Is the Kingdom of God/Heaven a Promised Land? Traces of a Material View in Jesus of Nazareth's Eschatology

O Reino de Deus / Céu é uma Terra Prometida? Traços de uma visão material na escatologia de Jesus de Nazaré

Fernando Bermejo-Rubio
UNED, Madrid
fjlmbr@yahoo.es

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1. Introduction: The Problem and Its Relevance

Although almost every aspect of the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth is hotly debated in the academic realm, there is virtual unanimity that the core of his preaching was the announcement of an approaching "kingdom of God" (resp. "kingdom of Heaven"). Nevertheless, this concept is usually understood as a metaphor or a symbol of blessedness, without a direct link with a terrestrial place. When a space is envisaged at all, it is, so to say, a transcendent one. The fact that the Gospel of Matthew uses the phrase "kingdom of Heaven" as a synonym of "kingdom of God" has contributed to favor the interpretation of this eschatological category as designing a meta-empirical reality[1]. The current representation of that kingdom remains rather ethereal, not being related to concrete, material elements. To sum up, neither the scholarly realm nor the popular view envisages the core of the preaching of Jesus of Nazareth as a "Promised Land".

This state of affairs is all the odder because Judaism, the religion of Jesus and the religious matrix of Christianity, put a great emphasis on the notion of

[1] Although "Heaven" is a respectful circumlocution for the divine name, it could be also part of Matthew's theological strategy of reaffirming the disciples of Jesus as people whose goals were in heaven and not on earth; see Foster, 2002.

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a promised land as a physical place[2]. One could accordingly expect that Jesus (and, in his wake, Christians) would also grant that particular notion a key role in his worldview. Nevertheless, eschatological expectations in the most widespread world religion are usually connected with abstractions as "Reward" and "Punishment", whilst the spatial reference is, if any, to some kind of celestial realm. Christian hopes seem to have been transferred from an earthly to a heavenly locale, and the notion of a promised land has been neglected or ignored. The aim of this paper is to account for this –at first sight– odd state of affairs.

The role of the land in the Hebrew Bible and in Judaism has understandably been the object of many studies, and has also been treated elsewhere in this conference, so I will not expatiate on this topic. Suffice it to recall that the hope for the land –and for the quintessence of the land in Judaism, the earthly Jerusalem– is a doctrine which is traceable throughout all ancient Jewish literature, from the Hebrew Bible through the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, and the Qumran Scrolls to the Hellenistic Jewish sources and ultimately to the Rabbinic literature. In these circumstances, it is a reasonable presumption that such an eschatological expectation must have played a significant role in the views of any Palestinian Jewish believer in the first century CE, and therefore also in Jesus of Nazareth. Nevertheless, according to standard wisdom, nothing could be farther from the truth: Jesus is depicted in the Christian tradition as a timeless Savior coming down from heaven and returning to his heavenly homeland after his death and resurrection, without showing interest in promised lands or any kind of earthly realm. For any independent observers –such as historians of religions–, this is obviously the result of a mythologizing process, through which the figure of a mortal Jewish preacher was injected with "narrative steroids", thereby letting him compete with the gods and mythological heroes of the classical world (See MacDonald, 2015, p. 10).

Previous treatments of the topic "Jesus and the Land" fit perfectly well with the traditional view of a de-nationalized and de-historicized Jesus who distanced himself from any territorial dimension of faith. The word "land" has a meager place in standard reference works on Jesus, and when it is used at all, such usage usually involves a blanket dismissal that Jesus shared any standard Jewish eschatological hopes (See e.g. Davies, 1994, pp. 336-376). As already remarked, this is also perceptible in the standard treatments of the key notion "kingdom of God". A German scholar, Gustaf Dalman (1855-1941), defined βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ not as "kingdom of God" but exclusively as "kingly rule", "reign of God" or "dominion of God", thereby excluding more spatially-oriented readings of the term "kingdom":

> No doubt can be entertained that both in the Old Testament and in Jewish literature *malkut*, when applied to God, means always the 'kingly rule', never the 'kingdom', as if it were meant to suggest the territory governed by him. (Dalman, 1902, p. 94)

[2] The biblical vision of utopia is firmly and concretely embodied in a specific land; see Collins, 2000, p. 67.

This interpretation has had a great impact on the scholarly realm, to the extent that, according to some scholars, Dalman's words constitute "in New Testament studies, perhaps the most influential sentence ever written" (O'Neill, 1993, p. 130). Be that as it may, the view of the kingdom as a significant earthly space has been accordingly dismissed. The Greek phrase ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ is deemed to be not so much the *place* where God rules as the mere *fact* that God rules, or the *power* through which God manifests his sovereignty. Its territorial meaning has been removed, to the point that quite a few scholars blame the usual translation "kingdom of God" as incorrect, insufficient, or misleading. For instance, the *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament based on semantic domains*, which has received a remarkably positive reception and is usually considered as a major achievement in lexicographical studies, in their entry for βασιλεία states that "it is generally a serious mistake to translate the phrase ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ ('the kingdom of God') as referring to a particular area in which God rules. The meaning of this phrase in the NT involves not a particular place or special period of time but the fact of ruling" (Louw and Nida, 1989, I, p. 480).

The problem with these studies is that they are bedeviled with argumentative shortcomings and flaws. To start with, they prevent scholars from appreciating the breadth of meaning of "kingdom" terminology, as a few authors have rightly remarked (See Aalen, 1962; Brown, 2001). The emphatic insistence on the exclusion of any other interpretation is unwarranted, since nothing inherent in the term βασιλεία tells us that we should decide against a spatial dimension (Wenell, 2017, p. 210). Let us realize that even some proposals in Dalman's wake do not seem to be particularly consistent: for instance, the term "dominion" itself suggests an area of domination, thereby referring again to space.

The same kind of problem is detected when studies on the relationship of Jesus to land are envisaged. These studies do not take seriously into account the evidence indicating that the land –and the nationalist and political aspects related to it– were crucial in Jesus' message. It is revealing, for instance, to what extent W. D. Davies' classic *The Gospel and the Land* is methodologically unsound and historically disappointing. For example, Davies starts by enumerating a whole set of Gospel passages hinting at a portrayal of Jesus as a man nationalistically concerned to rid the land of its Roman usurper[3], but immediately dismisses the heuristic value of all this material through an atomizing approach, incapable of offering a unifying explanation of it, and often involving strained and far-fetched interpretations. Moreover, in order to avoid the acknowledgement of the nationalistic dimension of Jesus' preaching and activity, Davies makes a

[3] E.g. the fact that his death was a Roman crucifixion; the possibility that some of his disciples may have been Zealots; sayings referring to bringing no peace, but "a sword" on earth (Matt 10:34); Jesus' demand for a readiness to undergo crucifixion (Mark 8:34–9:1; Matt 16:24-28; Luke 9:23-27); the disciples' conviction that Jesus was the one to redeem Israel (Luke 24:21); the charges that Jesus strove for political power (Mark 15:2.26 and parallels), incited people not to pay taxes (Luke 23:2) and preached sedition (Luke 23:5.14); the unmistakable Messianic connotations of the so-called "triumphal entry" into Jerusalem (Mark 11 and parallels); the portrayal of Jesus as harbouring a kingly claim, and so on (see Davies, 1994, pp. 337-339).

strained attempt to present the Galilean as uniquely concerned with a religious community (Davies, 1994, p. 349). This is all the more implausible because Davies himself explicitly recognizes that "the Gospel tradition has undergone a process of depoliticization [...] Mark and Luke, especially, reveal a tendency to decrease any possible tension that may have existed between Jesus and Rome"[4]. The fact that these kinds of fallacies and flaws emerge virtually every time confessionally--driven scholars tackle these issues betrays the presence of ideological prejudices and a strong bias.

Things are even worse, since the standard approach is ultimately self-defeating. For instance, Davies asserts that "In the complex scene of first-century Judaism it was easy even for Jesus' own followers to confuse such a concern with community as we have ascribed to Jesus, expressed in terms of the Kingdom of God, with that of the extreme nationalists" (Davies, 1994, p. 353). Put otherwise, not only the Roman and Jewish authorities mistook Jesus for a nationalist, but his own disciples fell into the trap. Unfortunately, Davies does not really explain for his readers how such serious misunderstanding took place, nor draws the disturbing corollaries from this claim. If –along with many other exegetes and theologians– Davies is right, an unavoidable corollary is not only that Jesus was an exceedingly incompetent teacher surrounded by very incompetent disciples (a disturbing idea indeed), but also that he raised hopes which he did not expect to satisfy[5]. If political expectations and hopes were aroused by Jesus, but he turned firmly away from them, then either he suffered from a degree of lack of realism bordering on autism, or – what is even worse – he consciously and deliberately brought disappointment and was a kind of unscrupulous deceiver. Although we have no reasons to think so, this is willy-nilly the inference which is to be drawn from the prevailing claims.

In this way, scholars consider themselves legitimized to clearly distinguish Jesus from the rest of Judaism. Whilst Pharisees occupied themselves with the Law, and the ideal community which they contemplated was inseparable from the land, Jesus allegedly focused on a loving and universal community, to such an extent that "the land itself played a minor part in his mind" (Davies, 1994, p. 354).

2. A non-terrestrial kingdom? Jesus' expectation of a Promised Land

A careful survey of our main sources on Jesus of Nazareth reveals a different result, which should give pause. First of all, the kingdom of God is often spoken

[4] Davies, 1994, p. 344. "Political factors which might have loomed large during the actual ministry of Jesus would soon have lost their interest for the churches within which the Gospels emerged, which were largely Hellenistic and removed in time and space from the Palestine of Jesus'day, so that there may have been political dimensions in the ministry of Jesus which were minimized or overlooked or misunderstood in our Gospels".

[5] Maccoby critically observed that, according to the prevailing (and untenable) view, "he was raising political hopes which he had no intention of satisfying, and inducing the people of Jerusalem to engage in political acts for which they would have to pay severe penalties" (Maccoby, 1974, p. 174).

about as if it might exist in a physical way. It is possible to be in(side) it[6] and to "enter" it[7], just as it is possible to be outside.[8] Although this language could be sometimes interpreted in a figurative way, there are quite a few verses in which βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ sounds very much like a place. For instance,

> I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matt 8:11-12 / Luke 13:28-29)

This passage discloses several aspects of "the kingdom" which are usually silenced. To start with, the kingdom has a material dimension: there will be meals in it. What is not less important, unlike the widespread contention that the kingdom has nothing to do with Israel (See e.g. Beavis, 2004), the reference to the patriarchs in Jesus' saying evoke Israel as the primary beneficiary of God's (and Jesus') promises. In fact, the idea itself of gathering "from east and west", although at first sight universalistic, entails that the gathering takes place to a "centre" and this indicates the land of Israel, and more specifically Zion, in agreement with the other Jewish traditions[9].

Second, the so-called "Lord's Prayer" looks for the coming of God's kingdom: "your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven"[10]. To start with, to pray for God's kingdom in the midst of Rome's empire is to indicate profound dissatisfaction with Caesar's empire (Carter, 2001, p. 5). Moreover, the close relationship which is established between the heavenly and earthly realms suggests that "kingdom of heaven" might do more than serve as a mere formal, reverential circumlocution for God. In the fundamental petition we find a request for the kingdom of heaven to come to earth, so the expected kingdom is "the projection of God's heavenly rule into the earthly sphere" (Marcus, 1988, p. 447). It is accordingly a promise of perfect justice and harmony. The establishment of God's will "on earth" would leave no place for the Roman rule, as it entails the longing for an approaching national deliverance.

Third, among the Beatitudes included in the so-called "Sermon of the Mount", we find Matthew 5:5 ("Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth"). Leaving aside the blessing itself, the saying is a straight rendering of the phrase concerning the meek inheriting the land in Psalm 37:11 in its LXX form (Οἱ δὲ πραεῖς κληρονομήσουσιν γῆν). The fact that it is a direct quotation of a psalm in itself does not mean that it is not from Jesus, whose piety was nurtured by the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings, that would later become the Hebrew Bible. The interesting point is that a substantive concern in this psalm is how

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6 See e.g. Mark 4:11; Matt 18:1-4; Mark 14.25 and par.; Matt 5:19; Matt 8:11-12 and par.; Matt 11:11 and par. Luke 14:15.

7 See e.g. Mark 9:47; 10:15 and par.; 10:23-25 and par.; Matt 5:19-20; 7:21; 21:31; Luke 16:16; 23:42.

8 See e.g. Mark 3 and par.; Mark 4:11; Matt 8:11-12/Luke 13:28-29.

9 See Allison, 1998, pp. 101-102; 179-180; Wenell, 2007, pp. 128-135.

10 Matt 6:10. The heaven and earth phrase is missing from the Lukan parallel (Lk 11:2).

to keep land. Psalm 37 has been called "the most obviously sapiential of all the psalms" (Brueggemann, 1984, p. 42). Now, wisdom teaching generally reflects on the moral conditions whereby blessing is to be received and maintained, and land is a fundamental blessing in a biblical context. The meaning of "land" is straightforward, not metaphorical. In fact, a contrast is made in the psalm between "the wicked" –whose prosperity could tempt the righteous to envy them and fall into unbelief– and the righteous. The psalm tells us, however, that the prosperity of the wicked is temporary and that the reward of the righteous is permanent and sure. The claim that the righteous shall inherit the earth is repeatedly used to express this idea[11], and is reinforced when the psalmist, time and again, states that the wicked will be destroyed, as they will not be able to inherit the land. Likewise, Matt 5:5 is a kind of "geotheological" claim.

Fourth, several miracles attributed to Jesus focus on the theme of nutritional abundance. Mark 6:32-44 (and 8:1-10), along with John 6:1-15, refers to a wonderful multiplication of loaves and fishes. Luke 5:1-11 (and John 21:1-14, in another context) depicts a miraculous catch of fish, which is the occasion for the disciples to leave everything and follow Jesus. John 2:1-11 (the change of water into wine) is a variant of this topic, which is, in John, the conceptual background of the "water of life" discourse in John 4:1-42 and the "bread of life" discourse in John 6:22-59. Although the historian of religions cannot, for obvious reasons, use these accounts as historical, (s)he can and must understand the significance of its presence in the sources. Leaving aside that these accounts are very similar to others contained in the Hebrew Bible, one should note that they are better understood in the light of eschatological expectations, inasmuch as the association of the world to come (whose arrival eschatological prophets often want to anticipate) with nutritional abundance is due to the underlying belief that the *Endzeit* somehow means the return to the *Urzeit*, conceived as a paradisiacal state[12].

Fifth, several passages convey that material, earthly goods were the goal of Jesus and his disciples. A most significant text is Mark 10:29-30 (with Synoptic parallels):

> Truly I tell you", Jesus replied, "no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields [...] and in the age to come eternal life.

This particular version of the Land of Cockaigne is enhanced by other texts, coming from different New Testament traditions, which promise the end of

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[11] "Those who wait for the Lord shall possess the land" (v. 9); "the meek shall possess the land, and delight themselves in abundant prosperity" (vv. 10-11); "those blessed by the Lord shall possess the land, but those cursed by him shall be cut off" (v. 22); "The righteous shall possess the land, and dwell upon it for ever" (v. 29); "Wait for the Lord, and keep to his way, and he will exalt you to possess the land" (v. 34).

[12] The motif of eschatological abundance is also found in many biblical passages. See e.g. Ezek 34:27; 36:21-38; Amos 9:13; 1 Enoch 10:18-19; 2 Bar 29:5-7.

hunger and affliction: Luke 6:21 ("Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh"), or John 4:13-14 ("Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst"). These Gospel texts find an echo in Revelation 7:16-17 ("Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them,' nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; 'he will lead them to springs of living water.' And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes").

Sixth, a saying put on Jesus' lips, preserved in a slightly different way in Luke 22:29-30 and Matthew 19:28, eloquently combines the banquet metaphor with the promise that the (twelve) disciples will judge the Twelve Tribes[13]. The Lukan version reads: "And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel". Despite some voices to the contrary, there seems to be no good reasons to deny that this logion basically reflects an authentic saying of the historical Jesus. One could suppose that κρίνειν means here "to judge" as a synonym of "to condemn" and thus belongs to Q's polemic against "this generation" –and is likely a redactional construction–. Admittedly, a strong argument supporting "judging" is that terms connected to the lexical domain of that verb are used in the remnant of Q always with that meaning. However, the semantic range of κρίνειν is in itself much broader than "judging" understood as "condemning". On the one hand, Luke 22:28-30 does not presuppose an opposition between the judges on the thrones and the twelve tribes of Israel subjected to their judgment; the enthroned followers of Jesus are rather all chosen from within Israel. On the other hand, the idea of "judging" is so entrenched as a constitutive part of good βασιλεία that many occurrences of the verb do not carry any forensic nuance, but indicate the exercise of sovereign authority. The saying pictures the members of Jesus' group as holding positions of power in the government of the new world.

Seventh, according to the disciples' own statements in the Gospels and Acts, Jesus' aim was to restore the kingdom to Israel. Both in Luke 24:21 ("But we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel") and Acts 1:6 ("Then they gathered around him and asked him, 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?'"), the nationalist and territorial aspects of the expectations are unmistakable. Significantly, in the second passage Jesus does not correct his disciples' view of the kingdom, but only their conception of

[13] There are good reasons to think that the references to the Twelve (disciples) in Paul and the Gospels reflect the historical datum that Jesus chose for himself a close circle of disciples. What is important to realize is that the twelve are a symbol of Israel as a whole, reflecting the belief in the existence of the (ultimately legendary) twelve tribes, and more specifically of the twelve phylarchs who, according to the Hebrew Bible, had a ruling role over the people. See e.g. Wenell 2007, pp. 116-121. Let us also note that the symbolic role of Israel as a whole clearly evokes ideal land spatialities in a similar manner to the contemporary sign prophets mentioned by Josephus, who drew on hopes related to exodus and entry into the land (see Ant. 18.85-87; 20.97-99.167-172; War 2.259; 6.285-286).

its imminence. Unlike what a widespread scholarly contention states, the disciples Jesus chose to preach his message must have understood him rather well, so if they expected him to be Israel's redeemer, the preacher himself must have instilled such hopes in them. This is the only scenario which makes sense of the evidence, since any alternative throws us into a morass of puzzlement.

Eighth, in Mark 14:25 and its Synoptic parallels, in the pericope of the "Last Supper", Jesus states: "Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the Kingdom of God". This passage, which is known as the "avowal of abstinence" and contains an implicit but bold declaration that the Kingdom is imminent, conceives its establishment in a material way, thereby conjuring up the image of people reclining at a table, which is in turn an object located somewhere in space. The sentence can be taken to mean that "the next Feast will be the Messianic Feast". Along with Luke 14:15 ("eat bread in the kingdom of God"), 14:24 ("none of those who were invited will taste my dinner"), or 22:30 ("eat and drink at my table in my kingdom"), this passage envisions the eschatological banquet.

This cluster of evidence allows us to glimpse a Jesus whose physiognomy as a preacher displaying an earthly-centered thinking greatly differs from the usual view of him as a visitant of the outer space, an ethereal being focused on otherworldly realities ("my kingdom is not of this world"). Although a systematic exposition of the "Kingdom of God" concept does not appear anywhere in a clear and sequential form in the extant text of the Gospels, there are still several traces thereof.[14] Even as *disiecta membra*, those traces indicate that Jesus' original expectation of the kingdom of God, in full accordance with widespread eschatological Jewish hopes, was that of a renewal of the world, which envisages an ideal life endowed with concrete and earthly goods.

3. On the historicity of the cluster

Can we be reasonably sure that the evidence set forth in the preceding section substantially goes back to the historical Jesus? Historical criticism has made plain that the Gospels are hagiographic, and hardly reliable, accounts. Although there is every indication that a Jewish preacher named Jesus of Nazareth actually existed and was active in Galilee and Judaea under Augustus and Tiberius in the first third of the first century CE, the sources narrating his life are largely fictional works, intended to create a life-enhancing understanding of his nature (Helms, 1988). Their purpose was less to describe the past than to affect the present and the future, since they served the vested interests of their

[14] "The theme of 'kingdom' [...] clearly includes among its nuances the idea of historical, political, physical realm, that is land. It may and surely does mean more than that, but it is never so spiritualized that those elemental nuances are denied or overcome. However rich and complex the imagery may be in its various articulations, the coming of Jesus is understood with reference to new land arrangements" (Bruegemann, 2002, p. 161).

authors and the communities they addressed[15]. This means that only to a certain limited extent it is possible to read the Gospels as historically reliable witnesses to the life of Jesus.

Since a great part of the contents of the Canonical Gospels are not reliable, the issue of the historicity of the surveyed material must be carefully tackled. Besides, an increasing number of scholars are claiming that the traditional criteria for determining the authenticity of the material contained in the available sources should be marginalized, not to say abandoned[16]. Below I will argue that some trustworthy information about Jesus is still attainable, and that the surveyed cluster (noted above) should be included in this category.

To start with, one should take into account that the so-called "evidential paradigm", set forth by the Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg, has proved fruitful in historical studies (Ginzburg, 1986). This method consists in laying stress on the significance of minor details and usually unnoticed trifles. It is, so to say, a method of interpretation based on discarded information and marginal data, which ultimately reveal themselves, as "traces" and "clues", very significant. Through it, details usually considered of little importance provide the key for approaching relevant matters. The applicability of this procedure to our issue is easy to understand. Despite the prevailing idea of Jesus conveyed by the Gospel authors and the Christian literature –that of a spiritual savior of mankind–, those scattered passages hinting at him as a political deliverer and preaching a material, this-worldly kingdom, can be confidently accepted as reliable vestiges of a more original view.

Even some scholars who have criticized as arbitrary the current methodologies based on a set of criteria have proposed an alternative procedure. This procedure does not aim at discussing the historicity of every passage taken as an isolated item, but consists in the realization of the existence of recurring motifs and patterns in the Gospels[17]. Unlike the traditional model, which privileges the parts (the analysis of the Gospel units) over the whole, it suggests privileging the generalizations. It seems that the presence of a convergent pattern in the Gospel tradition which is against the tendencies and interests of its authors cannot be anecdotal or hazardous. Against these pieces of information, taken as a whole, the objection that they may have been invented or altered is of no avail, for we find them essentially on the same level in all the sources. Furthermore, the study of memory (which tends to record more easily the broad outlines of an event than

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[15] As the Fourth Gospel put it, "Those [signs] here written have been recorded in order that you may hold the faith that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that through this faith you may possess life by his name" (John 20:30-31).

[16] See Allison, 2010, pp. 1-30; Keith and Le Donne, 2012.

[17] "If a motif has gathered numerous recurrent attestations across the sources, it can be regarded as having a claim to authenticity. Rationale: A greater dispersion of a motif suggests that the motif has landed in the Jesus tradition very early and through several tradents. It further suggests that already then the motif had been widely accepted and experienced as central" (Holmén, 2008, p. 47).

the details) allows us to infer that general impressions are more reliable[18]. The interesting thing is that the traces we have surveyed clearly constitute a converging pattern and create a general impression.

A further method which is widely used in History to detect reliable material in sources which are suspect of being distorted by ideological interests and biases, lies in finding embarrassing data. This applies to actions or sayings which must presumably have embarrassed the Nazorean communities by weakening their position in arguments with opponents, and which should accordingly be deemed authentic. The idea that those who venerated Jesus and his immediate disciples would not have invented sayings or stories that cast a dubious light on him/them, or material disadvantageous to themselves, is a self-contained principle, which assumes the human tendency not to foul one's own nest – more specifically, the propensity of a biased author not to harm one's own interests[19]. This is what happens with the material pointing to a material understanding of the kingdom of God, since it runs against the overwhelming Christian apologetic tendency to spiritualize the content of that concept.

Another general but helpful remark is the application of the criterion –or index–[20] of contextual plausibility. This means that, to be accepted as probably historical, the information provided by a source must make sense within the spatial, chronological, and cultural coordinates of the events it describes. The more easily a tradition sits in the context of Jewish Galilee in the first half of the first century CE, the closer it is likely to come from the historical Jesus. This does not imply that Jesus could not have been in conflict with his contemporaries – religious conflict is indeed to be expected in the polymorphic Judaism of this age–, but any conflict would have taken place within the frame of this religion, not outside it. Just to put an example, we have seen that a good number of passages in Jesus' sayings envisage the kingdom of God or its advent as a *banquet*. Likewise, roughly contemporary Jewish texts display similar expectations[21].

A further index of historicity is that of coherence. The rationale is that if the reliability of a passage or motif can be established, the probability that other motifs agreeing in character with it are historically reliable is enhanced. Now, this index applies in our case in several ways. The expectation of a kingdom of God which will entail a different state of affairs –the establishment of God's will

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[18] "If general impressions are typically more trustworthy than details, then it makes little sense to reconstruct Jesus by starting with a few of the latter –perhaps some incidents and sayings that survive the gauntlet of our authenticating criteria – while setting aside the general impressions that our primary sources instill in us" (Allison, 2010, p. 14).

[19] See Bernheim, 1908, p. 509 and 523. Although a few scholars have recently set forth some claims to counter the weight of this criterion, such claims have been convincingly answered as one-sided and simplistic; see Bermejo-Rubio, 2016.

[20] Since what is really at stake in the so-called criteria is not what is uniquely sufficient and so invariably *necessary* to establish historicity but rather what tends to make historicity more likely than non-historicity, they should be more modestly considered as "indexes"; see Meyer, 1979, p. 86.

[21] E.g. m. 'Abot 3:17; 4:16; 'Abot de R. Natan B 27; Lev. Rab 13:3 also envision the world to come as a banquet.

without the resistance of pagan empires or wicked inclinations– but which at the same time envisages that the new reality will take place on earth and will entail not only spiritual but also material goods, perfectly coheres with several clusters whose reliability has been compellingly argued in the history of the research. One of them is that Jesus, whatever else he may have been, was involved in some kind of nationalistic anti-Roman resistance, and specifically made a royal claim[22]; in fact, Luke 22:29-30 clearly assumes the reliability of this assertion.

The expectation of a kingdom of God on earth (and, specifically, in the Holy Land which is Eretz Israel, whose center is Jerusalem/Zion) also coheres with the several hints in the Gospels that Jesus and his group awarded Jerusalem a special role in the eschatological drama. According to all the Gospels, Jesus goes from Galilee to Jerusalem. The eschatological significance of this place is made more explicit in Matthew. For the author of this Gospel, Jerusalem is the setting of an eschatological drama, because at the time of the crucifixion the dead presumably raised and "went into the holy city and appeared to many"[23]. There is every indication that Jesus went to Jerusalem since he, along with his group, was waiting for the eschatological miracle announced in the Jewish tradition, which would take place in Zion as the Messianic centre par excellence[24]. This is supported by the fact that, according to the New Testament writings, the earliest disciples returned from Galilee to Jerusalem; the reason seems to be that they considered themselves to be the people of God awaiting the end in the city of The End.

Although multiple attestation (the fact that certain information is provided by several different but independent sources) is hard to prove in Jesus tradition, it could perhaps be used in this case. According to Irenaeus of Lyons, Papias of Hierapolis, a bishop and author who lived ca. 60-130, attributed to Jesus a prophecy of miraculous agricultural abundance. The text deserves being cited *in extenso*:

> The predicted blessing, therefore, belongs unquestionably to the times of the kingdom, when the righteous shall bear rule upon their rising from the dead; when also the creation, having been renovated and set free, shall fructify with an abundance of all kinds of food, from the dew of heaven, and from the fertility of the earth. As the elders who saw John, the disciple of the Lord, remembered that they had heard from him how the Lord taught in regard to those times, and said: "The days will come in which vines shall grow, having each ten thousand branches, and in each branch ten thousand twigs, and in each true twig ten thousand shoots, and in every one of the shoots ten thousand clusters, and on every one of the clusters ten thousand grapes, and every grape when pressed will give five-and-twenty metretes of wine. And when any one of the saints shall lay hold of a cluster, another shall cry out: 'I am a better cluster, take me; bless the Lord through me'". In like man-

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22 For a detailed demonstration of these statements, see e.g. Bermejo-Rubio, 2014; Bermejo-Rubio, 2015; Bermejo-Rubio, 2018.

23 Matt 25:53. Although this is pure legend, it betrays the great importance granted to the city by the early Christian tradition.

24 This is clear in the Book of Zechariah, which seems to have had a bearing on Jesus' expectations. See Maccoby, 1974. Let us note that, according to Matt 5:35, Jesus called Jerusalem "the city of the great King" (namely, of God).

> ner, he [scil. the Lord] declared that a grain of wheat would produce ten thousand ears, and that every ear should have ten thousand grains, and every grain would yield ten pounds of clear, pure, fine flour; and that all other fruit-bearing trees, and seeds and grass, would produce in similar proportions; and that all animals feeding only on the productions of the earth, would become peaceful and harmonious among each other, and be in perfect subjection to man[25].

According to this seemingly startling text, Jesus himself foretold the earth's amazing productivity in the coming messianic age[26]. At first glance, this promise of abounding fertility is hard to reconcile with the prevailing view of the historical Jesus, but when one carefully looks to the cluster we have set forth in the previous section, one realizes that it perfectly coheres with the most plausible reconstruction of the Galilean preacher, who, as a millenarian visionary, expected an ultimate renewal of the world. After all, unprecedented harvest of grapes or grain matches the disciples' surprising fish catch in Luke 5:1-11 and John 21:1-14, or the even more stunning feeding of the five thousand with some loaves and fish. However miraculous and unbelievable, these accounts reflect the longing for a salvific situation in which misery and affliction have been wiped out from the world. If this information can be deemed independent from the Gospels, we could accordingly add multiple attestation to our set of indexes of historicity.

Be that as it may, the scattered evidence pointing to Jesus' (and his first followers') expectation of a concrete, material, earthly kingdom actually betrays the true beliefs and hopes of the Galilean prophet and his group. As has been often recognized in scholarship, "a given criterion cannot provide an absolute bedrock for grounding the traditions of the historical Jesus, but is in some way dependent upon other criteria used in conjunction" (Porter, 2000, p. 110). Our discussion shows that, according to several different indexes, the above-mentioned evidence in all probability goes back to the historical Jesus[27].

4. How on earth did the earthly Kingdom become a de-materialized hope?

The Canonical Gospels and the New Testament not only contain the evidence we have surveyed above, but also clear hints at a very different understanding of the expected salvation. A de-politicizing and spiritualizing process, which involved the progressive erasure of the concrete, earthly goods from the escha-

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[25] See Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* V 33.3.

[26] There is a close resemblance between this description and that contained in 2 Baruch 29.5-7.

[27] It is revealing that, as a chiliast who believed in a literal millennium on earth, Papias was mocked by writers such as Eusebius, who labeled his proto-orthodox forebear a man of "very little intelligence" (*Ecclesiastical History* III 39). As a scholar has sarcastically put it, "The harsh words were directed against Papias not because he was, in fact, stupid, but because he was foolish enough to believe that there would be a utopian existence here on earth to be brought by an apocalyptic crisis at the end of the age. In other words, he was fool enough to agree with early Christian preaching" (Ehrman, 2012, p. 229).

tological hopes, seems to have begun at a very early date, as it occurs already in Paul. In the letters written by the visionary from Tarsus, the term "kingdom of God" –unlike its importance in the Gospel tradition– is marginal, and when Paul uses it he substantially modifies its meaning: "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit"[28]. Another passage seems to complete the idea: "I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable". Whilst apocalyptic texts and the Jesus tradition visualized the final victory of God as a great banquet[29], the new hope becomes a purely spiritual reality. This fits the fact that there is a significant absence of explicit references to the land in Paul's epistles. Even when he refers to the advantages enjoyed by the people of Israel in Romans 9:4 and mentions "the covenants, the law, the temple worship, and the promises (ἐπαγγελίαι)", he does not specify what these "promises" or God's good purposes for Israel are, and the land itself is not singled out for special mention. For Paul, salvation means to be "in Christ" in the present and to be with Christ in the world to come. The future for believers is envisaged in a cosmic, rather than a Palestinian setting of a tangible kind[30].

Although the original view could not be utterly cancelled,[31] it was increasingly replaced by an understanding which de-materialized and despatialized the concept of the Kingdom. A particularly sobering example of this development is found in the Fourth Gospel, where, in the dialogue with Pilate on the nature of Jesus' royal claim, a much-cited sentence is put in Jesus' lips: "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place".[32] In the pseudonymous Second Letter to Timothy, the author states that the Lord will rescue him from every evil and will bring him "to his heavenly kingdom (εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν αὐτοῦ τὴν ἐπουράνιον)"[33].

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[28] See resp. Romans 14:17 (Οὐ γάρ ἐστιν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ βρῶσις καὶ πόσις…) and 1 Corinthians 15:50.

[29] See Smit, 2008.

[30] For this development, see Davies, 1994, p. 213. Paul uses the phrase "in Christ" in a locative sense, inasmuch as Christ becomes for him the "locus" of redemption. In this sense, to be "in Christ" replaces being "in the (promised) land" as the ideal life (Davies, 1994, p. 217). This has been called "disenlandisement" in the sense that Paul disconnected himself ultimately from the land (Davies, 1994, p. 219). "Once Paul had made the Living Lord rather than the Torah the centre in life and in death, once he had seen in Jesus his Torah, he had in principle broken with the land" (Davies, 1994, p. 220).

[31] About chiliastic beliefs see e.g. Hill, 2001.

[32] John 18:36. This sentence, which attributes to Jesus an otherworldly view of the kingdom that blatantly contradicts what we have found out about him, lacks any historical verisimilitude, but suspiciously matches the tendency of the evangelist to portray a preternatural being coming from another world. It is an apologetic product of the primitive community, through which the Christian tradition protected Jesus from any charge of error, and also safeguarded their members against the reproach of believing in a misguided prophet.

[33] 2 Timothy 4:18.

Similar expressions of the transcendent and heavenly nature of God's or Christ's kingdom occur not only in New Testament works, but also in most early Christian literature, for instance in martyrological contexts. An interesting example is found in Hegesippus' story of Jude's grandsons standing before the emperor Domitian, as related by Eusebius of Caesarea:

> They were asked concerning the Christ and his kingdom, its nature, origin, and time of appearance, and explained that it was neither of the world nor earthly, but heavenly and angelic (οὐ κοσμικὴ μὲν οὐδ' ἐπίγειος, ἐπουράνιος δὲ καὶ ἀγγελική), and it would be at the end of the world, when he would come in glory to judge the living and the dead and to reward every man according to his deeds[34].

Understanding this conceptual development demands that we take, on the one hand, historical circumstances into account. The crucifixion of the leader in a collective execution –in which some other members or sympathizers of the Nazorean group might have also been victims of the Roman repression–[35] must have led Jesus' followers to conclude that any longing for expecting the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth in the short term would be doomed to failure and would entail persecution and repression by the Imperial authorities. The downplaying or silencing of the political dimensions of the Galilean's message must have been again fostered through another failure, namely, that of the insurgent Jews in the general revolt of the First Jewish War (66-74 CE), which for decades made plain that a military opposition to Rome constituted a hopeless option, whilst the Second Jewish War (132-135 CE) definitely involved the loss of the land. All of this could have been a stimulus to reinterpret in a different way the traditional salvific expectations, and to universalize the land so as to refer it to all the earth. After all, the survival of the Christian communities was at stake.

Inextricably interwoven with this tendency is the insight provided by some social science theories. More specifically, cognitive dissonance theory is very helpful to understand the ideological transformations carried out by Christian communities. Cognitive dissonance as a concept was introduced into social psychology through *When Prophecy Fails*, a book written in collaboration by Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken, and Stanley Schachter in 1956. This landmark case study analyzed the consequences of the disconfirmation of an end-time prophecy in a small group of flying-saucer devotees centered upon one woman convinced that she was receiving messages from outer space, culminating in the prediction of a massive flood that would engulf America on 21 December 1954, from which the believers would be rescued in a flying saucer. After the crucial date had come and gone, and it became clear that the group's hopes had not been fulfilled, the group emerged not only unshaken, but even more convinced of the truth of their beliefs than ever before. The fact that in the face of clearly disconfirming evidence, beliefs are sometimes not discarded but instead are intensified, is explained through several factors which have been envisaged both by

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[34] Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* III.20.4. On this text, see Hill, 2001, pp. 128-133.

[35] See e.g. Bermejo-Rubio, 2013.

Festinger and other scholars who have substantially refined the original theory and proved that it is extremely relevant for a scientific study of religion. In fact, it has been also fruitfully applied to the field of early Christianity.

Cognitive work and rationalizations prevent people from experiencing the failure of their expectations (e.g. the crucifixion of a leader and the non-arrival of the allegedly impending Kingdom of God) from falling into desperation, and allow them to overcome the psychological discomfort caused by the unexpected facts and the ensuing dashed hopes. Rationalization concocted to eliminate the cognitive dissonance is accordingly the starting point of the process. These reflections are underpinned in light of one of the qualifications regarding Festinger's theory made by Joseph Zygmunt and, in his wake, by John Gordon Melton. These scholars argued that the reason for the paradox that cognitive challenges strengthen beliefs rather than weaken them is that prophecies and expectations are often recast in spiritual terms:

> The prophesied event is reinterpreted in such a way that what was supposed to have been a visible, verifiable occurrence is seen to have been in reality an invisible, spiritual occurrence. The event occurred as predicted, only on a spiritual level. (Melton, 1985, p. 21)

This kind of response is a completely appropriate cognitive action within the total belief system of religious groups where humans recognize that they have misinterpreted divine utterances and prophetic promptings or signs and portents heralding doom. After all, the cost of such spiritualization is low: the mere admission of a slight error in perception, which is a readily acceptable human failure. The price is rather small compared with the loss of self-esteem and intimate relationship with the cosmos implied in admitting that the prophecy might have failed. According to this reconceptualization, the believers state not that the prophecy was wrong, but that they had merely misunderstood it in a material, earthly way. At the same time, the original prophesied event becomes an invisible and spiritual –and accordingly unfalsifiable– event: non-empirical items cannot be proven wrong.

Such a process is clearly seen in the Christian sources. The aim of the Galilean preacher of Nazareth seems to have been –admittedly with the indispensable help of God– that of (re-)establishing Israel as a world power and deliver his people from the domination of Rome. Fantasy, however, once more collided with reality. Once this illusion was given the lie through the collective crucifixion at Golgotha, the material and sociopolitical features of Jesus' status as an earthly messiah and the correlative kingdom of God were toned down and reframed in spiritual categories. In this way, the messianic group's hopes were reinterpreted so that they were "fulfilled", the fulfillment taking place on a non-empirical level. This shift from the material/integral understanding of the kingdom to the spiritual sphere not only preserved the group's self-esteem, but also solved its survival problem, since it turned their hopes into more innocuous claims: millenarian visionaries envisaging a sudden turnabout of the present order of things represent an obvious threat to the status quo, but the world Empires have nothing to fear from people expecting a merely supernatural salvation in an indeterminate

future. As the powers of this world know all too well, such fantasies, for some reason, are never actually achieved.

5. Conclusion

Unlike the wholly fictitious lives of so many legendary figures, which offer relatively harmonious portrayals, the Gospels are not a seamless tunic. As I have argued, we find in them many scattered pieces of information that do not fit well into their main story-line of a universal savior bringing peace and love, and alien to contemporary political conflicts. The convergence of these and many other related items constitutes a pattern that is obviously at odds with the overall impression conveyed by the evangelists and the Christian tradition, according to which Jesus had nothing to do with the dirty matters of politics in first-century Judaea and the current expectations of a kingdom of God on earth. Thus the presence of this pattern means that the inconsistent character of the Gospel accounts is not a random or an enigmatic phenomenon. As Joel Carmichael put it, "the Gospel narrative [...] gives us a general impression of incoherence, which is reinforced by a study of the details. Nor is this merely the incoherence of an imperfectly remembered event; the incoherence is the result of dynamic factors –it is *tendentiously* incoherent" (Carmichael, 1982, p. 41 [italics original]). The fact that an underlying story can be glimpsed behind the Gospels means, in turn, that in these writings not everything is reducible to sheer fiction. Beyond the mythical biography with which Jesus was equipped, it is still possible to envisage a very historical figure. He expected the arrival of a promised land here on earth, which –as ever– for better or worse never arrived.

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Abstract

It is a well-known fact that the Christian religion, since Paul (see e.g. *Romans* 14:17), developed a spiritualized view of the eschatological expectations of Second Temple Judaism, to the extent that the expressions "Kingdom of God" (resp. "Kingdom of Heaven") of the Canonical Gospels were ultimately understood as designating a heavenly salvation. This process increased after the defeats of the two Jewish-Roman wars in the 1st and the 2nd centuries, which for Israel involved the loss of the land. There are, however, several traces in the Synoptic Gospels and the Christian tradition hinting at a more original material and territorial understanding

of the soteriological hopes of Jesus of Nazareth. The present contribution, on the one hand, surveys the available sources in order to check the evidence which allows us to glimpse the presence, in the Galilean preacher's eschatology, of the idea of a "promised land", or a salvation "on earth"; on the other hand, it tries to explain the mechanisms and reasons which triggered the spiritualizing processes through which Christianity ended up endorsing a transcendentalized and de-materialized view of salvation.

Resumo

É um facto bem conhecido que a religião cristã desenvolveu, já desde Paulo de Tarso, uma visão espiritualizada das esperanças escatológicas do judaísmo do Segundo Templo, até ao ponto de as expressões "reino de Deus" e "reino dos céus" acabarem entendendo-se como designação de uma salvação celestial. Este processo acelerou-se nos séculos I e II, depois das derrotas das duas guerras judias contra Roma, que implicaram a perda da terra por parte de Israel. Porém, nos Evangelhos e na tradição cristã encontram-se vários sinais da existência de uma conceção material e territorial na mensagem original de Jesus de Nazaré. A presente contribuição tenciona, por uma parte, examinar os testemunhos textuais que permitem detetar a ideia de uma "terra prometida" ou uma "salvação na terra" na escatologia do predicador galileu; por outra parte, tenta explicar os mecanismos e as razões que impulsionaram os processos de espiritualização mediante os quais o cristianismo acabou sustentando uma visão transcendental e des-materializada da salvação.