

# Focus on the Kingdom

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Anthony Buzzard, editor

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**“Let the dead bury their dead, but you go and proclaim everywhere the Kingdom of God” — *Jesus in Luke 9:60***

## The Gospel and the Future Kingdom

“It may be said that during Jesus’ ministry the Kingdom of God is spoken of *always as a future event*. It is expected, prayed for and hoped for. But it is never said explicitly to have arrived, not even at the Last Supper. What is present is the agent of God, Jesus. But because the agent of the Kingdom is present and active through his teaching and mighty works, the Kingdom of God may also be said to be potentially present...Its arrival in its own right is depicted as a future event” (*Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* [A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship], IVP, 1992, “Kingdom of God,” p. 425).

Since the Good News/Gospel offered by Jesus for our belief has to do with the Kingdom of God, it follows that the term Kingdom of God must be defined. Without a definition, how can one “repent and believe the Gospel of the Kingdom” (Mark 1:14, 15)? You cannot believe in a Gospel about a Kingdom which remains a vague concept.

A widespread confusion exists in the churchgoing community about what Jesus meant by the Kingdom.

The quotation above from the *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* is immensely helpful as establishing the fact attested by Matthew, Mark and Luke that Jesus thought of the Kingdom as the great event of *the future*. He urges his disciples to keep praying “Thy Kingdom come!” This does not mean “Thy Kingdom spread”! You do not pray for the Kingdom to come, if it has already come. Note, too, that Joseph of Arimathea, who was a Christian disciple, was still

*waiting for* the Kingdom of God after the death of Jesus (Mark 15:43). The Kingdom of God is the great hope for the future to be realized only by the return of Jesus to reign on earth.

In our next issue we will go text by text through the Gospel of Matthew to establish as a fact the futurity of the Kingdom of God (a very tiny minority of Kingdom texts may support a potential or actual presence of the Kingdom *in a different sense*). The vast majority of the Kingdom texts in Jesus’ teaching unmistakably point to the *future* intervention of God at the future coming of Jesus. The Kingdom of God is the objective of the Christian faith. Loss of this simple fact is responsible for a great deal of confusion amongst Bible readers.

Here are two key verses: “When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, *then* he will sit on his throne of glory...In the regeneration, [when the world is reborn] when the Son of man sits on the throne of his glory, you too will sit on twelve thrones to administer the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matt. 25:31; 19:28).

These sayings combine to give us a clear vision of the second coming of Jesus and his subsequent session on his throne, ruling in company with the apostles. Jesus foresaw a reconstitution of the tribes of Israel. This “concrete” expectation of divine government coming to the earth — the Kingdom of God/Heaven — is fundamental to any understanding of the Bible. Replacing the constant Kingdom language of Jesus with “heaven” (which Jesus never offered as the Christian goal) confuses the New Testament and suppresses the words of Jesus. ✧

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## “If anyone does not remain in the teaching of Jesus...”

The definition of the Gospel is the key to a sound understanding of Jesus and the New Testament. Unconsciously, many Bible readers mount a fierce opposition to Jesus, because evangelicals have been systematically taught NOT to think of the Gospel teaching/preaching of the historical Jesus as of very much importance in salvation! (Last month we printed a revealing quotation from Luther showing that this tendency goes back to his own reduced gospel.) Any down-playing of the teaching/Gospel of Jesus — *the Gospel as he himself preached it* — is really an amazing mistake in view of II John 7-9: “If anyone goes too far and does not remain in the teaching of the Messiah, he does not have Father or Son.”

The teaching of Jesus began in Matthew 4:17 with a ringing command: “Repent in view of the coming Kingdom.” Mark (1:14, 15) summarizes the Christian faith by recording Jesus’ opening salvo: “The Kingdom of God is at hand: Repent and believe in the Gospel [of the Kingdom].” The whole Christian faith rests on that foundation.

Certainly the cross and the resurrection are essential to the Gospel, but they are not the first element in the Gospel. (Paul spoke of the death and resurrection of Jesus as “among matters of first importance” — I Cor. 15:1-3.) The death and resurrection of Jesus follow from the first (Kingdom) element, because no one can gain the Kingdom without the cross and the resurrection. But the Kingdom remains the heart of the One Gospel throughout the NT. The Kingdom provides the content of Christian HOPE, and hope is the second cardinal virtue after love.

There is no reason for doubt on this subject. The Gospel teaching of Jesus about the Kingdom takes up the space of over 40 chapters in the Gospels before a word is mentioned about his death and resurrection. John’s Gospel is a plea for belief in the

Gospel/teaching/word/words of Jesus as the basis of salvation: “He who hears my word and believes Him who sent me has the life of the Age to Come [‘eternal life’]” (John 5:24). How can you believe “if you don’t believe in my words?” (John 5:47). That word is defined as the “word about the Kingdom” (Matt. 13:19). Jesus obviously considered an intelligent belief in the Kingdom as the *sine qua non* — the indispensable factor — of successful faith: He referred to the counter-activity of the Devil: “The Devil comes and snatches away the word of the Kingdom [Matt. 13:19] from their heart *so that they cannot believe it and be saved*” (Luke 8:12). This is amazingly clear teaching. Salvation, in this central parable, is directly related to an understanding of and commitment to the Kingdom Gospel as Jesus preached it.

When in my 260 radio programs I point this out, I regularly receive comments from long-time Bible students and teachers who say, “We never realized that the Gospel had to do with the Kingdom!” Such is the power of anti-Kingdom propaganda.

Matthew has five blocks of teaching (possibly a deliberate parallel with the five books of Moses), each ending with “When Jesus had finished all these sayings...” The section which begins in Matthew 4:17 (“From that time Jesus began to proclaim...”) ends at the end of the Sermon on the Mount (7:28). In that section Jesus spoke of the only foundation for salvation: adherence to his teaching. That teaching is based on the command to repent and believe in the Coming Kingdom (Mark 1:14, 15) and in view of that Kingdom to develop “the righteousness which must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees” (Matt. 5:20) — otherwise we will not be fit to enter the Kingdom.

The whole Kingdom program is the gracious act of God who offers us salvation through Jesus and his words and work. Paul, faithfully following in Jesus’ steps, looked back over his entire ministry and described it as “proclaiming the Kingdom” (Acts 20:25). Paul followed Jesus faithfully and continued to preach the Kingdom everywhere.

What a wonderful model for contemporary evangelism. ✧

# Understanding Jesus in his own Messianic, Jewish Background

“It is a serious error to hold that the Kingdom of God plays no important role in apostolic Christianity. Such a view both lacks historical perspective and is at variance with the entire thought of the literature of apostolic Christianity. The very name of the new movement, *Christianity*, would suggest the contrary opinion. So far from the eschatological [future] Kingdom of God being a secondary element in the early church, *it is its great conditioning belief*. The preaching of the first evangelists was not a call to ethical ideals or an argument as to certain truths. Rather it was *the proclamation of a Message...As regards the Person of the Messiah, there is, of course, no question that the early church believed that Jesus was the Christ who had returned to heaven, whence he would come to introduce the new age and the new kingdom. This was the very core of the entire Christian movement.*”<sup>1</sup>

These words of the distinguished professor of Systematic Theology at Chicago Seminary register an important protest against the persistent tendency of commentators to rid the New Testament of its concentration on the future coming of Messiah to inaugurate a new era of history by introducing the Kingdom of God.

In the New Testament the eschatological (future) Kingdom is indeed the “great conditioning belief.” Both John the Baptist (Matt. 3:2) and Jesus announce a Gospel which commands belief in the coming Kingdom of God. Jesus commanded prayer for the advent of the future Kingdom (Matt. 6:10) and urged us pursue the Kingdom as our first priority (Matt. 6:33). Faith is directed not only to a Savior who dies and rises, but to the divine intention to bring present human governments to an end and replace them with

<sup>1</sup> Shailer Mathews, *The Messianic Hope in the New Testament*, University of Chicago Press, 1905, pp. 144, 145.

the Kingdom of the Messiah, to be introduced by a spectacular intervention — the future coming of Jesus to rule on earth.

It is characteristic of much Bible exposition that the future apocalyptic element in the teaching of Christ is reduced or eliminated. Some have argued that this element of the New Testament faith cannot go back to Jesus himself, but is the result of a misunderstanding on the part of those who heard Jesus preach. This theory, of course, would involve us all in a guessing game about what Jesus actually taught. If it were true that Jesus’ own teaching has been obscured by the misleading reports of his followers, then the genuine faith of Jesus must remain forever irrecoverable.

If, however, God has ensured a faithful account of the ministry of the chosen Messiah, then it is obvious that Jesus operated within a well-defined Messianic, apocalyptic framework in which the Kingdom of God was none other than the promised Day of the Lord at which a remnant of Israel would be saved, and the faithful of all the ages would be resurrected from the sleep of death to take up their assigned role as sovereigns with the Messiah in the divine government on a renewed earth.

Read in this light the New Testament is a coherent document with a two-fold underlying purpose — to announce that Jesus is the Messiah and that the Kingdom of God is coming with the return of Jesus to complete his Messianic work.

Traditional orthodoxy has been unable to face Jesus’ “Jewish” system without collapsing its strong, eschatological emphasis. Paul, with hope for the future Kingdom burning in his heart, comforts the believers in Thessalonica with the promise that at the Messiah’s arrival, the Christians who have died will be brought to life and with their surviving brothers in Christ they will ascend to meet Christ in the air. Following that stupendous event they will escort the distinguished Messiah to the earth for the inauguration of his reign in the New Age of the Kingdom. According to Paul, it is *by this process* that believers may expect to come into the personal presence of the Lord: “*Thus* [by means of rapture and resurrection] we shall be always *with the Lord*” (I Thess. 4:17).

Paul’s firm grasp of the future uniting of believers with their Lord has proven too difficult for unmessianic versions of the faith. They have insisted

that one can be “with the Lord” by an entirely different process — simply by dying and going immediately and individually into the presence of the Lord in heaven. Paul’s “*thus* we shall come to be always with the Lord because of his future arrival” has been deformed into “thus we shall come into his presence without the need for the future resurrection of the faithful and the spectacular arrival of Jesus in power.” Funeral services which promise that the deceased has gone to be with Jesus in heaven provide an unfortunate counter-propaganda to the New Testament teaching about how and when life after death will be achieved.

The two systems are quite different. Commentators are left in a muddle. On the one hand the sacred documents to be explained place their entire emphasis on the future resurrection as the only means by which a believer can meet Christ personally. On the other hand popular tradition demands that believers not have to wait until the Parousia (the Second Coming) in order to come face to face with the Lord. The two systems are irreconcilable. John Stott, as a leading evangelical, leaves us with an unresolved problem: how to reconcile the 1162 Church of England Burial Service with the teaching of Paul. “For one of the most popular gravestone inscriptions is [Paul’s] text ‘with Christ, which is far better’... Almighty God, went the collect of the old 1662 Burial Service, ‘*with whom* do live the spirits of them that depart hence in the Lord and with whom the souls of the faithful... are in joy and felicity.’ A popular hymn confirms the traditional teaching: ‘By death I shall escape from death and life eternal gain.’”<sup>2</sup>

But this popular teaching has abandoned Paul. Missing from the collect and the hymn is the ringing clarity of Paul’s faith in the eschatological (future) resurrection of the dead which will happen, not at death, but when Jesus *comes back*. Orthodoxy successfully contradicts Paul by making the believer’s arrival “with Christ” a matter of his going (individually) to him, rather than Christ’s *coming back to us*. “Let not your hearts be troubled... I go to prepare a place for you... I will *come again* [the Parousia] and will take you *to myself*” (John 14:1-3).

In complete harmony with Jesus I Thessalonians 4:13-17 announces the uniting of the believers with

Christ only by the event of the second coming of Christ: “*Thus* we shall be with the Lord forever.” It is to throw the New Testament and Paul into confusion if we then read Philippians 1:23, “My desire is to depart and be *with Christ*,” to mean that *individually at the instant of death* the believer can enter the presence of Christ. Equally unsatisfactory is the assumption that Jesus’ promise to the thief guaranteed an immediate presence with Christ on the day of the crucifixion. What Jesus in fact offered harmonizes perfectly with Paul in I Thessalonians 4:17, a reuniting with Jesus in the future day of the Kingdom-Paradise: “Truly I tell you today, you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). It is a promise for the future.

The loss of a clear vision of the future Kingdom and the resurrection plagues attempts to explain the Bible. The biblical Christian hope is to be “with the Lord.” Paul was faithfully following his master when he asserted that this coming into Messiah’s presence forever *depends on the future arrival of Jesus to raise the dead*. “*Thus* we shall always be with the Lord” (I Thess. 4:17), and by no other means. “Father, I desire that they also... may be *with me*... I go to prepare a place for you and I will *come again* and will take you *to myself*, that where I am you may be also” (John 14:1-3).

“Why would you want to go to *heaven*?” it is appropriate to ask the traditional believer. Jesus will not be there, following the future resurrection and the second coming. He is coming back to the earth so that we can be “with him.” To be “with Jesus” will mean inheriting *the earth* (Matt. 5:5) and ruling *on earth* with him (Rev. 5:10).

None of this would appear controversial, had the church not lost sight of the Messianic Kingdom, the heart of Jesus’ Gospel. ✧

### The Perilous Half-Truth

“As Jesus’ fame spread, people flocked to hear him, but when his followers hailed him as an earthly Messiah, successor to King David, sent to restore the glory of Israel, Jesus denied it” (*The Story of World Religions*, p. 146).

***Jesus in fact never denied the restoration of the throne of David in Israel. He insisted, however, that this was not to happen at his first coming. It will at his second coming.***

<sup>2</sup> *Understanding Christ*, Zondervan, 1979, p. 85.

## How Did Paul Define God?

Some of the most transparently simple propositions of the New Testament have become complex and confusing because of post-biblical traditions and creeds. Jesus and Paul were Jews who subscribed to the beautiful and simple creed of Israel: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is One Lord." "To you it has been shown that you might know that the LORD, He is God; that there is no other beside him" (Deut. 6:4; 4:35). Jesus quoted and confirmed the creed of Israel when he declared "The first commandment is this: Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is One Lord" (Mark 12:28ff.).

Paul, as the leading Christian apostle, confirmed his Jewish understanding of who God is with these words: "There is no God but One. For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many gods and many lords), yet for us [Christians] there is One God, the Father..." (I Cor. 8:4-6). Paul provides here the perfect definition of monotheism, belief in One God only. "There is One God, the Father..." "The Father," as grammarians say, stands in apposition to the One God: "There is One God, the Father, and that One God is the Father..." Combining Paul's words in I Corinthians 8:4 and 6 we have this vital information: "There is no God but One...There is One God, the Father."

Paul then acknowledged Jesus Christ as the One Lord, closely associated with the One God, the Father, but distinguished from Him. Readers should pay close attention to what Paul meant by "Lord" as the title for Jesus, the Messiah. The answer was provided in our first issue (October, 1998) in an article dealing with the all-important Psalm 110:1. Psalm 110:1 is the key to the title "Lord" as applied constantly to Jesus. Please write for a copy of that issue if you do not have it.

## John 1:1 — Caveat Lector (Reader Beware)

One day a theological storm is likely to erupt over the translation of John 1:1-3 in our standard versions. At present the public is offered a wide range of renderings, from the purely literal to the freely paraphrased. But do these translations represent John's intention? Have they sometimes served as a weapon in the hands of Christian orthodoxy to enforce the decisions of post-biblical creeds and councils?

According to the findings of a recent monumental study of the origin of Christ in the Bible (Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Born Before All Time? The Dispute over Christ's Origin*, New York: Crossroad, 1992) Bible-readers instinctively "hear" the text as follows: "In the beginning was *Jesus* and Jesus was with God and Jesus was God."

This understanding of the passage provides a vital support for the traditional doctrine of the Godhead, shared equally by Father and Son from eternity. The Contemporary English Version goes way beyond the Greek and gives us: "The Word was the One who was with God." No doubt, according to that version, that Word means an eternal Son.

But why, Kuschel asks, do readers leap from "word" to "Son"? The text reads "In the beginning was the *word*," not "In the beginning was *the Son*." The substitution of "Son" for "word" has had dramatic consequences. But the text does not warrant the switch.

There is no direct mention of the *Son of God* until we come to verse 14, where "the word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory of a unique Son, full of grace and truth."

Consider this very remarkable and informative fact: If one had a copy of an English Bible in any of the eight available English versions before the appearance of the King James Version in 1611, one would gain a very different sense from the opening verses of John: "In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God. All

things came into being through *it*, and without *it* nothing was made that was made.”

“All things were made through *it* [the word],” not “through him.” And so those English versions did not rush to the conclusion, as does the KJV and its followers, that the word was a *person* before the birth of Jesus. If all things were made through “the word,” as an “it,” a quite different meaning emerges. The “word” would not be a *person* existing alongside God, the Father from eternity. The result: one of the main planks of traditional systems about members in the Godhead would be removed.

“In the beginning was the word.” There is no justification in the original Greek for placing a capital “W” on “word,” and turning it into a *person*. The question is, what would John and his readers understand by “word”? Quite obviously there are echoes of Genesis 1:1, 3: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...and God said [using his *word*], ‘Let there be light.’” “God said” means “God uttered His word,” the medium of His creative activity. And so in John 1:1 God expressed His intention, His word, His self-revealing, creative word. But absolutely nothing in the text (apart from the obtrusive capital letter on “word” in our versions) would make us think that God was in company with another *person*. The word which God spoke was in fact just “the word of God.” And one’s word is not another *person*, obviously.

Sensible Bible study would require that we see in the background of John’s thinking what “word” would mean. “Word” had appeared many times in the Hebrew Bible known so well to John and Jesus. *On no occasion did “word” ever mean anything other than an utterance, promise, command, etc.* Never a personal being. Always the index of the mind — an expression, a word.

It would be a serious mistake of interpretation to discard the massively attested meaning of “word” in the Hebrew matrix from which John wrote and attach to it a meaning it never had — a “person,” or even “spokesperson.” No lexicon of the Hebrew Bible ever listed “*davar*” (Hebrew for “word”) as a person, God, angel or man.

“And the word was with God.” So read our versions. And so the Greek might be rendered, *if* one has already decided, against all the evidence, that by “word” John meant a person, the Son of God, alive before his birth.

Allowance must be made for Hebrew idiom. Without a feel for the Hebrew background, as so often in the New Testament, we are deprived of a vital key to understanding. We might ask of an English speaker, “When was your word last ‘with you’?” The plain fact is that in English, which is not the language of the Bible, a “word” is never “with” you. A person can be “with you,” certainly, but not a word.

But in the wisdom literature of the Bible and other Jewish sources a “word” certainly can be “with” a person. And the meaning is that a plan or purpose — a word — is kept in one’s heart ready for execution. For example Job says to God (10:13): “Yet these things You have concealed in your heart; I know that this is ‘with you.’” The NASV gives a more intelligible sense by reading, “I know that this is *within* you.” In Job 23:13, 14 it is said of God, “What His soul desires, that He does, for He performs what is appointed for me, and many such decrees are *with Him*,” meaning, of course, that God’s plans are stored up in His mind. God’s word is His intention, held in His heart as plans to be carried out in the world He has created. Often what God has “with Him” is the decree He has planned: “This is the portion of the wicked man *with God*, and the inheritance which tyrants receive from the Almighty.” With this we may compare a similar thought, “This is the portion of a wicked man from God and the heritage appointed for him” (Job 20:29).

Or take the related concept of “Wisdom.” In Job we find this: “The deep says, ‘It [Wisdom] is not *in* me.’ And the sea says, ‘It is not *with* me.’” (Job 28:14). To have wisdom or word “with” one is to have them in one’s mind and heart. “With Him is wisdom and strength. To Him belong counsel and understanding” (Job 12:13).

In Genesis 40:14 we read “Keep me in mind when it goes well with you,” and the text reads literally “Remember me *with yourself*...” From all these examples it is clear that if something is “with” a person, it is lodged in the mind, often as a decreed purpose or plan.

Thus in John 1:1, “In the beginning God had a plan and that plan was within God’s heart and was itself ‘God.’” In other words the plan was the very expression of God’s will. It was a divine Plan, reflective of His inner being. John is fond of the word “is,” which is not always an “is” of strict identity.

Jesus “is” the resurrection (“I am the resurrection”); “God ‘is’ spirit.” “God ‘is’ love and light.” Well, God is not actually one-to-one identical with light and love, and Jesus is not literally the resurrection. “The word *was* God” means that the word was fully expressive of God’s mind. A person “is” his mind, metaphorically speaking. Jesus is the one who can bring about our resurrection. God communicates through His spirit. The word is the index of God’s intention and purpose. It was in His heart, expressive of His very being. As the *Translators’ Translation* senses the meaning, “the Word was with God and shared His nature,” “the Word was divine.” The word, then, is the divine expression, the very self of God revealed. This came to perfect expression in the human being, Jesus.

Of course, if one has taken a first false step by assuming that the “word” in the beginning was “the *Son*,” then the phrase “the word was God” can only confirm the impression that there are *two* members of the Godhead, both of whom are God. However problematic and illogical this (very unJewish) leap into a duality in God may be, Bible-readers have been conditioned to make that leap painlessly, though John and Jesus elsewhere prove themselves to be believers in the *unitary* monotheism of the great Jewish heritage: Addressing the Father, Jesus says unequivocally, “You, Father, are the only one who is truly God” (John 17:3). He refers again to the Father as “the one who alone is God” (John 5:44). These are echoes of the pure monotheism of the Hebrew Bible. God remains in the New Testament “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Jesus had and has a God, and that is the Father, the One God of John 17:3. How exactly like the OT: “Have we not all One Father? Has not One God created us?” (Malachi 2:10). How beautifully this harmonizes with Paul’s great creedal declaration: “For us Christians there is *One God, the Father* and none other than He” (see I Cor. 8:4, 6).

“In the beginning there was a divine word and it was stored in God’s heart and was His own creative self-expression. All things came into being through that divine word and without it nothing was made that was made...And the word/plan became flesh — was realized in a human person — and dwelt among us.” That living expression of God’s intimate purpose for mankind was Jesus Christ, the human person supernaturally conceived as the Son of God. Luke

had no doubt about *the reason and basis* for Jesus being entitled to be called the “Son of God.” It was as a consequence of the supernatural miracle wrought in the womb of Mary that Jesus is truly “the Son of God.” “For that reason indeed (*dio kai*) he will be called the Son of God” (Luke 1:35). Indeed, as Matthew, Luke and Paul agree, Jesus “is” wisdom, wisdom embodied in a living breathing person, who entered the world and conscious existence through birth from his mother — truly a man, the last Adam, Son of David, Son of God and Messiah. Jesus is the unique and final revelation of God.

If we read John and his introduction in this fashion, we find him proclaiming, unitedly with the other Gospel writers, the supremely important fact that Jesus *is the Messiah, Son of God*. On that great truth, the church is to be founded (Matt. 16:15-18) and united, and for that single purpose — to demonstrate and urge belief in Jesus as *the Messiah* — John wrote his whole Gospel (John 20:31). ✧

## Responses

“I listen to your radio program with keen interest. Have you ever thought of visiting South Africa?” — *Durban, South Africa*

“I have enjoyed listening to your programs. Please send me your booklet ‘What Happens When We Die?’” — *Plano, TX*

“Some observations regarding the ‘kingdom’: I’m in full agreement about the fact that Christ will be returning to set up his millennial kingdom here on earth. That has never been a problem; however, I never took it much further than the first thousand years. I’m trying to figure out why we have such a difficulty accepting and/or preaching about the ‘kingdom.’ I think you alluded to one reason — that being an anti-Semitic mindset. (Does that explain the apparent rush in the second and third centuries to embrace Greek philosophy and make it foundational to Christianity — at the expense of the Gospel’s Jewish roots?) Might I suggest, as you probably already have, that a second reason why the ‘kingdom’ message is ignored in mainstream evangelical circles is because of fear of being identified with cults such as the JW’s, whose message seems to primarily be one of the coming ‘kingdom’...I want to learn truth. So I’d appreciate some clarification as to whether or not I’m a spirit being who has a soul and lives in a body.” — *Yap State, Federated States of Micronesia*