

The Kingdom in the Gospels

Introduction

The theme of “kingdom” occupies a great deal of discussion in the Gospel accounts, but more so in the Synoptic Gospels than in John. In terms of the teaching of Christ, it is safe to say, “the Kingdom of God was the central message of Jesus.”¹ Jesus taught the reality of the kingdom in both narrative and parabolic material. He Himself said, “I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, for I was sent for this purpose.” (Luke 4:43).²

Terminology

The term “kingdom” (βασιλεία) is found some 127 times in the New Testament.³ In the Synoptic Gospels it is coupled with the term “God” some 50 times, with only four such uses in Matthew. However “kingdom” is found in Matthew 32 times in the synonymous expression “kingdom of heaven.” The remaining uses in the Synoptics finds it either standing alone (e.g. “a kingdom” Lk. 9:12) or in association with various other expressions (e.g. “kingdoms of the world” – Mt. 4:8).

The Gospel expressions “kingdom of heaven” and “kingdom of God” “are clearly synonymous concepts (cf. Mt. 3:2 with Mk. 1:15; Mt. 5:10 with Lk. 6:20).⁴ That “heaven” is used as a substitute for the divine name of God is seen in the New Testament (cf. Mark 14:61; Lk. 15:18).

In addition, the Gospels couples the term “kingdom” with Jesus; (e.g. Jn. 18:36 “My kingdom”) and with gospel proclamation (e.g. Mt. 9:35; “the gospel of the kingdom”). The Gospels also acknowledge a kingdom for those other than God and His good news. For instance, in Mark 6:23, Herod promises Herodias’ daughter “up to half of my kingdom.”

The Gospels therefore use the term kingdom to refer to earthly, human realms as well as in association with God the Father, His Son, and His domain (Heaven). The gospel of the kingdom is a gospel of Him and His domain. This paper will concern itself with the kingdom belonging to God and the major issues associated with it, namely its nature, extent, and message.

¹ George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 57.

² As a matter of fact, though not a Gospel passage (But still Luke!), the book of Acts records Paul doing the very same thing while under a loose house arrest (28:23-31). In 28:23 Luke records Paul “was explaining to them by solemnly testifying about the kingdom of God, and trying to persuade them concerning Jesus, from both the Law of Moses and from the Prophets, from morning until evening.”

³ My hand count.

⁴ C. C. Caragounis, in “Kingdom of God/Kingdom of Heaven,” in *The Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, (Downers Grove: IVP, 1992), 417.

The Definition of the Kingdom of God

The following definition is based upon the nature of the kingdom as well as the message of the kingdom, issues that are dealt with below. The term “kingdom” implies both a ruler and a domain. A simple definition of the kingdom of God would be “God’s sovereign rule everywhere.” Chrys Caragounis notes that “The term ‘kingdom of God’ or ‘kingdom of Heaven’ signifies God’s sovereign, dynamic and eschatological rule.”⁵ Based on Old Testament understanding of the term *malkût*, Ladd argues that the New Testament term βασιλεία is more abstract than concrete. In other words, the background behind Jesus’ use of the term is more on God’s rule or reign than on the realm in which He will reign.⁶ God’s kingdom is His sovereign rule. This rule takes place wherever He is present, namely, everywhere.

While few would argue against the idea that the kingdom of God implies the rule of God, it is the domain in which it is carried out that causes much debate. What exactly is the nature of this realm or domain?

The Nature of the Kingdom of God

Based upon the teaching of Christ, it seems that the emphasis of the kingdom of God in the Gospels is more dimensional than geographical. The kingdom is soteriological, eschatological, supernatural, and dynamic. It is soteriological in that its message saves the sinner. It is eschatological in that its consummation is yet to take place. It is supernatural in that entrance into it takes the power of God, and it is dynamic in that it arrives and invades history, defeats the enemy of God and sets up the rule of God for all eternity.

Synoptics

The Synoptic Gospels reflect the multidimensional quality of the kingdom of God. From a soteriological point of view, they teach that the kingdoms of the world, which will one day become part of the rule of God and Christ (Rev. 11:15), are currently under the domain of Satan (Mt. 4:8; Lk. 4:5). Jesus arrived and offered sinners the opportunity to repent and believe the gospel of the kingdom (Mt. 3:2; Mk. 1:14-15).

Eschatologically speaking, the kingdom of God awaits its consummation (Mt. 6:10; 25:1; Lk. 11:2) which will have no end (Lk. 1:33). An issue related to this future consummation of the Kingdom is that the Gospels also state a present time quality of the kingdom. The Synoptic Gospels also state that the Kingdom is “at hand” (Mt. 3:2; Mk. 1:15), “within you” (Lk. 17:21), and can be entered into now through faith. This tension

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ George E. Ladd, “Kingdom of God” in *I. S. B. E.* ed. by Geoffrey Bromiley, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 4 vols. 1986), 3:24.

of “already/not yet” will be dealt with under the section, “The Timing of the Kingdom of God.”

The Synoptic Gospels also reflect a supernatural quality about the kingdom in that the power of God is need for participation. In Mark 10:23-27 we see this need of Divine ability:

23 And Jesus, looking around, *said to His disciples, “How hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!” 24 And the disciples were amazed at His words. But Jesus *answered again and *said to them, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 25 “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” 26 And they were even more astonished and said to Him, “Then who can be saved?” 27 Looking upon them, Jesus *said, “With men it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God.”

The kingdom of God is in essence the power of God; His sovereignty over all things.

The Synoptic Gospels also portray a dynamic quality of the kingdom in that it arrives and carries out its purpose. It comes on the human scene (Mt. 3:2; 4:17), it takes root resulting in growth that is both remarkable and inclusive (Mt. 13:31-33).

John

The gospel of John has few references to the kingdom of God. The major passage in John dealing with the kingdom of God is in 3:3-8. In the Gospels, eternal life is equivalent to participation in the kingdom. (This point will be addressed below in “The Saving Message of the Kingdom of God”). Jesus here in John 3:3, 5 states that in order to participate in eternal life with God in the Kingdom, one “must be born again.” This second birth is from heaven⁷ signifying the need of divine favor in order to experience participation. John draws out this need for Divine help in 3:5-8 through the role of the Holy Spirit of God. So even here in John, one sees that the kingdom is both soteriological and supernatural.

The Gospels portray the kingdom of God as the sovereign rule of God in a multidimensional capacity.

The Time of the Kingdom of God

This issue is the most debated issue in the evangelical church today in regards to the kingdom of God. Is the kingdom in existence now, will it come in the future, or as many now hold, is it both “already” and “not yet?”

⁷ γεννηθῆ ἄνωθεν

Synoptics

One of the most crucial passages pertaining to this issue is Mark 1:14-15 and the phrases “is fulfilled” and “is at hand.” Both expressions, “is fulfilled” (πεπλήρωται) and “is at hand” (ἤγγικεν) are perfect tense verbs. In Mark 1:14-15 we read,

14 And after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, 15 and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

Many believe that these verses are a summary of the message of Christ when he began His public ministry.⁸ Undoubtedly He said these words and words like it regularly as He appeared to Israel. Matthew records similar expressions in 3:2 and 4:17.

While there are actually four key elements in Mark 1:14-15, (1) fulfilled time; (2) a kingdom that has drawn near; (3) “repent” and (4) “believe in the gospel,” it is the second of these that is most difficult to interpret. Beasley-Murray chronicles the difference of opinion between C. H. Dodd, J. Y. Campbell and others over the precise meaning of the verb ἔγγιζω. Arguments in favor of it meaning “arrived” (Dodd) and “come near,” “approach” (Campbell) have raged for some time to the end that even today, the only consensus that seems to be is that the term is full of “ambiguity.”⁹ A better way to express this might be that of overlap. In other words, ‘imminent nearness and actual arrival do frequently overlap; thus it is extremely difficult to speak of the one without also speaking of the other.’¹⁰

One does wonder if Mark has employed a kind of parallelism or appositional idea through the use of a chiasmic structure, especially if 1:14-15 is a summary of Jesus by Mark. In other words, might the second and fourth elements of this passage be shedding light on the first and third respectively as follows:

- A. “The time is fulfilled”
i.e. A.¹ “the kingdom of God is at hand”

- B. “repent”
i.e. B.¹ “believe in the gospel”¹¹

⁸ e.g. G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 71.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹⁰ R. F. Berkey, “EGGIZEIN, PHTHANEIN, and Realized Eschatology,” *JBL* 82 (1963): 181.

¹¹ The New Testament sometimes uses repentance and faith as synonyms: Luke 24:47; Acts 2:38. Theologically, one could attempt to argue that they are synonyms in that saving faith includes repentance, and genuine repentance leads to saving faith. Jesus does seem to have done this here in Mark 1:15.

If this is the case then the fact that the time is fulfilled would support the premise to some degree at least, that the kingdom been manifested in a proleptic manner in and through the person and work of Jesus. In a sense, God's rule is now (present) coming to pass (future).

Another passage that touches upon this issue is Matthew 12:28 [Luke 11:20]. In Matthew 12:28 Jesus says, "But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you." The conditional clause seems to be true beyond any doubt; Jesus did in fact cast out demons.¹² If that be the case, then the kingdom of God "has come upon" (ἐφθασεν) you. The verb φθάνω is as debated in regard to its meaning as ἐγγιζω. The general consensus is that Jesus is portraying the kingdom as so imminently near that "it may be considered as virtually here."¹³

If one looks at other great theological truths taught in the New Testament, an "already/not yet" understanding of the kingdom is not so far off. I am justified by faith in Christ, and positionally I have been glorified (Rom. 8:30), yet I await final consummation! The point is that an "already/not yet" may be a more common idea than we are often willing to admit.

John

John adds little to the debate regarding the time of the kingdom. In John 3 we have already seen that Jesus stresses that entrance into it takes an act of God. If anything, this passage stresses the future aspect of the kingdom since entrance takes place after one is born again. In addition, in John 18:36 Jesus speaks of His kingdom as not being of this world. Given that His hearers (Pilate, others, and eventually us) would have made the observation that at the time He uttered these words He was on the earth yet His Kingdom was not, the consummation of His kingdom was yet future.

The Saving Message of the Kingdom of God

Synoptics

The Synoptic Gospels portray participation in the Kingdom of God and eternal life as synonymous concepts. In Mark 10:17-31, Jesus has a fascinating discussion with a man whom has become known to us as the "rich young ruler." In verse 17 the man asks Jesus a question: "what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus went on to both show the man his spiritual bankruptcy through his covetous heart (10:18-22). In verse 23 Jesus then addressed His disciples saying, "How hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!" By saying this, Jesus has equated the inheriting of eternal life as participation in the kingdom of God. After addressing the need for all men for divine help in entering the kingdom (10:24-27), Jesus then that all who have turned from this world

¹² First class condition: εἰ with the indicative ἐκβάλλω.

¹³ Caragounis, in "Kingdom of God/Kingdom of Heaven," 423.

in order to follow Him (through divine help) will in fact come to “receive...eternal life” (10:30), just as the rich man desired. The message of the kingdom is in fact the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

John

In John 3 we see teaching from Jesus that is very similar to that of Mark 10 in regard to the message of the kingdom. In John 3:3 Jesus stated to Nicodemus “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” In 3:5 Jesus brings out the fact that being born again (or from above) is directly tied to divine enablement. He states, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.” Being born again is the work of the Holy Spirit of God and it results in participation in the Kingdom. In continuing His discussion with Nicodemus, Jesus goes on to explain further what He means by the need to be born again. He says in 3:14-15, “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; that whoever believes may in Him have eternal life.” Jesus has equated being born again with faith in the Son of Man (Himself) resulting in participation in the kingdom of God, namely eternal life.

The message of the kingdom in the Gospels is the same whether it is in the Synoptics or in John. Jesus is the object of faith and such faith results in being part of God’s program. Once the initial demands for entrance to the kingdom have been met (repent and believe), Jesus goes on to talk about the cost of commitment that is involved in following Him in the kingdom enterprise (Mk. 12:28-34; Luke 9:57-62).

Role of parables (mystery/hidden)

Much of Jesus’ teaching concerning the kingdom of God is contained in parables whose number and volume exceed the purpose of this paper. Jesus gives His two-fold reason for this in Matthew 13:11-13 when He responded to His disciples’ question of why He spoke in parables. He replied saying,

11 And He answered and said to them, “To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted. 12 “For whoever has, to him shall *more* be given, and he shall have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him. 13 “Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.

Jesus used parables concerning the kingdom both to reveal truth to His own and to reveal truth from Israel in fulfillment of Isaiah 6:9-10. Parables reveal the “mysteries” or secret of the kingdom of God. It seems the manner in which they were revealed to the disciples was through personal revelation of Jesus. For example, after having told the “parable of the sower” (as Matthew calls it in 13:18) to a mixed audience (13:3-9), Jesus then takes the time to unfold its meaning (13:18-23). Without this interpretation by Jesus, the parable as it stood shed no light on the meaning of the kingdom. Jesus used parables in

His day to reveal truth to His followers and to conceal the meaning of the kingdom to those who rejected Him.

Summary of the Kingdom of God

The kingdom of God is His sovereign rule everywhere. It is a kingdom that is multidimensional in that it is soteriological, eschatological, supernatural, and dynamic. It is soteriological in that its message saves the sinner. It is eschatological in that its final consummation is yet to take place. It is supernatural in that entrance into it takes the power of God, and it is dynamic in that it arrives and invades history, defeats the enemy of God and sets up the rule of God for all eternity.

Though its ultimate consummation awaits fulfillment, there is a sense that in and through Jesus, it is here. It is now coming to pass. This tension of “already/not yet” does seem to be able to account for the teaching of Jesus that the kingdom is both here and future. Clearly all of the ramifications of the kingdom of God have yet to be fulfilled, but to some degree in some manner they have been inaugurated. This is not unlike our own salvation.

The literal 1000 year reign of Christ has not begun, but from the perspective of this writer, the extent of a fixed duration of the millennial kingdom was not known in the Gospels, and is only revealed in Revelation 20. This is a paper on the kingdom of God in the Gospels and I am not convinced that the Gospels communicate much of a difference between eternal life as an ongoing state and the kingdom of God as a fixed length of time. The progress of revelation makes this distinction, but the Gospels do not.