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Chilton, Bruce 1996 — Pure kingdom: Jesus' vision of God

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 178 pages.

Reviewer: Dr M M Jacobs

Pure Kingdom: Jesus' vision of God forms part of the series 'Studying the historical Jesus', which focuses on key questions concerning Jesus in recent discussion. Due to its centrality in Jesus' teaching and ministry and in current discussion of him, the choice of 'kingdom of God' as such an issue is obvious. The book consists of six chapters, which are closely related, and two appendices.

In chapter one Chilton briefly traces the investigation into 'kingdom of God' from Schweitzer's view of the kingdom as an eschatological or then apocalyptic entity up to the current non-eschatological view of the kingdom advocated by a number of North American New Testament scholars. Reviewing the situation, he points out that there has been much more agreement between eschatologists and anti-eschatologists than is usually realised. In his view, the solution to the problem is not the denial of eschatology as a reference to the kingdom, but the realisation that the kingdom has other dimensions besides eschatology.

In chapter two attention is paid to the concept of God as king, in which, according to Chilton, the language of the kingdom of God originated. This is done mainly with reference to the Psalms, because they are richest in the presentation of the divine kingship, were commonly known as a result of their use in the context of worship in the temple, and develop a coherent manner of speaking of God as king.

God's kingship, according to the Psalms, points to his activity, the fact that he is in control of the world. Chilton identifies five coordinates or dimensions of the kingdom which function in the Psalms: (1) the eschatological coordinate (Pss 44, 47, 96, 98), from which it becomes clear that there is no absolute contrast between the kingdom as present and as coming; (2) the transcendent coordinate, which in his use of the term does not refer to something abstract, but to the kingdom in its spatial sense, the universal nature of God's rule, its limitless nature (Pss 145, 22, 93); (3) the coordinate of judgement, which involves the ethical demands within the purview of the kingdom (Pss 10, 97, 103); (4) the coordinate of purity (Pss 5, 24); and (5) the dimension of 'radiance' (Ps 47), which implies that from Israel as center the power of the kingdom is to radiate outward to include the other peoples. These five dimensions were, according to Chilton, the common property of the language of the kingdom in early Judaism. This is why the kingdom of God is such a richly varied concept in early Judaism.

Since Jesus acted within the context of early Judaism and his movement developed within it, the kingdom about which he taught must be related to and understood within the coordinates discovered in the Psalms. This is done in chapters three and four.

According to Chilton, Jesus' theology of the kingdom can be deduced from his sayings 'that most directly attest his own concerns within the context of the early Judaism of his time' (p 56). In chapter four he identifies a number of such generative sayings of Jesus (sayings from which the others developed) and relates them to the five coordinates of the kingdom in early Judaism which he has identified. In the process of elucidating the concept of the kingdom in the teaching of Jesus from early Judaism, Chilton comes up with some interesting explanations of Jesus' sayings (eg, the saying on children and the kingdom, Mark 10:15, Luke 18:17, which he relates to the coordinate of purity, and the one about the coming of the kingdom in the lifetime of some of his contemporaries, Mark 9:1 and parallels). Sometimes, an awareness of the different dimensions of the kingdom does indeed contribute to a better understanding of Jesus' teaching on the kingdom (eg, the kingdom as present/near).

Chilton rightly emphasises that Jesus and his impact can only be understood historically, if we understand both his teaching and his characteristic activity in their original context and in relation to one another (ch 5). In his view, Jesus' teaching and activity characterise him as a rabbi (in the pre-seventy sense of the word). 'Rabbi', however, only gives an indication of the social field in which Jesus was active. Jesus was, in his view, distinctive in two respects. Firstly, he not only gathered disciples, but also sent out twelve of them to teach and act in his name. Secondly, the occupation of the temple represents an unusual confrontation between him and priestly authority. 'No historical description of Jesus can claim to be adequate that fails to explain the causes of that fateful confrontation, because that is just where he becomes a figure whom history has not forgotten' (p 107).

Chilton's explanation of the 'cleansing' of the temple is distinctive. In contrast with, for example, Sanders, who regards the cleansing of the temple as a symbolic act which points to its destruction, Chilton is of the opinion that Jesus' conduct in the temple reflected his dissatisfaction with the way people sacrificed. Like Hillel, Jesus insisted that the offerer's ownership of what is offered, which had to be shown by the imposition of hands, be a vital aspect of his sacrifice. As a result of Caiaphas' introduction of traders into the Temple, this was no longer possible. Jesus' conduct in the temple pointed to what the temple should be, not to its demolition.

According to Chilton Jesus' last meal with his disciples provides the key to his arrest and execution. In the last supper Jesus' new interpretation of his meals becomes evident. When Jesus said over the wine 'this is my blood' and over the bread 'this is my flesh', 'he claimed that wine and bread were a better sacrifice than what was offered in the temple, a foretaste of the new wine in the kingdom of God' (p 125). 'In essence, Jesus made his meals into a rival altar' (p 125). This meant that he could be charged with blasphemy. Disloyalty to the temple also implied disloyalty to Rome. Together with the fact that Jesus continually spoke about a kingdom, this could have led to Pilate's command to crucify Jesus.

In chapter six Chilton pays attention to the shift in the meaning of 'kingdom' which occurred after Jesus' death. Of special importance is the Synoptic transformation, 'in which Jesus' preaching of the kingdom becomes the seal of his divine mission, not the principal point at issue' (p 136; cf eg, Lk 4:16-21). This transformation, which continued in the Pauline and Johannine writings, explains why the kingdom plays a much smaller role in early Christianity than in Jesus' teaching and activity.

Chilton's contribution lies especially in the fact that he takes early Judaism as context for Jesus' teaching on the kingdom seriously. He not only points to the multi-faceted nature of the kingdom (or then the kingship of God) in early Judaism, but implements this insight in a creative way in dealing with Jesus' teaching on the kingdom of God. By doing so, he moves away from the dichotomy between eschatological/non-eschatological which characterises much of the discussion on the kingdom in the teaching and ministry of Jesus. His approach is comprehensive in the sense that he relates Jesus' teaching

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on the kingdom to views both before and after his, as well as to Jesus' teaching and activity and their relation to the kingdom. He also provides some new ideas and explanations (eg, his explanation of the 'cleansing' of the temple and his view of the reason for Jesus' arrest), which, while they will still have to be critically assessed, provide food for thought.
