it "does not consist in talk but in power" (1 Cor. 4:20), the power of an inner life supported by the Spirit; the power of God for resurrection which works within our bodies from now on.

+ The Kingdom of God is not concerned with external affairs like eating or drinking: "For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:17). Hence, when such inner strengths (righteousness, peace and joy) prevail, it is a proof that we have become partners in the Kingdom of God which has actually begun to be revealed to us. For as "the kingdom of God is in the midst of you," so should its signs be now in the midst of us.

As for the complete manifestation of the Kingdom of God, though we know not now what it is, on account of our lack of knowledge and of Christ's partial manifestation, yet we do know that as soon as Christ comes we will be partners with Him in this Kingdom: "If we endure, we shall also reign with him" (2 Tim. 2:12). And though we know not yet what the glory of God is (which is to be revealed at the appearance of Christ in His second advent) we are nonetheless called upon to strive in the sure hope of attaining partnership in such glory: "We charged you to lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory" (1 Thess. 2:12). Thus, because we are called to receive a partial share by faith in the Kingdom of God in the present, joy and inner peace become its sign.

Yet we are called all the more to acquire a complete partnership in the Kingdom of God—which will be manifested in the future—by strife and unrelenting hope, by patience to the last breath, by enduring agony and tribulations even unto death: "Therefore we ourselves boast of you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions which you are enduring. This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be made worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering" (2 Thess. 1:4-5).

Through our fellowship in the Kingdom—whether it be partial in the present by faith founded upon love, or total in the future by hope founded upon strife—we are thus being inwardly prepared every day to become members in this Kingdom which will comprise of all spiritual creatures to which we will be united by no other than Christ Himself.

However, whatever we do, whether it be by faith founded upon love, or hope founded upon strife, none of this qualifies us for inheriting the Kingdom of Heaven; it only prepares us for the appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ when He comes in His glory, so that we might not fear nor be put to shame at His appearance but endure His glory. Our worthiness and our initiation into the fellowship of the Kingdom will be consummated for us by the manifestation of Christ's glory at "His second fearful advent, full of glory"(*) by our acceptance of this glory and our shameless partaking of it; for when Christ comes He will appear in the glory of His Kingdom with all the angels and the spiritual creation together with His spirits of the saints, calling us (the rest) to appear with Him.

(*) Coptic Liturgy.

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Back cover:

Icon of the three St. Macarii This is the oldest icon in the monastery (The Church of St. Abbaskheiron, the Monastery of St. Macarius)

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