

What is the Kingdom?

God's "Kingdom"ⁱ is a critically vital doctrine of the New Testament.

When John the Baptist prepared the way for the Lord, he preached, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."ⁱⁱ The reason for his hearers to repent – to change their way of living and thinking – was the imminent coming of the Kingdom.

When Jesus entered his ministry, it was with the words, "The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"ⁱⁱⁱ

Jesus declared this was the very purpose of his mission: "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent."^{iv}

Jesus preached how to enter the Kingdom; his miracles proved the Kingdom of God had come; the theme of numerous parables provided understanding of the Kingdom; and when he gave his disciples his model prayer, it opens with the desire "your kingdom come, your will be done"^v

Three meanings for the term "Kingdom"

The "Kingdom" appears more than 100 times in the synoptic Gospels. The Gospel of Matthew alone refers to the Kingdom about 50 times. Therefore we should be able to obtain a clear picture of what the expression "Kingdom of God (or Heaven)" means. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

The problem lies in the fact that the expression is used in three ways:

1. **God's reign**, his power and authority to rule.
2. **The realm we may now enter** to experience the blessings of that reign.
3. **A future realm** which comes only with the Coming of Jesus Christ. Then we shall enter and experience the fullness of that reign.

Kingship, or authority

The word "Kingdom" can encompass the meaning of "Kingship", which means the royal office or the position of the King. In this case, it belongs to God and is his alone.

The dictionary supplies various meanings for the term "Kingdom" including the ideas of a state ruled by a king and of people belonging to a realm. These concepts, however, do not supply the Biblical connotation of the primary sense of the word.

"Until now, we have translated *basileia* as *kingdom*, but in Greek it may mean both *kingship*, kingly *dominion* and *kingdom*. There is no doubt that the former sense (*kingship*), especially that of dominion as the exercise of royal dignity, is the most prominent meaning of the word in various central pronouncements about God's "kingdom" in the gospels. The spatial meaning of kingdom is then a secondary one."^{vi}

Not primarily a spatial concept

"The spatial meaning of kingdom is then a secondary one. When the text says the *basileia toon ouranoon* 'is at hand' (Matt. 3:2; 4:17, etc.); 'is nigh at hand' (Luke 21:31); 'cometh' or 'is coming' (Luke 17:20; Mark 11:10); 'should appear' (Luke 19:11); or 'may come', (Matt. 6:10), we should not in the first place think of a spatial or a static entity which is descending from heaven; but rather of the divine kingly rule actually and effectively starting its operation; therefore, we should think of the Divine *action* of the king."^{vii}

It is an action by a Person

There is a *personal* connotation in the expression 'The Kingdom of Heaven'. The manifestation of the kingdom cannot be conceived as an impersonal metaphysical event, but as the coming of God himself as king. This conception is borne out by a whole series of parables about the kingdom of God. . . .

A definite person always stands in the center in these parables, and his action demonstrates the meaning of the kingdom. This person is often no other than God or the Son acting in his name.”^{viii}

Concurs with Hebrew thought

In the following passage from the Hebrew Scriptures, “kingdom” to describe the *power* and *authority to rule*, rather than the area or the people being ruled.

“All you have made will praise you, O LORD; your saints will extol you. They will tell of the glory of your kingdom and speak of your might so that all men may know of your mighty acts and the glorious splendor of your kingdom.”^{ix}

The Psalms are the supreme expression of Hebrew poetry which, unlike our usual concept of poetry, does not rhyme, but is built up on a series of parallels. Many of Jesus’ sayings, including the Sermon on the Mount and the Lord’s Prayer, are structured on the parallelisms of Hebraic poetry. So this relates ‘kingdom’ with God’s “glory”, “might”, and “glorious splendor”, in contrast to any spatial concept.

Further reading

This crucial topic requires very deep thought and careful reflection, far more than is possible with this short piece. I would like to recommend excellent publications that cover this extensive subject:

The Coming of the Kingdom, Herman Ridderbos, The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company (“The kingdom means redemption, because God maintains his royal justice towards those who put their trust in him”, page 20)

The Gospel of the Kingdom, G. Eldon Ladd, The Paternoster Press (“Those who begin with the idea of the Kingdom as a people base their definition upon the identity of the Kingdom with the Church, and for this there is very little scriptural warrant. We must set aside our modern idiom if we are to understand Biblical terminology. ... The *primary* meaning of both the Hebrew word *malkuth* in the Old Testament and of the Greek word *basileia* in the New Testament is the rank, authority and sovereignty exercised by a king.” Page 19)

Your Kingdom Come, C. Leslie Mitton, Mowbrays (“What the phrase really means is ‘God acting as King’ or ‘God in his sovereign power’. When Jesus speaks about the Kingdom of God he is in effect speaking about what happens when God begins to take charge of affairs. ... The Kingdom of God means the rule of God, a rule unlimited by any boundaries, and not at all a restricted area. ... There is actually no such entity as the kingdom. It is not a kind of establishment which God sets up. It is rather God himself exerting his rightful power to bring all people and all things under his control and to direct them by his will.” Pages 2, 4.)

What is the Kingdom of God? V. F. Storr, Hodder and Stoughton.

ⁱ The expressions “Kingdom of God” and “Kingdom of Heaven” are synonymous. For example, the gospel writer Matthew, with his Jewish upbringing, uses the surrogate “Heaven” for “God”.

ⁱⁱ Matthew 3:2 (NIV)

ⁱⁱⁱ Mark 1:15 (NIV)

^{iv} Luke 4:43 (NIV)

^v Matthew 6:10 (NIV)

^{vi} “The Coming of the Kingdom” (page 24), Hermann Ridderbos.

^{vii} Hermann Ridderbos., (pages 24 -25)

^{viii} Hermann Ridderbos., (pages 25)

^{ix} Psalms 145:10-12 (NIV)