



Turning Lost Students into Christ-Centered Laborers

THE CHRONICLES OF YAHWEH, PART 3 • Rick James

The Manhattan Project

In the struggle, both cosmic and terrestrial, we've seen quite the arsenal employed by God to impede the spread of evil and expand his kingdom and reign on earth. But the dropping of a Messiah on the unsuspecting town of Bethlehem redefined all rules of engagement.

During his roughly three and half years of public ministry, Jesus would call the nation of Israel to repent and embrace her King and his coming kingdom. But it was only a minority, a godly remnant, who would turn, curtsy, and follow. It's perhaps not surprising, then, that as he headed toward Jerusalem and his appointed death, Jesus' parables turned dark and ominous, seemingly rumbling from his lips. Try this one on for size.

A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, "Come, for everything is now ready."

But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, "I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me."

Another said, "I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me."

Still another said, "I just got married, so I can't come."

The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, "Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame."

"Sir," the servant said, "what you ordered has been done, but there is still room."

Then the master told his servant, "Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full I tell you, not one of those men who were invited will get a taste of my banquet." (Luke 14:16-24)

This parable of the great banquet is, in effect, an eviction notice from Israel's landlord. If Israel would not repent and receive her Messiah, then the kingdom would expand all right, but not through them. The message of the King and his kingdom would bypass Israel, and invitations would instead be sent to the Gentile nations (or "out to the roads and country lanes," as referenced in the parable), where it would find a willing audience.

The messianic banquet is a powerful eschatological (end of the age) image deeply rooted in the Old Testament. It would have been a shock (though it shouldn't have been) for Israel to learn that the Gentiles were to be seated at the banquet, but it was incomprehensible that they themselves would be scratched from the guest list. Yet having provided a personal visitation, what more could God possibly do to reform the wayward nation? Nothing. As Jesus got to the final days of his ministry on earth, hope for Israel as the conduit of blessing to the nations had all but expired. No more pleas, no more parables, no more free loaves or lunches; just a last symbolic gesture, an enactment of Israel's impending judgment and rejection.



...as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. Then he said to the tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard him say it.

On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written: "'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it a 'den of robbers.'" (Mark 11:12-17)

In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!" (Mark 11:20,21)

Jesus looked to the fig tree (a fig tree being symbolic of Israel in the Old Testament) and saw that fruit was nowhere to be found. Likewise, as he entered the temple, the center of Israel's worship, it too was devoid of produce (spiritual fruit). God had required the Jews to build a special section onto the temple, called the Court of the Gentiles, for those of other nations to come and "know the Lord" (Jeremiah 31:34). Like Israel as a whole, the temple—Jesus reminded his listeners—was to be "a house of prayer for all nations" (Mark 11:17). But instead of the court serving its evangelistic function, it had been turned into Walmart and with such an attitude toward missions, the lack of fruit was anything but a mystery.

The verdict had been rendered. In proclaiming God's glory to the nations, Israel was as superfluous as a fig tree without figs. It would need to be abandoned. The gospel would be preached to the nations, but through a new vehicle—the followers of Jesus, the church, a new Israel. (As could be argued from Romans 11, this does not preclude the possibility that God may one day revisit his covenant with ethnic Israel.)

The Great Commission

After his death and resurrection, Jesus gave his disciples this final instruction, and as they were his last words and last command to his followers, it is more than a little significant:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20).

See, if you were one of the first disciples, you might have been wondering, What will happen now that the Messiah has come? Now that Israel has rejected him? Now that God has rejected Israel? In other words, you might be wondering what was to become of the plot without Israel. Jesus, in his final words, addressed that question and affirmed to his followers that the plot of history—and Scripture—remained the same.

As I've stated with considerable redundancy, the Bible, while containing many themes, is driven by a single plot. With that in mind, it is important to read the final words of the Old Testament as if they are the closing words of a very large book—because they are. In the Hebrew Scriptures (which of course were the Bible of Jesus' day), 2 Chronicles was the last book of the Scripture, not Malachi. (That's as it continues to be in Judaism today.) So here are the closing words of the Hebrew book of Scripture. As you read it, look for similarities with the Great Commission given by Jesus in Matthew 28.

This is what Cyrus king of Persia says:

"The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Anyone of his people among you—may the Lord his God be with him, and let him go up." (2 Chronicles 36:23)



In the final scene of the first Spiderman movie, Peter Parker's friend Harry Osborn finds his father's Green Goblin paraphernalia: mask, tights, weapons—that kind of thing. In using this connecting sequence, the filmmakers were letting us know that the plot of Spiderman was going to be continued in Spiderman 2, though the Green Goblin would be replaced by his son, Harry Osborn. That is precisely how this passage functions.

Being a unified story, the Old Testament ends by bringing us back to the plot. The Jews had been exiled from their land (also wondering what was happening to the plot), and God used their captor, Cyrus, king of Persia, to recommission them and call them back to the plot. That plot, once again, was the expansion of God's kingdom, which of course centered around Israel as a lighthouse to the nations. So they were told to “go” and rebuild Jerusalem, knowing that God would be “with them” in the mission. And Cyrus, arrogant mortal that he was, made this declaration on the basis that “all authority” belonged to him.

Jesus, in playing off these final words, was picking up the plot line of the Old Testament and threading it into the New. The importance of the Great Commission and its connection to the last page of the Old Testament is to announce that the plot of Part One would continue in Part Two (the New Covenant), but the role of Israel would now be played by the church, with a few important nuances that Jesus delineated:

- His disciples were to “go out” to the nations, not “go up” to Jerusalem. (Israel, geographically, was no longer central to God's plan.)
- All authority to complete the mission belonged to Jesus, not to King Cyrus.
- Kingdom expansion was now the responsibility of the church, not Israel.
- The church would manifest the kingdom of God on earth as a spiritual kingdom, not a geographic one like Israel.
- This kingdom would be comprised of people from every nation, not just one, as ethnic Israel had been.
- And last but surely not least, the king of God's kingdom, unnamed in the Old Testament, is Jesus.

There are of course other nuances, but these are the ones implicit in the Great Commission. The bottom line: though the plot had thickened, it had not changed. God's people were to expand his kingdom to the world, proclaiming its king to every nation.

Out of the barren womb of Sarah, God created the nation of Israel. And out of a barren Israel, Jesus created the church. All for the furtherance of the plot.

In the Great Commission, Jesus called his followers to engage in the plot, embrace it, and bring it to its climax and resolution. In fact, the New Testament ends with a vision given to the apostle John of the story's resolution, when the kingdom will have expanded to every nation and where at least one person from every people group will “call upon the Lord”:

After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.” (Revelation 7:9-10)

As the church now heads into its third millennium, you might wonder when the story is going to end. Jesus has already given us a partial answer. The story will end when the plot has been resolved: “This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (Matthew 24:14).

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