

The Coming Kingdom: Evolution or Revolution?

McLaren's *Jihadist Jesus* and the Second Coming

"Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken: And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory." Jesus, Matthew 24:29-30, KJV

In recent years, Christendom's thinkers have offered a smorgasbord of ideas and theories about Jesus, thus begging the question—will the real Jesus please stand up? If one pays attention to the Jesus revisionists, we are left with the impression that nobody really understood Him, not even the Apostle Paul. To some, Jesus is a white Caucasian, and to others He's a black African. To some, He was a revolutionary, and to others a pacifist. To some, He's a prophet, while to others He's a Gnostic. From teacher to magician, Jesus, it seems, can become almost anyone to everyone—a man for all seasons. So, it is supposed, if we earnestly “quest” after Him, we might discover the authentic Jesus. However, Jesus “makeovers” usually require that disparate parts of the biblical record be affirmed on the one hand, and denied on the other. But amidst all this “Jesus questing,” the believer can take solace in knowing that controversy over Jesus' identity is not new (See Matthew 16:13-20.).

As he embraces “the nonviolent Jesus of the Gospels” (the Jesus of “love and grace”), one Christian leader now debunks what he labels the “jihadist Jesus” of the “Second Coming” (the Jesus of “violence and domination”). According to Brian McLaren, “the Second Coming Jesus”—once held by an evangelical consensus to be one of the five fundamentals of the Christian faith—needs rethinking.[1]

Advocating that the whole of nature is a “sacred ecosystem of God which is the kingdom of God,”[2] McLaren appears to view that the Second Coming (SC) would be an imposition upon nature's ongoing order/disorder. In fact, he associates the idea of it with false religion characterized by “dislocation, derangement, and decomposition.”[3] Because SC eschatology (like that portrayed in the *Left Behind* series of novels) creates hope that the Messiah will renew our environment when He returns (See Isaiah 65:17; 66:22; 2 Peter 3:13.), such a hope, McLaren argues, creates indifference toward nature, and hence, facilitates the current environmental crisis. After all, if Jesus is coming back to get us out of the ecological mess, who cares? In fact, to make Jesus hurry up a bit, maybe people ought to trash the planet to escalate the *eschaton* (Greek, meaning “the end of everything, the end of the world”). But such demented reasoning runs counter to the environmental stewardship God entrusted to mankind (Genesis 1:24-31).

But fixing the blame for the environmental crunch is much easier than fixing the problem. Are we really to think that, in the overall global picture, belief in a SC Jesus, “intoxicated by dubious interpretations of John's Apocalypse,”[4] is really to blame for the world's ecological crisis? Is it really credible to think that “second-coming-Jesus-ism” is responsible for polluting the Ganges

River, or dumping toxic wastes in Siberia or Nevada? Any accounting for the ecological mess we're in, it seems to me, has more to do with human depravity—the systemic derangement of humanity's corporate heart which incites the exploitation of God's wondrous creation—than it does with belief in Jesus' SC which, in the global scope of things, is a minor idea that the majority of humanity is either ignorant of or indifferent to. McLaren's argument is too parochial.

Yet in light of the very same Bible to which McLaren often alludes and refers, just how does the New Testament present Jesus' Second Coming? To answer this question will require that we understand what the New Testament means by the Second Coming, the attitude of the nations towards the Lord's kingdom, and the role that war played in God's establishing of His kingdom amongst the ancient nations.

The Meaning of the Second Coming

Brian McLaren states:

The phrase 'the Second Coming of Christ' never actually appears in the Bible. Whether or not the doctrine to which the phrase refers deserves rethinking, a popular abuse of it certainly needs to be named and rejected.[5]

Disregarding the fact that the word "trinity" does not appear in the Bible—this belief is deduced from the revelatory data deposited in Holy Scripture—are we to think that, as McLaren suggests, belief in the SC is unbiblical?

If Jesus' SC needs to be adjusted to fit the theory that earth's ecosystem is "the kingdom of God," then we might agree with him. Any futurism that does not correlate with the observable order of things may need revision in an "earth-is-the-kingdom-of-God" theory, for if that be the case, the past is the present, and the present is the future. Thus, the human race needs time, and lots of it, to help "evolve" God's kingdom on earth. The SC would be an intrusion upon the ongoing evolution and outworking of God's "sacred ecosystem." But the fact of the matter is, assuming entropic laws of thermodynamics to be true, and they are (See Psalms 102:26; Isaiah 51:6; Romans 8:20-22.), sooner or later the deteriorating condition of earth will reach critical mass and desperately require, if life is to survive, intervention from outside "the system." One day, the sun will no longer shine, and our solar system will die a cold death. Or, in the far distant future, when gravity has exhausted itself, the "force" will reverse and what was once "the big bang" will end in "the big crunch." Earth to God: We need your help!

Three Words

Scripture portrays that help is on the way. James encourages believers to, "**Be patient . . . until the coming (*parousia*) of the Lord**" (James 5:7). Paul calls it, "**the blessed hope and the appearing (*epiphaneia*) of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus**" (Titus 2:13). He also describes that the Corinthians ought to be, "**awaiting eagerly the revelation (*apokalupsis*) of our Lord Jesus Christ**" (1 Corinthians 1:7). In these references, three nouns describe Jesus' return—"**the coming . . . the appearing . . . the revelation.**"[6] In

order, the words denote Jesus' future "presence, Shekinah-shining, and great unveiling." In that the apostolic church viewed the resurrected Christ had ascended into heaven (Acts 1:9), His expected return came to be known as the Second Coming. It's just that simple. So we ask, is McLaren's assertion—"The phrase 'the Second Coming of Christ' never actually appears in the Bible"—correct? Sure, like the word "trinity," the precise phrase "Second Coming" does not occur in the Bible. Nevertheless, the New Testament is quite comfortable with the meaning and concept of it. We now give more detailed attention to, "The Parousia of Jesus."

One Word

Parousia is the Greek word describing the presence of a person.[7] The word does not connote "spiritual presence" (See Matthew 28:20.). *Parousia*-presence is physical. It is a three dimensional "in-the-body" experience in which one person can reach out and touch the other! This connotation is evident from the saying of Paul's enemies who criticized that, "**His letters are weighty and strong, but his personal presence (parousia) is unimpressive**" (2 Corinthians 10:10, NASB; See I Corinthians 16:17; Philippians 2:12.). Further, Matthew uses the word when he recorded the question the disciples asked Jesus on the Mount of Olives about His return. As they overlooked Herod's Temple, the disciples asked Jesus: "**Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of Your coming (parousia), and of the end of the age?**" (Matthew 24:3)." In answering their question, Matthew records that Jesus used the Greek word *parousia* to describe His presence at the end of the age (Matthew 24:27, 37, 39). Note: The Lord did not correct the disciples for associating His coming presence (*parousia*) with the end of the age (the *eschaton*). Thus, when placed under the spotlight of Scripture, it can be seen that though the phrase "Second Coming of Christ" never appears in the Bible, the concept of it is prominent. McLaren's objection is a ruse.

Should the Parousia be taken Seriously?

In setting forth his theory that the "sacred ecosystem" equals (i.e., he uses the verb "is") "the kingdom of God," McLaren rightfully tells us to ask ourselves: "What if Jesus isn't being cute and romantic in the Sermon on the Mount? What if He is completely serious and means to be taken seriously?"[8] Thank you. I think Jesus meant for His followers to take that sermon seriously (Matthew 5:1-7:28). But later in His ministry, He preached another sermon, the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24:4-25:46). So piggybacking on McLaren's questions, what if Jesus isn't being cryptic and esoteric in the sermon He preached on the Mount of Olives? What if he is being completely open and literal about His Second Coming, and means for His followers to take it seriously?

The Apostle Peter took the Second Coming seriously. In fact, he called skeptics who dare to question the Parousia "mockers." He wrote:

Know this first of all, that in the last days mockers will come with their mocking, following after their own lusts, and saying, 'Where is the promise of His coming (parousia)? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation'. (2 Peter 3:3-4).

Of their ridicule, a scholar noted that, “Their mockery seems to be directed against the delay in the parousia, and consequently against the Church’s eschatology in general.”[9]

In looking at Peter’s words, the ideology which causes the mockers to mock the Parousia is evident; that is, “all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation.” Does this statement by Peter bear resemblance to the idea that nature is the continuing “sacred ecosystem of God which is the kingdom of God”? If nature “is the kingdom of God,” no Second-Coming Jesus is needed to establish God’s earthly kingdom. If nature “is the kingdom of God,” why pray, “**Father . . . Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven**” (Matthew 6:10)? Why pray for the kingdom to come when, in the form of the “sacred ecosystem,” it’s already here? The chaos of nature is the emerging fractal of heaven.[10] As above, so below . . .

In proposing that the SC needs rethinking, McLaren pejoratively estimates that current thinking about Christ’s *Parousia*, “intoxicated by dubious interpretations of John’s Apocalypse,” is “ignorant and wrong . . . dangerous and immoral.”[11] Granted, some have taken the study of biblical prophecy to imbalanced excesses. Mistakes have been made. But are we therefore, to consider the core of eschatology, the fundamental of Jesus’ coming Parousia, to be so wrong-headed that it needs rethinking? Are the Scriptures not clear on this point? I suggest that any revisionist thinking is necessary only if the “the kingdom of God” equals the current “sacred ecosystem.” If indeed this system is the kingdom, then there’s really no reason for the King to come. Nature does not need, and perhaps does not want, grace. But in spite of such a theory, and given the reality of entropy, sooner or later our world will need the intervention of its Creator.

The Attitude of the Nations towards the Lord’s Anointed

But the Bible pictures that the world’s intelligentsia—the political, economic, and religious movers and shakers—is ever strategizing and plotting about how to build a kingdom without the Lord’s “Anointed.” As the Psalmist asks,

Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing? *The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord, and against his Anointed, saying, ‘Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us’.* (Punctuation and Emphasis Mine, Psalm 2:1-3, KJV)

From the Psalmist’s statement it can be seen that dating back as far as Babel, there has been resentment of and resistance to God’s rule on earth (Genesis 11:1-9).

From the psalmist’s question and insight, it can be seen that humanity, perhaps the majority, does not want God’s Kingdom. In fact, they incorrigibly oppose it. As pictured in the movie *Independence Day*, earthlings will fight it as if it were an invasion from outer space. Nevertheless, the Lord will give His Messiah “**the heathen for [His] inheritance and the uttermost parts of the earth for [His] possession**” (Psalm 2:8). The Lord will say to the nations who are confederate against His rule, “Enough is enough! Put away your insincere

peace stratagems and toys of war. It's time for My Kingdom." So in that day, as David describes, the Lord will **"speak unto them in his wrath . . . vex them in his sore displeasure . . . break them with a rod of iron . . . dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel"** (Psalm 2:5, 9). In other words, the Kingdom will come via a coup d'état from heaven.

Resistance to God's Reign: Past and Future

McLaren assumes that belief in a "jihadist Jesus" grows out of some off-the-wall interpretation of John's Apocalypse (Revelation 19:11-19). He states that, "The gentle Jesus of the first coming becomes a kind of trick Jesus, a fake-me-out Messiah, to be replaced by the true jihadist Jesus of a violent second coming." [12] What he seems to overlook is that the very Revelation chapter he asserts is misunderstood by Left-Behind eschatologists alludes to the Old Testament passage which describes the resistance of the nations to the rule of the Lord's Anointed (Compare Revelation 19:15 and Psalm 2:9.). Therefore, Jesus' SC (i.e., His "revelation" or apokalupsis) must be understood against the backdrop of the international antagonism toward God's kingdom pictured in Psalm 2. This, of course, raises the issue of war as a means "the Lord of Hosts" might use to establish His coming earthly rule. In the past, the Lord employed war to establish the kingdom of Israel amongst the ancient pagan kingdoms. The "jihadist Jesus" of the Apocalypse, as McLaren calls him, is antitype to the "jihadist Jehovah" in the Old Testament. Might it be that the Lord will resort to force to establish His kingdom in a secularized world in the future?

Amongst the kingdoms of the ancient world, God elected Israel to be His Kingdom (Exodus 19:6; Deuteronomy 7:6; 26:19). Imperfect as Israel was, Yahweh called her to be His Kingdom amongst the ancient kingdoms of men. Of the divine choice, Old Testament scholar Peter Craigie stated that,

In order to achieve the ultimate redemption of man, God acts through human beings. He acts in the world as it is, for if the prerequisite for divine action were sinless men and sinless societies, God could not act through human beings and human institutions at all. [13]

The ancient kingdoms however, resisted God's rule in their world through Israel, for as the Psalmist stated to the Lord about His chosen nation:

For, behold, Thine enemies make an uproar; / And those who hate Thee have exalted themselves. They make shrewd plans against Thy people, / And conspire together against Thy treasured ones. They have said, "Come, and let us wipe them out as a nation, / That the name of Israel be remembered no more." (Psalm 83:2-4, NASB)

In light of the visceral hatred of the nations toward Israel, what option remained for Yahweh to establish and defend His kingdom other than war? But antagonism toward the establishment of God's kingdom continued . . . When God's King came, the world rejected Him.

Upon hearing of the birth of the “King of the Jews,” King Herod’s heart was troubled as he felt his throne threatened. So to preserve his rule, he later ordered the killing of infant boys two years old and under (Matthew 2:3, 16). The Romans also mocked and crucified Jesus as “**the King of the Jews**” (John 19:1-3). These incidents reveal the resident rebellion in the hearts of men toward the reign of God. Since David wrote Psalm 2, there is no evidence to suggest their attitude changed. Systemically, the world opposes the reign of the Lord’s Anointed.

Will the Nations Repent?

So what of Jesus’ Second Coming? Are we to think that, the second time around, earth’s authorities will suddenly become amicable to the idea of God’s Kingdom? In light of how the nations resisted Israel and world leaders treated Jesus, can the picture of it in the book of Revelation be dismissed as that of a crazy “jihadist” Jesus imagined by Left-Behind-fundamentalist Christians? In contrast to the non-resistance He exhibited when He was tried and crucified, might Jesus reserve the option of force to establish His authority when He comes again? Should we expect the world’s nations to be any less hostile to God’s takeover in the future than they have demonstrated in the past? Might Jesus be cornered into fighting the war to end all wars? After all, both David the Psalmist and John the Seer similarly wrote:

David: Yahweh speaking to His Anointed—“You shall break them [the nations] with a rod of iron; / You shall dash them to pieces like a potter’s vessel . . .” Yahweh speaking to the nations—“Kiss the Son, lest He be angry, / And you perish in the way, / When His wrath is kindled but a little.” (Psalm 2:9, 12, NKJV)

John: “Now out of His mouth goes a sharp sword, that with it He should strike the nations. *And He Himself will rule them with a rod of iron.* He Himself treads the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God.” (Emphasis Mine, Revelation 19:15, NKJV)

But until the coming reign of the Messiah, and unlike power mongers of any religious persuasion, God’s children should not take matters into their own hands, but must patiently and peacefully wait in faith for God’s Anointed to establish His Kingdom. The establishment of it will be His doing, not ours. “**For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh . . .**” (2 Corinthians 10:3-4a, NASB).

Conclusion

New Age spiritualists are comfortable with the idea that a cosmic Christ-spirit, in a laissez-faire way, dwells in, around, and through all things, but are discomfited by any thought that the personal Christ might turn out to be a hands-on “Jesus,” who when He comes, will not only judge men for how they treated His creation, but also for how they treated God and His children. Utopianism and its *apparatchiks*[14] underestimate human depravity and the way it militates against man’s attempt to develop a perfect society on earth.[15] While some are better than others, no human system of government possesses the ultimate peace plan for our planet. Until the Second Coming, we “**according to His promise . . . are looking for [the] new heavens**

and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells” (Emphasis Mine, 2 Peter 3:13, NASB). Any hope for peace and fairness in the world demands the presence (parousia) of the “**Prince of Peace**” who will “**order and establish [His government] with judgment and justice**” (Isaiah 9:6-7).

"Behold He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him. Even so. Amen."
(Revelation 1:7).

Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

[1] Historically, the fifth fundamental affirmed that the church could expect, as with His First Coming, Jesus would personally and physically return to our world again. The Second Coming is “the main event” of biblical prophecy.

[2] Emphasis Mine, Brian D. McLaren, *Everything Must Change, Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007) 142. In this regard, I admit to being a sort of “tree hugger,” and that I religiously recycle all the plastic containers and metal cans I can. On occasion, I have contributed to environmentalist causes. I believe Christians ought to exemplify “using but not abusing” earth’s natural resources. God has mandated that we care for this planet (Genesis 1:26-30).

[3] Ibid. McLaren accuses that Christians who believe that the world will end in a final conflict between good and evil possess a violent and terrorist streak in them. He states that, “no one should be surprised when those shaped by this theology behave accordingly.” (p.144) Thus, he lumps fundamentalist Christians and radical Muslims together. But to show that McLaren is not comparing “apples to apples” in his ideological stereotyping, two quotations, one from the *Koran*, and another from the Bible, are juxtaposed. The *Koran*: “Make war on them (i.e., infidels) until idolatry is no more and Allah’s religion reigns supreme.” (*Koran*, Sura 2:193; 8:39) The *Bible*: “If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:18-21).

[4] McLaren, *Everything*, 144.

[5] Ibid. 144.

[6] Verbs used in the New Testament to designate Jesus’ return include various forms of “come” (*erchomai*, Matthew 24:42; Revelation 22:20) and “appear” (*phaino*?, Matthew 24:30; Titus 2:13).

[7] Deriving from the Latin word for “past” (*praeter*), Preterism is an eschatological system which holds that most, if not all, biblical prophecies regarding the Second Coming were fulfilled before or at the time of Jerusalem’s destruction in A.D. 70. Radical preterists hold that Jesus came in a “judgment coming” upon the Jewish nation at that time and therefore “the kingdom of God is a present reality” and “in a real historical sense the *parousia* has already occurred.” See R.C. Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998) 24. I point this

out to show that that Preterism has already rethought and revised the doctrine of Jesus' Second Coming. Some radical preterists hope that in the future God will, in order to make time for His kingdom to develop on earth, suspend the entropic laws of thermodynamics. See *John No?, Beyond the End Times, The Rest of . . . The Greatest Story Ever Told* (Bradford, Pennsylvania: Preterist Resources, 1999) 63. Thus No? confidently asserts: "The world is never, repeat never-ever, going to end. We live in a never-ending world." (p.45). All concerned environmentalists—I say this facetitiously—should be comforted by No?'s assurance.

[8] McLaren, *Everything*, 142-143.

[9] Georg Bertram, "empaigmonh," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Gerhard Friedrich, Editor and Geoffrey William Bromiley, Translator and Editor (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1967) 5:636.

[10] "A fractal is generally 'a rough or fragmented geometric that can be split into parts, each of which is (at least approximately) a reduced-size copy of the whole.'" Thus in a monistic universe, the earth below can be thought of as the copy of heaven above—as above, so below.

[11] McLaren, *Everything*, 144.

[12] *Ibid.* 144.

[13] Peter C. Craigie, *The Problem of War in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978) 96.

[14] "Apparatchik" is a Russian term describing individuals appointed to positions in any government on the basis of ideological or political loyalty rather than competence.

[15] See Thomas Molnar, *Utopia: The Perennial Heresy* (New York: Sheed and Ward, Inc., 1967).