

The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus

1. Importance of the Subject

The Kingdom was the central message of Jesus and his disciples according to the Synoptic Gospels. See the following important moments in his ministry, Mark 1:14-15; Matthew 4:23; 10:7; Luke 9:2.

2. Terminology

There are two expressions used by Jesus:

- 'Kingdom of Heaven' - 30 times in Matthew
- 'Kingdom of God' - 5 times in Matthew (though 6:33 is not found in all the main manuscripts)
 - 16 times in Mark
 - 32 times in Luke

Nearly all scholars agree that 'kingdom of heaven' = 'kingdom of God' with the terms being used interchangeably. See for example:

Matt. 19:23-24 cf. Mark 10:23, Luke 18:24
Matt. 4:17 cf. Mark 1:15; Matt. 10: 6-7 cf. Luke 9:2
Matt. 13:11 cf. Mark 4:11; Luke 8:10.

The 'Kingdom of the heavens' was a Semitic idiom used by the rabbis. The Gospel of Matthew is generally recognised as the most 'Jewish' Gospel. Usually Jews avoided the divine name out of reverence and substituted other expressions e.g. 'heaven' cf. Matt. 21:25, Luke 18:18. On the other hand the 'kingdom of God', would be more meaningful to Gentiles. Speaking in Aramaic Jesus likely used both phrases though probably 'kingdom of heaven' more frequently because of his Jewish audience.

3. Some Interpretations of the Phrase

3.1 Augustine and the Roman Catholic Church taught that the Kingdom was equivalent to the Church. But though the kingdom creates and works through the church, and is proclaimed by it, we must not confuse the rule of God with the fellowship of men (even though they are closely related).

3.2 The Old liberal view. The kingdom is the pure prophetic religion taught by Jesus e.g. the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, the infinite value of the human soul and the ethic of love.

There are also under this heading similar non-eschatological interpretations. The kingdom is the renovated social order built on the principles of Jesus' kingdom of self respect, a utopia on earth built by the church or the Biblical equivalent of the evolutionary process.

3.3 The View of Johannes Weiss (1892) and Albert Schweitzer (1910). They held that the phrase 'kingdom of God' referred only to a future and eschatological kingdom to be revealed by a supernatural act, revealing Jesus as heavenly Son of Man. Schweitzer stressed its coming in the immediate future. The teaching of Jesus e.g. in the Sermon on the Mount was only for the brief interval before the end and such teachings can be described as 'interim ethics'. Schweitzer taught that Jesus tried to force God's hand to bring about the kingdom by going to Jerusalem. The kingdom did not come so Jesus died in despair and disillusionment. But few today would agree with this understanding or that the kingdom is exclusively eschatological.

3.4 The influence of C.H. Dodd who advocated 'Realised eschatology'. The kingdom of God refers to the transcendent order beyond time and space which has broken into history in Jesus. The 'wholly other' has entered history.

Dodd's view has been criticised for minimising the futuristic aspect of the kingdom. Later he admitted that kingdom awaits consummation 'beyond history'.

Generally scholars agree with Dodd that the most distinctive thing in Jesus' teaching is his insistence on the presence of kingdom in his ministry, Matt. 12:28; Luke 17:20-21.

Jeremias accepted much of Dodd's position but spoke of 'eschatology in process of realisation'. The resurrection, parousia and consummation of the kingdom are seen as a single process.

3.5 The majority of scholars emphasise that the kingdom has both present and future aspects.

3.5.1 The dispensational view. In this view the OT prophecies are to be literally fulfilled. There is often a sharp distinction made between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven (which is the earthly theocratic kingdom promised to Israel in OT). Only Matthew's Gospel gives us the Jewish aspect of the kingdom. The Sermon on the Mount is the law of the kingdom of Heaven which will be realised, not at the Rapture of the Church but later at Christ's return in glory when Israel is converted and OT promises about David's kingdom are literally fulfilled.

3.5.2 The non-dispensational evangelical view. The kingdom of God (or the kingdom of heaven) is his kingly rule which is both present and future. The OT promises are fulfilled now in the coming of the kingdom in Jesus and the kingdom will be consummated at the return of Jesus, inaugurating the age to come.

4. The Kingdom of God in Judaism

Though the phrase 'kingdom of God' does not occur as such in the OT the idea pervades the prophets. God is king now both of Israel and all the earth (Ex.15:18; 2 Kings 19:15; Isa.43:15). Yet a day is coming when his kingship will be more fully and effectively manifested through a coming king. (Isa. 9:2, 6, 7; 11:1; 24:23 Jer.23:5; 33:15; Ezek.34:3; Dan.7:13f; Micah 5:2; Zech.14:9). Then God's redemptive purposes will be complete. There were various views among Jews in the 1st century about the future kingdom, e.g., some said the kingdom would come through a descendant of David. Others claimed that it would come through a heavenly Son of Man. The prophets did not always sharply distinguish between the now and distant future.

There were diverse views in apocalyptic Judaism (which despaired of the present age because it was viewed as under the control of evil powers) e.g. an earthly historical kingdom (Enoch 1-36; Psalms of Solomon 17-18) or a transcendental kingdom (Enoch 37-71).

In Qumran literature, at the eschatological consummation the angels were to help the sons of light against the sons of darkness.

The Rabbis often spoken of 'The kingdom of the heavens'. They said that God's rule had always been exercised through the law. Therefore the kingdom was limited to Israel. But later his sovereignty would be manifested in the world, overcoming all who resist God.

The Zealots. There were many rebellions against Rome, e.g. Acts 5:36-37. Rebellion is also referred to in Josephus. The Zealots aimed to bring in the kingdom by the sword. The last rebellion was in 132 A.D. by Bar Kokhba.

Despite differing views, all Jews expected the kingdom would be brought in by God, overthrowing his enemies, making Israel victorious and establishing God's rule.

5. The Meaning of Kingdom of God

The word used for 'kingdom' in the NT is '*Basileia*' (Greek) and '*Malkuth*' (Hebrew) in the OT.

It is not like an earthly kingdom as a territory ruled by a king. It has rather that abstract meaning of reign, rule, sovereignty, dominion. See Pss. 103:19; 145: 11-13. So its basic meaning is rule or reign (cf. RSV's use of 'kingship' and 'royal power' in John 18:36 and Rev. 17:12). So the word 'kingdom' as used by Jesus has a present and future reference. He is king now and also in the future.

In a secondary sense *Basileia* can mean a realm which men may enter and from which they may be excluded – see Matt. 21:31; Mark 9:47. Moffatt's New Testament translates *Basileia* as both 'reign' and 'realm'.

The dominant meaning is of God in kingly power visiting and redeeming his people, the saving rule of God, or God at work in history bringing his gracious purposes to their appointed end. It refers to God's supernatural activity in Jesus for man's salvation. Man does not build the kingdom but God in his grace gives it. Man's responsibilities are to repent, believe and submit. It is not man's deed but God's seed, Matt. 13:31-32; Mark 4:30-32. It reveals God to be the seeking God who takes the initiative in salvation.

6. The Need for the Kingdom

6.1 Satan's Activity

The need for the kingdom is because of another kingdom, the power of Satan and evil spirits, see the OT background with 'Satan' as the 'adversary' of God, Job 1-2; 1 Chron.21:1. In Intertestamental Judaism, the present age was viewed as under the power of evil and there were many references to evil spirits. They were subject to a chief spirit which was given various names. He was the source of all the evil on the earth.

In the Gospels, Satan opposes God's purposes in Jesus. In the temptations he claims authority over the world and tries to keep Jesus from obeying God's will and fulfilling his role as the Suffering Servant of the Lord.

However, there is no absolute dualism in Judaism and the Gospels. God is sovereign. Evil must fall.

Satan's activity is described in various ways – he binds a woman, Luke. 13:16; snatches away the word, Mark. 4:15; the weeds are the sons of the evil one, Mt. 13:38; Satan speaks through Peter, Mark. 8:33; he enters Judas, Luke.22:3; attacks Peter, Luke.22:31.

Evil spirits possess men's personalities e.g., Mark. 1:23f; 5:2f. Demon possession has physical and mental effects, but is not to be explained away as insanity.

6.2 Man and Sin

As to the value of man – his 'soul' is much more valuable than the whole world, Mark.8:36; he is created by God, Matt. 19:4; cared for by God, Matt. 5:45; 6:26; 10:30.

He is made for fellowship with God but is out of touch with God – 'lost', Luke 15; 19:10.

Israel (even the covenant people!) are 'lost sheep', Matt. 10:6.

There is a universal call to repent, Matt. 4:17; Mark. 1:15, Luke 24:46-47. The alternative is to perish, Luke 13:1-5. Man is sick with a deadly disease, Matt. 9:12-13.

The disciples of Jesus are also affected – 'if you being evil', Matt. 7:11. The source of sin is the human heart, Matt. 15:19f; Mark. 7:16f.

The Sermon on the Mount has been described as 'The most terrible indictment of human nature in all literature' and 'there is no account of sin to match the Sermon'. Here sin is not just violations of negative commandments but is basically an inward attitude and motive.

When men do their duty – they are still unprofitable servants Luke 17:7-10. Men need to live lives of righteousness which exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees Matt. 5:20. Men have no merit before God, Luke. 18:10-14.

6.3 God and Man

Men are utterly dependent on God – they cannot control the colour of their hair or height Matt. 5:36; 6:27. Also, God determines the time of death – often when men least expect it Luke 12:16-21. He is man's judge Matt. 25:41f and can condemn to hell, Matt. 10:28.

Men need to be 'rich towards God', Luke 12:16-21; Matt. 6:19f. Men are created for sonship with God, Matt. 5:45; 6:26,32; 18:14. This is not theirs by nature but is God's gift.

7. Kingdom in its Present Aspect

7.1 Jesus and the Kingdom

The ministry of Jesus began with an announcement of the arrival of the kingdom, Mark 1:15. It was promised in e.g., Is. 52:7.

His ministry was that fulfilment of OT promises, Luke 4:21 cf. Is.61:1-2. In Matt.11:2-6, Jesus is the 'coming one' whose healing miracles fulfil Is. 35: 5-6. There is a constant emphasis (especially in Matthew) on the fulfilment of the OT in Jesus and his ministry. Through Jesus, his teaching and healing, God's kingdom comes to men. As the Son of Man Jesus is the one who bears God's kingdom, Daniel 7:13-14. Note the parallels of Matt. 16:28 (the Son of Man coming in his kingdom) = Mark 9:1 (the kingdom of God come with power); Luke 9:27 (the kingdom of God). Where Jesus is there is God's saving rule.

The miracles bring the kingdom, Matt. 12:28 cf. Luke 11:20. Jesus comes to bind the strong man (Satan) and to release his captives, Matt. 12:29; Mark 3:27. The kingdom's power is in evidence from the days of John until now, Matt. 22:12.

To be a disciple of Jesus is the same as being in the kingdom, Matt. 19:29 (for my name's sake) = Mark 10:29 (my sake and the Gospel's) = Luke 18:29 (kingdom of God's sake). Again, following Jesus is being in the kingdom, Luke 9:57-62. So being a disciple is equivalent to being in the kingdom, to being saved, to having eternal life, Mark 10:14-26.

Christ's compassionate dealings are in themselves a picture of God's gracious kingly rule. His parables are pictures of the kingdom's growth and power. His teaching about prayer concerns the kingdom and his teaching about God as father concerns one who is also King of the kingdom. His death as Suffering Servant opens the kingdom to those who belong to him, Mark 10:35-45 – the Son of Man of Daniel 7 gives himself as the Suffering Servant as a 'ransom'. The kingdom creates a new community – the new Israel which confesses Jesus as Messiah. Its nucleus was that 12 disciples. Jesus affirms that the kingdom of God is *entos humon*, Luke 17:21 = 'among you', 'in your midst', 'within you' or 'within your reach'. It was Origen who said, 'Christ is *auto Basileia*'. Marcion also said, 'In the Gospel the kingdom of God is Christ himself'.

So to be 'in Christ' is to be in the kingdom. The gospel of the kingdom is Christ in essence. To bring the kingdom preach the king. It is wherever he is. Here we can find NT unity. 'In the kingdom' (Synoptics) = to be in Christ (Paul) = to have eternal life (John). Acts itself combines the preaching of the kingdom and the preaching of Christ, Acts 8:12; 28:31.

7.2 The Blessings of the kingdom

The blessings of the kingdom are many.

First, there is victory over Satan and the evil spirits. Exorcisms were prominent in the ministry of Jesus. The ancient world sought to exorcise by magic. Jesus healed by his mere word, Mark 1:27. Jesus' exorcisms were evidence of the advent of the kingdom, Matt. 12:28; Luke 11:20 (Matthew has 'by the Spirit of God'; Luke has 'by the finger of God' cf. Ex. 8:7; Ps.8:3). Jesus binds the strong man, Mark 3:27 and his power is broken.

So evil is already curbed by Jesus before the end of the age. But Satan is not yet destroyed cf. his activities in Matt. 13:19; Mark 8:33; Luke22:3, 31. The final victory is not yet but certain. Note that the 70 disciples were also victorious over Satan, Luke10:9, 18. Judaism saw victory over evil at end of age but in the Gospels God already acts in Jesus to overcome

evil!

In the kingdom one has the gift of salvation. To be in the kingdom = eternal life = salvation, Mk. 10:17-26. This gift is bestowed on the Father's little flock, Lk.12:32.

It is more valuable than any other gift, Mt. 13:44-46. They must seek it here and now, Mt. 6:33; receive it as children, Mk.10:15 and those who ask receive, Mt. 7:7; It is for the poor in spirit, Mt. 5:3, 10.

The Beatitudes envisage present blessedness leading to blessing in the consummation (note the present and future emphasis).

God's salvation is offered to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, Mt. 10:6; 15:24; present salvation is experienced in the parables of Luke 15 and for Zacchaeus, Lk.19:10, cf.Ezek.34:16,22.

Jesus also exercises the divine prerogative in forgiving sins, Mk. 2:5, 10, cf. Ps.103:3; Is 43:25. Forgiveness was the gift promised in the Messianic age, Jer. 31:34; Ezek. 36: 22-28; Micah 7:18-20. Divine forgiveness precedes and requires human forgiveness, Matt. 18:23-35.

Those in God's kingdom receive the gift of Righteousness. A righteousness said to be greater than that of Scribes and Pharisees, Matt. 5:20. It is described in detail in Matt. 5:21-48 and in other aspects of Jesus' ethical teaching. Those who hunger for it are satisfied, Mt. 5:6. It involves a cry for mercy, Luke 18:13-14. So the Sermon on the Mount presupposes teaching about kingdom and the Sermon describes the life of the disciple in the kingdom.

The Sermon on the Mount presents the conduct God requires – the fruit which comes from the tree made good by God, Mt. 7:17f; 12:33-35. Again, obedience to God's will is the proof that the kingdom is possessed, Mt. 7:21f. God gives what he demands. Jesus' standards are impossible for ordinary human nature to reach apart from the help of God.

Thus in the ministry of Jesus the kingdom comes. It is an actual foretaste of the eschatological salvation.

8. The Demands of the kingdom

These involve:

Repentance, the change of mind and direction concerning God and sin. There is a call to leave one's sin and return to God, Mk.1:15; repent or perish, Lk. 13:1-5.

Men must receive the kingdom as a child, Mk. 10:15. Turn and become as little children, Mt. 18:3.

The kingdom is for the poor in spirit, Mt. 3:4.

There must be submission to God. Seek first God, his kingdom and righteousness, Mt. 6:33. There is the denial of self, taking up the cross and following Jesus, Mk. 8:34.

Every hindrance to this ought to be removed, e.g. riches in the case of the rich young ruler, Mk.10:21; one should even be prepared to be ruthless with sin, if necessary remove one's hand, foot and eye, Mk. 9:43!

Jesus is to come before family ties, Mt. 10:37; Lk. 14:26 has 'hate' i.e. 'love less'. The effort involved is described in this way 'strive' (*agonizomai*), Lk.13:24. One may have to sacrifice all but it will be worthwhile, Mt.13:45-46.

The Gospels also express an urgency because the door may be shut, Mt. 7:23; 25:10f. After entering the kingdom men live in obedience to the will of God. This new life is pictured in the Sermon on the Mount.

9.The Kingdom and the future

The kingdom is present now, Lk. 17:21, and tax collectors and harlots are already entering it, Mt. 21:31. But it is yet to come – hence the prayer ‘Thy kingdom come’, Mt. 6:10. Many are to come from the East and the West to sit at table in the kingdom, Mt. 8:11. Jesus is to drink wine in coming kingdom of God, Mk. 14:25. Then there will be deliverance from mortality and perfected fellowship with God, Lk. 20:34-36 cf. Mk. 12:24-27. Final salvation involves the whole man. Resurrection life will have things in common with the angels.

Evils of physical weakness, sickness and death will not be in the life of the kingdom of God, Mt. 25:34, 46.