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A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_bq\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php)

# The Kingdom of Heaven

## II.

When we endeavour to account for this fact that the phrase "the Kingdom of God" very early fell out of the vocabulary of the Apostolic Church, we are safe in concluding that it was due to its intensely Jewish significance. It was a phrase of the older Judaism, and the idea, at least, is of frequent occurrence in the literary remains of the period between the Old and the New Testaments. Apocalyptic literature of the age before Christ contains not a few descriptions of the blessings of the coming "Kingdom of Heaven," and that fact helped to give the phrase, and the often vague conceptions it connoted, ready currency in the Rabbinic schools and through them, amongst the common people themselves. Of the canonical books this idea is most clearly expressed in the Prophecy of Daniel—which probably belongs to this period (circa 300 B.C.) where the prophet speaks of the Kingdom set up by "the God of Heaven" and given to the "Son of Man" (Dan. ii. 44; vii. 13-14). But the idea, though possibly not the phrase, is much older than that, and may be traced back to the early beginnings of Hebrew history, for it is really the development of the ancient idea of the theocracy entertained by the Jews in the days prior to the establishment of the monarchy—an idea which persisted even after that event and the Jews had adopted the form of government practised by their neighbours. And hence, the frequency of "the Kingdom of Heaven" on the lips of Jesus was largely due to, and a natural consequence of, His education in Jewish literature and Old Testament history. His home belonged to the grand order of the "Prosdechomenoi," wherein He was trained by His mother in the hopes and aspirations of those who waited for the "consolation of Israel." This glorious company of pious and expectant souls was probably much larger and more widespread than we perhaps imagine, so that the idea and hopes of the Kingdom were very much in people's minds in the time of Jesus, and by adopting the phrase as the comprehensive term for His "Glad-tidings," the Master was able to place Himself and His teaching in direct relation with both the past history of His nation and the present expectations of His hearers.

And this is the explanation, at once, both of the use so largely made by Jesus of this phrase and of the disuse into which it early

fell amongst the Apostles. In the teaching of the Master it was a "point of attachment" with the minds of His fellow countrymen, whereby He was able to attract and secure their attention to His message. That does not mean, however, as Wellhausen seems to maintain, that the idea was merely a Jewish survival in the mind of Jesus, from which He could not escape, "but which He so permeated and changed by His Spirit, that it is of no permanent significance, like an iceberg in a tropical sea (vide *Christianity in the Modern World*, by D. S. Cairns, page 167). But it does mean that Jesus, consciously and deliberately, adopted the phraseology of His time, and by transforming and ethicising its conceptions, made it a fit and proper vehicle for conveying His message to the hearts and minds of His hearers. They—the disciples included—believed that a material Kingdom, which signified the literal reign of Jehovah upon earth, was to be inaugurated by a martial and conquering Messiah who would destroy the domination of the Roman power, and would achieve the complete triumph of "the children of Abraham" over the other nations of mankind. Jerusalem, not Rome, would then be the metropolis of the world, from which would go forth God's light and truth to the uttermost parts of the earth. Jesus, however, in using the idea, purified it—as He did many other current conceptions—and gave it a more spiritual content. "The Kingdom of Heaven," with Him, *did* mean the reign of God upon earth, but it was a spiritual rule in the lives of those who received His word and obeyed His commandments. The new era *was* to be inaugurated by a conquering Messiah, but He was a Messiah the symbol of whose power would be a cross and achieving His conquest of humanity by His sacrificial death. The coming time *would* involve the triumph of "the children of Abraham," but it would be the triumph of the moral character of those who were the real "children of Abraham," because they were the children of Abraham's God, the true "Father of the Faithful." *That* was "the Kingdom of Heaven" as taught by Him who perfectly embodied its spirit and teaching and in whose Person it came, and although, as Dr. Stalker points out, it is impossible to forecast what the history of Judea and the world would have been if the Jews had accepted Christ's teaching, one thing at least may be said with certainty, viz., that had they done so "all the happiness and glory depicted by the prophets would have been realised" (*The Christology of Jesus*, page 150; *The Ethic of Jesus*, page 49).

But the intensely Jewish significance of the phrase "the Kingdom of Heaven" also explains why it so very quickly fell out of use amongst the early followers of Jesus. Had the phrase been retained in the vocabulary of the Apostolic Church it is

almost safe to say that Christianity would have been strangled in the first few years of its history. As it was, the task was difficult enough for Paul and his co-workers to rescue the Evangel from Jewish confines and give it widespread proclamation in the terms of its universal significance. The Judaizing party in the primitive Church—to which, at one time, even Peter seems to have belonged—desired to keep Christianity as narrow as Judaism itself, whereas, as the great Apostle was swift enough to see, the new wine of the Gospel would burst the old bottles of tradition and be lost. And so the wine was poured into another vessel. Phraseology—even the Master's phraseology—was compelled to make way for terms which would find acceptance in the Gentile world. Language which had significance for the Jews only was converted into that which could be understood by the other peoples of the earth. To talk about a "Kingdom of the Heavens" to those not educated in Jewish history and literature might easily have spelt disaster for the Gospel, especially in view of the fact that those who might have been expected to understand—the Jews themselves—largely missed the meaning of Jesus and, therefore, crucified their Messiah though He spoke the language they knew. Had the Apostles retained Jesus' phraseology their action might have gained the adherence of the Jews—though that is doubtful; it certainly would have spelt failure amongst the Gentiles. Had they spoken only as Jesus spoke they may have had a message for "the lost sheep of the house of Israel"; they would have had no good news for the lost sons of the Father's heart. Moreover, if they had extensively preached about a King and a Kingdom, in those very terms, they would have come into early conflict with the Roman power, and that at a time when, perhaps, the Church was not strong enough to fight the battle, which at a later day she fought and won. As it was, Paul was once indicted on a charge of treason against the sovereignty of Rome. He was accused of having preached "another king Jesus" (Acts xvii. 7), though it is certain that the Apostle was not guilty of sedition in the sense intended by his accusers. It is even doubtful whether he spoke of Jesus as King at all on that occasion—at any rate, judging from verse 3—but if he did it was, of course, in a spiritual sense and without any prejudice to the reign and rights of Caesar. Still, the incident is illuminating in so far as it shows the difficulties which would have had to be faced by the Apostles had they gone over the Roman world preaching "the Gospel of the Kingdom" in the language of their Master. Those difficulties they met and surmounted in a splendid and tactful manner, which, as it happened, was along the line of least resistance. Guided, no doubt, by the Holy Spirit, they dropped almost entirely the intensely Jewish phrase used by Jesus, proclaimed the

essence of the Gospel He embodied, preached in language suited to the world at large, and organised the groups of believers into Churches, which in the providence of God were to be the means of the establishing the Kingdom in the world. Thus did they themselves endeavour to realise the prayer their Master taught them to offer. "Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven."

### III.

It will be noticed that so far we have dealt almost entirely with the *place* of the Kingdom in the New Testament. It now remains for us to consider briefly, the *import* of this conception which, as we have seen, occupies so large a place in the preaching of our Lord. And at the outset, we can pass by the question whether the original form of the expression on the lips of Jesus was "Kingdom of Heaven" or "Kingdom of God." Judging from Matthew's Gospel, Jesus used both expressions, though possibly the former was the more usual one. Mark and Luke report Jesus as invariably using "Kingdom of God," but the probability is that they have adopted it instead of the more Jewish "Kingdom of Heaven," as, perhaps, more suited to the Romans and Greeks for whom they wrote. More important is the question whether the Kingdom in Jesus' idea of it is simply a present reality already existing upon earth when He Himself moved in and amongst men, or whether it was something entirely in the future, an order of life purely eschatological to be established at the "Parousia" of "the Son of Man." Some scholars, like Ritschl and Wendt, hold the former view; others, especially the younger Weiss, proclaim the latter; and the way in which these two views are expounded by their different authors would make it appear that they are absolutely antagonistic and irreconcilable conceptions. But, in reality, such is not the case, as both Dr. James Moffat (*Theology of the Gospels*, chapter 2) and Dr. D. S. Cairns (*Christianity in the Modern World*, chapter 4) very convincingly point out. For it is evident from the two sets of sayings preserved in the Gospels that both views were simultaneously held by our Lord, and although we are confronted with the problem of how both were psychologically possible for Jesus, yet no estimate of His teaching is just and fair which does not do full justice to *all* the data supplied by the Gospel records. *All* the facts must be taken into account in any attempt to arrive at the import of this conception in the mind of Christ and one group of our Lord's declarations—whether ethical or apocalyptic—must not be minimized or overlooked in the interests of the other. We must possess no critical bias that will induce us, unconsciously, it may be, to twist the facts of our Lord's teaching given to us in the

Gospels to fit in with a preconceived, though, perhaps, not fully elaborated, theory. This is rendered all the more necessary by the fact that Jesus Himself does not always use the phrase "in the same sense or with the same breadth of signification. Sometimes one aspect, sometimes another of His rich complex idea is intended by this term" (*Christian View of God and the World*, by Orr, page 355, footnote). Neither does Jesus ever formally define what He means by "the Kingdom of Heaven," though as a recent writer suggests, it is possible that the phrase is defined nowhere in the Gospels, because it is defined everywhere (*Jesus and Life*, by Mcfadyen, page 158). And this makes it all the more important, in endeavouring to arrive at a just estimate of Christ's teaching concerning the Kingdom, that we do not omit to take into consideration every aspect of His comprehensive view.

In order to arrive at this "just estimate" of the Kingdom we may conveniently consider it from a threefold point of view, under which the whole of Christ's teaching upon this subject may be ranged.

1. *As an Experience in the Heart.* This is the undoubted suggestion of the Johannine phrase "eternal life"—a phrase, which, by the way, also occurs in Synoptic passages which speak of the "Kingdom of God"; e.g., the incident of the rich young ruler (Matt. xix. 16-26; Luke xviii. 18-27). It is, therefore, a Kingdom already existing in the world, though not of it. As Dr. Moffat says: "Life eternal is not an eschatological boon, but the immediate experience of faith. The judgment is not a dramatic catastrophe at the close of the present age, so much as a process of inward discrimination conditioned by the attitude adopted by men to the person of Christ" (*The Theology of the Gospels*, page 45). The passage which most clearly indicates this view of the Kingdom as something already existing when Jesus taught the multitudes and healed the sick is the much-disputed one in Luke (chapter xvii. 20-21). The point of debate in this passage is the force of the preposition translated either as "the Kingdom of God is within you," or as "among you." (The rendering "upon you" may be rejected as having very little to commend it.) Of these two renderings the former is to be preferred upon linguistic grounds, though classical usage does not exclude the latter. The context, however, is declared by some to be against the former translation in this case, for the words of Jesus are held to have been addressed to the Pharisees only and the Kingdom could hardly be said to be within *them*. Yet the context is not decisively against this rendering, for in combating the idea that the Kingdom was to come with observation and outward pomp, Jesus could easily have meant by His declaration, "the Kingdom is essentially spiritual, not outwardly visible. It is something in your souls, if

you possess it at all" (Plummer in *International Critical Commentary* on "Luke," *ad. loc.*). Besides, though originally addressed to the Pharisees, this saying, as Wellhausen points out, was by no means confined to them. "The Kingdom of God here, as in the parable of the leaven, is conceived as a principle working invisibly in the hearts of individuals" (quoted in *The Theology of the Gospels*, page 49). This view of the Kingdom, however, is not dependent upon our interpretation of a single saying of our Lord. It is involved in His demands for repentance and faith, obedience and righteousness, it is the plain supposition even of those parables, like "the Tares" and "the Great Supper" which seen entirely eschatological. "The Kingdom of Heaven" is thus, with Jesus, an already existing fact in the hearts of those who receive His message and obey His word—something that will grow in the life of men and nations, until the rule and sovereignty of God are firmly established the wide world over.

2. *And this brings us to the second aspect of Jesus' teaching upon this subject; viz, as a process in history*—a divine process, the ultimate outcome of which would be the permeation of all human affairs—national and social, industrial and domestic—by the spirit and teaching of Christ. The Master's "manifesto of the Kingdom" was not "an emergency code" to help the disciples through the short period that was to elapse before the arrival of the rapidly approaching end of the age; it was the declaration of the principles and laws of the Kingdom of God which would, as their significance was gradually unfolded in the experience of humanity, lead men and nations into the way of righteousness and truth. And so the Kingdom itself was to be realised as these unfolding principles and laws were accepted and obeyed by the sons of men, who through faith and trust in, and loyalty and allegiance to, the King, would become the citizens of this ideal Kingdom. That surely is signification of many of Jesus' most striking parables—those of the sower, the mustard seed, the leaven and the tares. "Whilst His contemporaries were expecting some mighty intervention that would suddenly bring the Kingdom ready made from heaven, He saw it growing up silently and secretly among men. He took His illustrations from organic life. Its progress was to be like the seed hidden in the earth, and growing day and night by its own inherent germinating force" (*Christianity and Ethics*, A. B. D. Alexander, page 137). Jesus believed in the purifying and illuminating power of truth and righteousness, and so He spoke of His Kingdom as a process that, like the grain of corn, only gradually, slowly and imperceptibly reaches its culmination—the complete transformation of the ideals and institutions of humanity. He believed in the contagion of character as the method and means of establishing His Kingdom,

and so He described His disciples as the salt and light which would save the world of men from moral corruption and spiritual darkness. He believed, too, that His Kingdom would be a realm without boundaries, knowing no barriers or limitations of nation, race, colour or class, but embracing all humanity within its fold, and so He dreamed of the day when many shall come from the east and west, from the north and south, "and sit down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the Kingdom of Heaven" (Matt. viii. 11). Such a Kingdom is the ideal and goal of the race.

The one far-off divine event  
To which the whole creation moves.

It involves and includes the social redemption, as well as the spiritual emancipation, of humanity, although it may possibly be true, as Ritschl held, that Jesus originally preached the Kingdom in a purely religious and ethical sense. It is, therefore, wide enough to embrace all the elements of the life of man, those of state, family, art, commerce, culture and science. Indeed it is, in its very essence, the Kingdom of love, righteousness, and peace, where-in all the relationships of human existence are regenerated and transformed.

3. *But the "Kingdom of Heaven" is not only a divine process in the history of the world. It is also a process to be divinely consummated in that day when the Son of Man will come in all the glory and power of His Father (Matt. xvi. 28), and girded for the task of being final arbitrator of the destinies of the nations of the world (Matt. xxv.). Here, of course, we are touching upon one of the great problems of New Testament theology—a problem around which there gathers from time to time, in our religious press, great controversy—and about which, therefore, it would be unwise to dogmatise. One thing, however, may be said with certainty, viz., that of the fact of this glorious consummation the teaching of Jesus leaves us in no doubt. Not only are there parables—such as those in Matt. xxv.—which speak in unmistakable terms about what is known as the "Second Coming," but there are also explicit statements such as those contained in the "Parousia" discourse of Jesus, as recorded by all three Synoptists (Matt. xxiv; Mark xiii; Luke xxi.). From these parables and statements there is no escape, except by a process of critical violence to the Gospel narratives, and they all teach very definitely and explicitly indeed the "Second Advent" of our Lord. When, however, we come to consider the manner in which these sayings are to be interpreted we reach the quicksands of controversy. One school of interpretation is still bound in the graveclothes of Rabbinical tradition and holds tenaciously, and even uncharitably, the idea of a literal, visible, spectacular coming*



on the clouds of heaven. But it seems much more natural, and certainly is much more in keeping with the mind of Jesus, to consider these sayings as being highly poetic figures, expressing profound spiritual truths. At any rate, that is how the author of the Fourth Gospel seems to interpret Christ's references to "last things," for it is generally admitted by critics that it is a spiritual coming which is alluded to in the Johannine record of our Lord's discourses in the upper room. Even in the Synoptics the disciples are bidden to take heed lest they be deceived by a visible Christ or be led away by merely outward signs. "Not in a visible reign or personal return of the Son of man does the consummation of the Kingdom consist but in the complete spiritual sovereignty of Christ over the hearts and minds of men. When the same love which He Himself manifested in His life becomes the feature of His disciples; when His spirit of service and sacrifice pervades the world, and the brotherhood of man and the federation of nations everywhere; then indeed shall the sign of the Son of Man appear in the heavens, and then shall the tribes of the earth see Him coming in the clouds with power and glory" (*Christianity and Ethics*, page 139). But, whatever be the interpretation of Christ's teaching on this point, this consummation is an event to be devoutly wished for by every loyal follower of the Master. It is an event which a New Testament writer tells us we can hasten as well as expect (2 Peter iii. 12)—a fact which Jesus Himself declared when He taught His disciples to pray and work for the coming of the "Kingdom of God."

Lo, as some venturer, from his stars receiving  
Promise and presage of sublime emprise,  
Wears evermore the seal of his believing  
Deep in the dark of solitary eyes.

Yea, to the end, in palace or in prison,  
Fashions his fancies of the realm to be,  
Fallen from the height or from the deeps arisen,  
Ringed with the rocks and sundered of the sea.

So even I, and with a heart more burning,  
So even I, and with a hope more sweet,  
Groan for the hour, O Christ! of Thy returning,  
Faint for the flaming of Thine advent feet.

JOHN PITTS.