

# *The Meaning and Significance of the Phrase "Kingdom of God" in the Teaching of Jesus as Represented by the Synoptic Gospels*

From that time on Jesus began to preach. "Repent. for the Kingdom of God is near.

Matt. 4:17.

It is clear from the Synoptic Gospels that 'the Kingdom of God' formed the central theme of Jesus' preaching from the very outset of his ministry. Although Matthew's Gospel only uses the phrase 'Kingdom of God' four times (12:28; 19:24; 21:21, 31, 43). it is generally held that the phrase 'Kingdom of Heaven' used in this Gospel is typical of the Jewish practice of circumlocution - substituting another word for the divine name. The two terms are therefore completely interchangeable (cf. Matt. 19:23 with v. 24; Mark 10:23).(1)

Jesus did not invent the phrase, but built upon existing Old Testament teaching (cf. Psalm 145:11, 13; 103:19; Isa. 45:23; Dan. 4:3; Zech. 14:9)(2) and Jewish Apocalyptic writings that follow the same pattern of thought. The regular synagogue prayer of pre-Christian times (the Kaddish), for example, reads: "May He let His Kingdom rule... speedily and soon."(3)

J. Ramsey Michaels comments:

In many different ways Jesus affirmed traditional Jewish expectation. yet he gives them at the same time what Henry James would call a 'turn of the screw', a new twist that shocks his hearers and in some respect calls their behaviour and world-view into question.(4)

It is now generally agreed that the Greek word *Basileia* referred primarily to the abstract concept of God's rule or reign, but was also (but less commonly) used to refer to the realm over which that rule was exercised.(5) That being said, what did Jesus mean by the term Kingdom of God? The simplest answer is that he used it to summarise his entire mission, in all its aspects,(6) but this statement requires further development lest the theological richness of the term be lost.

For Jesus the Gospel was the nearness of the Kingdom of God (Mark 1:14-15).(7) This passage (and others that emphasise the nearness of the Kingdom. e.g. Mark 9:1; Matt 12:28=Luke 11:20) were taken by C.H. Dodd as evidence that Jesus taught that the Kingdom of God was present in his own ministry and "a matter of present experience".(8) Closer examination of the texts illustrates the danger of interpreting the evidence according to ones preconceived ideas.(9) Study of Mark 1:15 has shown that the Greek texts (and the Hebrew underlying them) are ambiguous in their meaning, which has led many to conclude (rightly in my view) that Jesus intended his hearers to understand that the Kingdom of God [henceforth abbreviated to "the Kingdom"] had both a present(10) and a future aspect.(11) By way of contrast Cranfield argues that the reference is not temporal but spatial - the Kingdom has come near in the person of Jesus.(12)

C.H. Dodd felt free to alter the translation of Mark 9:1 by inserting "...the adverb 'already' and interpret 'see' to mean recognise in retrospect."(13) He wrote: "The bystanders are...

promised... that they shall come to see that the Kingdom of God *has already come*, at some point before they became aware of it.”(14) The correct translation and an examination of the context reveals, however, that for Mark (as for Matthew [16:28] and Luke [9:27]). the term “coming of the Kingdom in power” referred first of all to the transfiguration (which follows the statement in all three the Synoptics (Matt. 17:1-13; Mark 9:2-13; Luke 9:18-36). but also pointed forward to the glory to come following the resurrection (cf. 2 Peter 1:16-18).(15) If it were to refer to the Parousia then it would have to be conceded that Jesus was mistaken in his prediction that some of the disciples would still be alive when it occurred(16) (which is exactly what T.W. Manson seeks to prove).(17)

Jesus’ exorcisms mean that “the sovereign power of God has come into effective operation.”(18) Matthew (4:23; 10:7; cf. 11:2-6)(19) and Luke (4:40-43; 8:1-3;9:1-2, 11; 10:9) both link the proclamation of the Kingdom with the defeat of demons and the cure of diseases.(20) The contrast is made by Jesus between God’s Kingdom and that of Satan (Luke 11:18-20, cf. 4:40-43). In many of his parables Jesus taught his disciples that the Kingdom of God would coexist in the world with the kingdom of Satan for a time. In the parable of the Weeds (Matt. 13:24-30, 36-44) he explains “how the Kingdom can be present in the world without wiping yet not wiping out all opposition.(21) The parable of the Dragnet (Matt. 13:47-50) likewise speaks of a time of coexistence followed by a separation when the Kingdom is fully established at the end of the age.(22)

Matthew 12:28 (=Luke 11:20) also teaches us that the kingdom is established by the power of the Holy Spirit, in whom Jesus worked.(23) Although it is done in the power of the Spirit, the work of establishing the Kingdom is the Father’s (Matt. 6:10; Luke 11:2).(24) T.W. Manson has shown that Jesus revealed God as Father to his disciples.(25) In the same way the teaching concerning the bestowal of the Kingdom was also done in the context of private instruction of the disciples (Matt. 13:43; 25:43; Luke 12:32; 22:29ff).(26) The Parable of the Growing Seed (Mark 4:26-29) illustrates that the kingdom grows on its own, apart from any visible external assistance, as the Father causes it to grow,(27) “emphasising God’s initiative in the establishment of His rule.”(28)

The Early Church was clear in their assertion that Jesus was the Messiah, the Anointed One (cf. Matt .4:16-17; Mark 1:10-11; Luke 3:21-22), who was Ruler and king (Matt. 2:2; cf. 21:5). Yet Jesus did not publicly claim that title. preferring instead the self-designation ‘Son of Man’. Marshall suggests that just as Jesus used this ambiguous term (which could mean “Son of God” [cf. Dan. 7:27] or simply ‘I’) as a veiled manifestation of himself, so in the same way he used the term ‘Kingdom of God’ to refer to “an authority and rule that will be revealed openly in the future, but at present is hidden and partly secret.”(29) This is supported by an examination of Jesus’ parabolic teaching, such as the Parable of the Mustard Seed (Mark 4:30-32; Luke 13:18-19) and the Yeast (Matt. 13:33; Luke 13:20-21). Blomberg points out that the Parables, “confronted people with radical demands, and not all were willing to comply. Some followed him in discipleship, but others were actually driven further from his Kingdom.”(30) (Mark 4:10-12; cf. Matt. 12:34).

The Kingdom also has a future aspect, which Weiss and Schweitzer have over emphasised(31) at the expense of those passages where Jesus taught a present Kingdom (see above).(32) Luke 13:22-31 is particularly relevant to our discussion at this point, for it not only gives a rare glimpse into events in the eschatological Kingdom i.e. the feast (vv. 29-30).

This concept would have been a familiar one to his hearers (Isa. 25:6f; 64:3; 65:13f; Ezek. 32:4; 39:17-20),(33) but Jesus gives ‘a turn of the screw’ that would have shocked a Jewish audience: there would be many surprises as to the final membership of the Kingdom - even the Gentiles would be represented! (cf. Isa. 45:6; 49:12).(34) The same theme recurs in Luke 14:15-25, were Jesus does not correct his table companions declaration: “Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the Kingdom of God” (v.15), as ‘feast’ is “a common Jewish metaphor meaning eschatological salvation.”(35) The Pharisees were deeply offended by the way in which Jesus welcomed such people as Gentiles, Tax Collectors and ‘sinners’ and ate with them (Matt. 9:9-13; Mark 2:15-17; Luke 5:27-32). To which Jesus replied with the parables of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Silver and the Lost Son (Luke 15). Of these the “keynote is the joy in heaven over a son who repents (15:7, 10). over a son who comes home.”(36)

The question as to membership of the Kingdom leads to the commonly asked question “Is the Church the Kingdom of God?” R.T. France points out that this question is “meaningless... roughly on a par with... ‘Is Mrs. Thatcher patriotism?’”(37) because as we have already seen, the Kingdom refers primarily to God’s rule. Nowhere in the New Testament is the church identified with the Kingdom of God. George Eldon Ladd states:

The Kingdom is the rule of God, and the realm of his blessings; the Church is the people of the Kingdom. who have received it, who witness it, and who will inherit.(38)

There is a danger, however, of taking Perrin’s concept of the Kingdom(39) too far, as I.H. Marshall points out. Like other liberal scholars Perrin derives his “understanding of the Kingdom of God from a limited number of texts which he believed to be the authentic sayings of Jesus,(40) and so his definition of the Kingdom “namely the powerful action of God that can be expressed in a whole range of situations”(41) is proved inadequate when the rest of the evidence is examined. Marshall concludes that “the Church as the people of God is the object of his rule and is therefore His Kingdom, or at least an expression of it, imperfect and sinful though it is.”(42)

Luke 17:20-21 is the only saying of Jesus that might be used as evidence to attempt to prove that he saw the Kingdom as something internal(43) (cf. Rom. 14:17). The Pharisees were looking for signs that could be observed, but Jesus replied that the Kingdom was among them - that is - it was present in His person and ministry.(44)

In contrast to the ideas current in his day, Jesus’ statement that “From the time of John the Baptist until now, the Kingdom of Heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it (Matt. 11:12; cf. Luke 16:16). These verses have given rise to a great range of interpretations. F.F. Bruce sees them as a rebuke to those of like mind to the Zealots, who sought to bring about the Kingdom of God by force.(45) More likely is the view of D.A. Carson who argues that:

From the beginning of Jesus’ ministry the Kingdom had been forcefully advancing (the point also made in Luke 16:16). But it has not swept all opposition away as John expected.(46) What both John the Baptist and the Pharisees were expecting was the sudden and total establishment of the Kingdom. Instead, Jesus predicts that those in the Kingdom can expect opposition and persecution.(47)

The idea of the ‘scum of the earth’ (prostitutes and Tax-Collectors) entering the Kingdom

(Matt. 21:28-32) while the 'righteous' religious leaders remained outside is yet another example of Jesus correcting mistaken notions.(48) His point is obvious, saying 'Yes' to God verbally yet failing to do the will of God excludes one from the Kingdom (cf. Matt. 7:21). "The gracious, redemptive activity of God demands a response of radical obedience."(49)

The parables of the Hidden Treasure (Matt. 13:44) and the Pearl (13:45- 46) teach that the Kingdom is of great worth. In the former a man, having found the treasure, hid it again until he had bought the field, because treasure belonged to the owner of the property, not to the finder.(50) In the latter:

Jesus is not interested in religious efforts or in affirming that one can 'buy' the Kingdom; on the contrary, he is saying that the person whose whole life has been bound up with the 'pearls' will, on comprehending the true value of the Kingdom as Jesus presents it, gladly exchange all else to follow him.(51)

The parable of the Sower shows that productivity within the Kingdom depends on the kind of response made by each individual who heard of it. In ancient Israel a tenfold harvest was a good yield, and the average about seven and a half. The hundredfold harvest predicted was the result of two things - a correct attitude of heart and on part of the disciple and a miracle.(52) This correct attitude is further described in Luke 18. It is not self-righteousness, like that of the Pharisee (vv.9-12, 14), but humility like the Tax Collector (v.13). It is having the attitude of a child (vv. 15-16; cf. Matt. 19:13-15; Mark 10:13-16),(53) which implies total dependence upon the good pleasure of God, having no power or righteousness of one's own.(54)

For the Gospel writers the phrase "entering the Kingdom of God" is interchangeable with 'being saved' as can be seen from Luke 18:25-26 (cf. Matt. 19:24-25; Mark 10:23, 26), where Jesus describes how hard it is for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God and the disciples reply "who then can be saved?" In the next few verses the Kingdom is linked with 'eternal life' (Luke 18:30; cf. Matt. 25:29; Mark 10:30).(55) This is further strengthened in Luke 21:28-30. for in verse 28 'redemption' is drawing near, but in v.30 it is the Kingdom of God that is drawing near. Clearly the Gospels are linking the salvation and redemption of believers with the coming of the Kingdom.(56)

The term 'Kingdom of God' is a multi-ordinate term which includes every aspect of Jesus' ministry, even the cross, which in some way (that the Gospels do not make clear) is essential to the coming of the Kingdom.(57) In His teaching Jesus built on and corrected the current ideas about the Kingdom within Judaism and showed that it has both a present and a future aspect. Now it suffers violence, is resisted and requires total commitment to enter it; yet its growth is not the work of man, but of the Father. The Kingdom is the rule of God, but it also includes people, and these people are not a new Israel ruled by the Twelve Disciples (Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:29),(58) but are different from the old in composition in that it is universal rather than restricted to one nation.

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