

A RESPONSE TO G. R. BEASLEY-MURRAY ON THE KINGDOM

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Contemporary evangelicals on both sides of the Atlantic owe a profound debt of gratitude to George Beasley-Murray. Many have benefited immensely from sitting under his teaching and learning from his books.¹ I recommend to my students his voluminous compendium of material in *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* as the best detailed work on the topic currently in existence.² Our most recent generation of evangelical scholarship would be noticeably impoverished without his contributions. It is in this spirit of gratefulness to God for Beasley-Murray's scholarship and ministry that I offer this response to his paper.

After reading his book on the kingdom, one finds no surprises in his essay. Here is a concise presentation of key tenets about Jesus' teaching on the kingdom of God that reflect a growing consensus among evangelicals, that are endorsed by not a few outside our circles, and that should be widely accepted and promoted, particularly in light of so much misinformation at the level of popular preaching, especially over radio and television. I am particularly grateful for no less than nine of the foci of this paper.

First, and perhaps foremost, Beasley-Murray rightly defines the kingdom more as a reign than a realm, more as a power than a place. David Mains, in a recent "Chapel of the Air" series, nicely popularized this concept with his talks entitled "Thy Kingship Come." I. Howard Marshall, assessing the state of the question in kingdom studies, included this definition as one of five points on which there was near-consensus agreement among NT scholars. (The others: the kingdom as the central theme of Jesus' teaching, the authenticity of many of Jesus' kingdom teachings, the combination of both present and future aspects of the kingdom, and the proclamation and activity of Jesus as the form in which the kingdom came to be present.)³

Second, Beasley-Murray insists on inaugurated eschatology as the best theological framework with which to summarize Jesus' understanding of

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¹ Most helpful personally have been *Jesus and the Future* (London: Macmillan, 1954; rev. and forthcoming from Peabody: Hendrickson); *Baptism in the New Testament* (London: Macmillan, 1962); *The Book of Revelation* (London: Oliphants, 1974); *John* (Waco: Word, 1987).

² (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).

³ I. H. Marshall, "The Hope of a New Age: The Kingdom of God in the New Testament," *Themelios* 11 (1985) 5-15.

God's reign. As just noted, this is also widely held and has been increasingly approximated by some in the dispensationalist study group of the Evangelical Theological Society, most notably Robert Saucy and Craig Blaising.⁴ As a slightly tongue-in-cheek aside, one might observe that if a theological perspective is held jointly by such a diverse but impressive array of scholars as Trilling, Kümmel, Jeremias, Ladd, Marshall, Beasley-Murray, Saucy and Blaising, it must almost certainly be true. In view of the tenacity at the grassroots level of older dispensationalism on the one hand and the resurgence of idiosyncratic studies like Clayton Sullivan's wholesale rejection of realized eschatology on the other hand,⁵ a vigorous promotion of inaugurated eschatology is surely not out of place.

Third, in focusing on the present aspect of God's reign Beasley-Murray properly identifies the perfect tense of *engizō* as pointing to the arrival and not merely the nearness of the kingdom.⁶ The promise-fulfillment scheme would surely be anticlimactic if the reign of God were not at least in part established with Christ's life and death.

Fourth, he helpfully stresses that God's kingly power has already decisively defeated Satan and his minions. Even if we agree with Cullmann that V-day must follow D-day, we live in a culture in which too many Christians act as if Satan might overwhelm them at any time with various forms of demonization, completely without invitation. In part this is the unintended offshoot of Frank Peretti's works.⁷ In other circles we are baraged with claims like Jimmy Swaggart's that he had to exorcise a demon of lust from himself, the implication being that he was not personally responsible for his own sexual temptation and sin. And in a more academic milieu we are told by certain church-growth specialists that the key to successful evangelism in various foreign countries is the widespread exorcism of devils from Buddhist or Hindu temples as the necessary prerequisite to mass conversions.⁸ The Biblical truth that Satan has already been decisively bound surely needs a bigger press.

Fifth, Jesus' pointer to his miracles as signs of the inbreaking kingdom offers us helpful clues as to how to assess the current signs-and-wonders movement. Not surprisingly, those places where modern-day miracles seem most frequent and authentic are in contexts where God's reign has not previously and decisively entered. There may be no NT precedent for exorcising territorial demons, but there clearly is precedent for "power evangelism" at the individual level as a prelude to the gospel gaining successful inroads into a pagan culture (consider, in Acts alone, the episodes

⁴ R. L. Saucy, "The Presence of the Kingdom and the Life of the Church," *BSac* 145 (1988) 30-46; C. A. Blaising, "Development of Dispensationalism by Contemporary Dispensationalists," *BSac* 145 (1988) 254-280.

⁵ C. Sullivan, *Rethinking Realized Eschatology* (Macon: Mercer, 1988).

⁶ See esp. Beasley-Murray's own elaboration of this point in *Jesus and the Kingdom* 72-73.

⁷ F. E. Peretti, *This Present Darkness* (Westchester: Crossway, 1986); *Piercing the Darkness* (Westchester: Crossway, 1989).

⁸ Particularly in the recent work of C. Peter Wagner, as reported by Paul Hiebert in a lecture on the globalization of theological education, Denver Seminary, Denver, CO, April 1991.

in Cyprus with Elymas, the magician; in Philippi, with the demon-possessed slave girl; and in Ephesus, with the seven sons of Sceva).⁹ Yet in the spirit of John 20:29 ("Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believed"), which with v. 31 brings to a climax the twin Johannine themes that signs are intended to demonstrate who Jesus is but that people should not have to need them, perhaps the more mature an individual believer or Christian community becomes the less it should expect miracles, which are more appropriate for God's initial establishment of his reign.¹⁰

Sixth, Beasley-Murray appropriately rejects the translation of Luke 17:21 that makes the kingdom something internal. It seems incoherent to view Jesus as telling his Pharisaic opponents that God's royal power already existed inside of them, even though the translation "the kingdom of God is within you" persists in many circles (including the NIV, though the footnote acknowledges the alternative "among").¹¹ "In your midst," "among you," or "within your reach" are all surely preferable.¹²

Seventh, I am grateful for the insistence that Jesus' claim to be Messiah was not viewed as blasphemy. This observation always surprises my students, and yet it seems so straightforward. Notwithstanding diverse messianic expectations in second-temple Judaism, the Jewish authorities could hardly have expected ever to acquire a Messiah if they automatically killed off all claimants. Rather, it was Jesus' association of Messiah with supernatural prerogatives ("the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven"), which in turn requires a Danielic background for "Son of Man" for at least this passage, that was viewed as improper self-arrogation of divine privilege.¹³

Eighth, I appreciate the sensitivity to the synoptic sequence of Jesus' progressive self-disclosure. His trial before the Sanhedrin is indeed "the only public occasion when Jesus plainly declared that he was the Messiah." Other plain revelations are more private (e.g. with the Samaritan woman in John 4); other public revelations are more ambiguous (e.g. with Jesus' "I am" sayings, which we too easily forget are built on metaphors). I am increasingly convinced that popular-level evangelicalism is riddled with unwitting docetism,¹⁴ particularly as I encounter widespread resistance among students and churchgoers to the plain meaning of the more blunt statements in the gospels about Jesus' voluntarily accepted limitations (e.g. his lack of omniscience in Mark 13:32 or omnipotence in Mark 6:5).

⁹ Cf. further J. Wimber and K. Springer, *Power Evangelism* (San Francisco: Harper, 1986).

¹⁰ On which see esp. R. Kysar, *John the Maverick Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1976) 65–83 (*contra* Wimber and Springer).

¹¹ The most recent defense of this view is that of H. Riesenfeld, "Le règne de Dieu, parmi vous ou en vous? (*Luc 17, 20–21*)," *RB* 98 (1991) 190–198.

¹² Cf. esp. J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X–XXIV* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1985) 1160–1162; C. F. Evans, *Saint Luke* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1990) 628–630.

¹³ Cf. now esp. C. A. Evans, "In What Sense 'Blasphemy'? Jesus before Caiaphas in Mark 14:61–64," in *SBLSP* (ed. E. H. Lovering; Atlanta: Scholars, 1991) 213–234.

¹⁴ Not to mention among those who should know better; cf. e.g. J. F. Walvoord (*Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come* [Chicago: Moody, 1974] 223), who puzzles over the high priest's outrage because he believes that prior to his trial Jesus has "freely claimed his deity and Messiahship."

Finally, Beasley-Murray has given us an important, renewed defense of Mark 14:62 as a reference to the *parousia* and not, as with Richard France and a growing number of other writers, to Christ's coming in judgment of the nation of Israel in A.D. 70.¹⁵

In light of all of these significant points of agreement, any points of disagreement that I might register remain trivial in comparison. But the genre of "response" constrains me to note a few such points.

First, I am not convinced that any of the words that are difficult to translate in Matt 11:12 are intended to be taken *in bonam partem*. With Schrenk and a host of subsequent commentators it seems more true both to the context and to the most common uses of the terms to take *biastai* as the hostile opponents of the kingdom who attack (*harpazousin*) it (and hence Jesus) so that it suffers violence (*biazetai*).¹⁶ Matthew 11 appears precisely in that part of the gospel in which opposition to Christ and his ministry is starting to unfold. Jesus has himself foreseen it in his discourse in chap. 10, and it will reach a fever pitch in chap. 12 with the accusations against him of empowerment by Beelzeboul. I do not see how the seemingly more positive meaning of the saying in Luke 16:16 can restrict our interpretation of Matthew. The context is so entirely different in Luke that this must either be Jesus' reuse of a similar saying on a different occasion or so significant an adaptation by Luke of the original saying that Jesus' words in Matthew can scarcely be interpreted by it.

Second, I wonder whether we are presented with a false dichotomy regarding the opening petition of the Lord's prayer. Must we choose between "a plea for a cessation of irreverent use of the name of God" and one "that God should so manifest his powerful deliverance that people should be in awe"? After all, the Ezekiel passage quoted in support of the latter also laments how Yahweh's name "has been profaned among the nations."

Third, I suspect the beatitudes are more balanced between present and future aspects of the kingdom rather than having "primarily . . . in view the future kingdom." The inclusion of present-tense verbs in the first and last blessings, framing the future-tense verbs of the intermediate promises of recompense, suggests the importance of both present and future manifestations of the kingdom.

Fourth, I doubt that the midrash on Ps 2:7 can be used as evidence for conjoining Ps 110:1 with Dan 7:13 "prior to the resurrection of Jesus." Most scholars of rabbinic literature place this midrash as one of the very latest composed, perhaps even into the Gaonic period (i.e. beginning in the sixth century). On the same topic, I fail to grasp how such a "remarkable" juxtaposition of texts suggests that it was "traditional," unless perhaps the logic is that it is not likely that the rabbis would for the first time duplicate such a combination that they knew Jesus had already created. But

¹⁵ R. T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982) 139–148, modified slightly in *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 185.

¹⁶ G. Schrenk, "*biazomai*, *biastēs*," *TDNT* 1:609–614. Cf. recently W. E. Moore, "Violence to the Kingdom: Josephus and the Syrian Churches," *ExpTim* 100 (1989) 174–177.

such coincidences do occur elsewhere, so I am not sure how strong an argument this is.

None of these four points of demurral in any way jeopardizes the main theme or even the main subpoints of Beasley-Murray's presentation, about which I remain enthusiastic. My largest area of concern is not about anything the paper says but about certain areas that are left unaddressed. No doubt they were simply not perceived to be part of the purview of this study. But that raises the larger question of whether American evangelicals more generally are addressing key aspects of kingdom studies that loom large in other theological and scholarly traditions. I will mention only two here.

First is the broad category of the social outworking of God's royal rule. John Drane helpfully refers to the kingdom of God as God's new society.¹⁷ If it is important to stress the present, powerful activity of the kingdom, first in Jesus and then individually in the lives of his followers, surely it is even more important in an age and culture of radical individualism to stress the corporate aspects of the kingdom. Andrew Kirk's rather comprehensive summation of all that is involved in the reign of God challenges us to explore new dimensions not often treated at length in evangelical discussions of the topic:

The kingdom sums up God's plan to create a new human life by making possible a new kind of community among people, families and groups. [It combines] the possibility of a personal relationship to Jesus with man's responsibility to manage wisely the whole of nature; the expectation that real change is possible here and now; a realistic assessment of the strength of opposition to God's intentions; the creation of new human relationships and the eventual liberation by God of the whole of nature from corruption.¹⁸

Today over half of the world's born-again Christians live in abject poverty, to say nothing of the total number of people more generally who barely survive from one day to the next in squalid surroundings. Notwithstanding several fine papers that stood out as exceptions, it is a telling critique of our own subculture when such a large gathering of North American evangelicals at the annual meeting of the ETS in November last year could devote an entire conference to the kingdom of God and spend such a small percentage of their time addressing practical issues of life-style, giving, stewardship, relief, politics, or even the structural or systemic change that may be needed if we are seriously to obey Jesus' mandates to care for the poor and needy in our world.

Second, since the ETS is uniquely a gathering of scholars, it is worth noting that a major new trend in interpreting Jesus' teaching on the kingdom has gained momentum in nonevangelical scholarly circles during the last decade. It takes several forms; what unites it is what might be called a de-apocalypticizing of the kingdom. Marcus Borg has helped to spearhead

¹⁷ J. Drane, *Jesus and the Four Gospels* (San Francisco: Harper, 1979) 90-92.

¹⁸ A. Kirk, *The Good News of the Kingdom Coming* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1983) 47.

this movement and is one of its less radical practitioners. He still endorses a two-stage inaugurated eschatology but moves it to the periphery of what Jesus was about.¹⁹ Others eliminate the future or apocalyptic aspect altogether. Crossan speaks of "permanent eschatology," which he defines not as Christ proclaiming the end of this world but as Jesus

announcing God as the One who shatters world, this one and any other before or after it. If Jesus forbade calculations of the signs of the end, it was not calculations, nor signs, but end he was attacking. God, in Kingdom, is the One who poses permanent and unceasing challenge to man's ultimate concern and thereby keeps world free from idolatry and open in its uncertainty.²⁰

For James Breech, Jesus is nothing but a sage, teaching a kind of existentialism in which his message of the kingdom purposes to "communicate to his listeners his own perception of, and attitude toward, human reality" in which people must come to grips with commitment to others besides themselves.²¹ This is good as far as it goes, but it does not go far toward embracing the full-orbed gospel. Recent *Semeia* symposia, conferences whose papers have been presented in the new journal *Forum*, and the findings of the Jesus Seminar in its various color-coded studies all reflect this hyper-realized interpretation of the kingdom.²² It surprised me somewhat that Beasley-Murray's book, not published until 1986, interacted with virtually no developments in kingdom studies beyond the late 1970s.²³ I note that his paper represents no advance in this respect on the lacunae in his book. But the de-apocalypticizing of the kingdom seems to be no passing fancy, and sooner or later some evangelicals will have to respond to it. Indeed, the five points Marshall attributed to the consensus in his 1985 survey may no longer be the consensus in many circles today.

But it is time to conclude. I must reiterate my profound thanks for Beasley-Murray's presence among us. I am delighted that his scholarship has broken into our midst and continues to empower us. I trust that his career, like his understanding of Jesus' eschatology, has still future elements to it awaiting fulfillment, and that he may continue to have a productive ministry for many years to come. I wish to thank him for his paper and its wisdom, and to thank him as well for his unswerving commitment over the years to our Lord and Savior.

¹⁹ M. Borg, *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teaching of Jesus* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1984) 248-263.

²⁰ J. D. Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Harper, 1973) 27.

²¹ J. Breech, *The Silence of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 112, 213.

²² E.g. *Semeia* 44 (1988); *Forum* 3/1 (1987); *Five Gospels, One Jesus* (ed. R. W. Funk and R. W. Hoover; Sonoma: Polebridge, 1992).

²³ This, I am told, is because the MS was completed in 1980 and subsequently delayed at various publishers. .