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# JESUS AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

The editor of this journal has suggested that I may wish to respond to Professor Marshall's comment that the book bearing the title of this article would have benefited from a summary of its findings as to the nature of the kingdom of God, and a comparison with other investigations of the theme. Readers of the book will know that a conclusion is provided in it, but its intention is not so much to summarize the interpretations offered as to consider their significance for the nature of the Christian hope. This was done in view of the importance of the kingdom of God as the *goal* of history in the Bible, as well as the difficulty experienced by not a few in coming to terms with that concept (consider, for example, Bultmann's treatment of it in his demythologizing programme). I have lived so long with this theme I had assumed, evidently mistakenly, that the cumulative effects of the expositions are reasonably plain. Accordingly, since a lack is sensed here, I readily comply with the suggestion that a summary be provided. In view of the fact, however, that most readers of this journal will not have read the book I shall have to provide some indications of the approach to leading elements in the teaching of Jesus that appear to demand the interpretations given.

1. The expression 'kingdom of God' has itself been the subject of a great deal of discussion. Despite the frequency of its mention among Christian people I am inclined to think that it evokes a blur in the minds of many. That is not surprising in view of the breadth of meaning often attributed to it - e.g. a synonym for Christianity, or for Christendom, or a cipher for the organization of society on Christian principles. That is not its meaning in the Bible. Oddly enough the expression does not occur in the Old Testament, but its reality is deeply rooted there. It is an interesting phenomenon that the term 'kingdom' in Hebrew, Aramaic (the *lingua franca* of the Middle East in the time of early Judaism, and the probable language of Jesus), in Greek, and in our own language has virtually identical meaning, namely *the exercise of royal power* (the major Oxford English Dictionary has some fascinating illustrations of its early use: for example a statement by Hobbes in 1679, in which he defined monarchy as a form of government 'which, if he limit it by law is called *Kingdom;* if by his own will, *Tyranny*'). In each of the languages just mentioned 'kingdom' denotes not a *realm* ruled by a king, nor the *people* in it, but the *rule* of the king. It is a dynamic, not a static word. In the Jewish eschatological hope 'kingdom of God' came to denote God's exercise of his royal power in establishing justice and salvation in the earth, whereby his people would be delivered, peace and righteousness would everywhere prevail, and (in the more developed writings) life eternal would replace death. In the belief of at least some Jewish writers, the blessings of the divine kingdom were anticipated to be universal, not for Israel alone. That this was the basic meaning of 'kingdom of God' in our Lord's teaching may be seen through a careful perusal of a concordance; here it suffices to read the Beatitudes in Matthew 5.3-12, and the Lord's Prayer:

> Hallowed be thy name,
> Thy kingdom come,

Thy will be done,
as in heaven, so on earth.

The three petitions are parallel; they constitute a prayer not for a territory to come in which God will rule, nor for a people who shall be in it, but for the exercise of God's sovereign power, in which the holiness and glory of God's name will be manifested to all, his saving sovereignty revealed, and his royal will - his 'good-pleasure' - will come to pass on earth as in heaven. In the teaching of Jesus, the 'Kingdom of God' is primarily a synonym for salvation, but in the broadest sense, not in the restricted sense that the term often has in Christian preaching.

2. Throughout the twentieth century the importance of Mark's statement of the preaching of Jesus has been acknowledged:

> The time is fulfilled,
> and the kingdom of God has drawn near;
> repent, and believe the good news. (Mark 1.15)

Self-evidently Mark did not wish his readers to understand that Jesus went about all Galilee and Judea repeating that sentence. It is a *summary* of the preaching of Jesus. If it were asked who was responsible for its formulation, one could suggest Mark himself, working on the basis of the material in his gospel (it comes at the end of the introduction to his account of the ministry of Jesus). More likely it has been drawn from the catechetical instruction given to new Christians as to what Jesus said and did, and that it goes back to the early days of the Church's mission. Be that as it may, the important thing to observe is that this is not presented as an occasional or early saying of Jesus, but as *the sum and substance of his message to his nation*. He preached the kingdom of God! And that was true of his entire ministry.

But what, according to Mark 1.15, did he say about the kingdom? After three generations of argument about it by New Testament scholars a consensus is at least on the way, if not actually achieved. Contrary to those who followed Albert Schweitzer, who believed that Jesus consistently proclaimed that the kingdom of God was imminent, never present; and to the followers of C. H. Dodd, who thought that Jesus preached that the kingdom had come, never that it was to come; it is now generally acknowledged that this proclamation affirms that *the sovereign action of God which is to end in a transformed universe has begun*. The time of waiting for God to act is over; the work which will finally bring to pass his purpose for the world has been initiated. The proclamation of Jesus thus affirms God's decisive action in the present which has ultimate future consequences. The two tenses of present and future of God's operation are held together. Admittedly some notable scholars have refused to admit this interpretation of the teaching of Jesus. These include Bultmann, who to his last breath denied that Jesus ever proclaimed that the kingdom of God was present in his ministry (this, incidentally, led Bultmann to believe that the Fourth Gospel brought about a radical revision of the teaching of Jesus, since that gospel is dominated by the theme of the presence of the kingdom of God in and through Jesus). Nevertheless Bultmann's successor in

Marburg, W. G. Kümmel, in one of the most important works that have appeared on the kingdom of God in the gospels, laboured to show that Jesus preached the kingdom of God as *come,* and *yet to come.* In my own work I sought to demonstrate the correctness of that position. Luke does not cite Mark's summary of the preaching of Jesus, but his epitome of the sermon of Jesus at Nazareth, set at the beginning of his account of the ministry of Jesus, is even plainer: on reading Isaiah 61.1ff, a statement of the advent of the kingdom of God under the figure of the year of Jubilee, he declared: 'Today this scripture has become fulfilled in your hearing'. God's great jubilee release has begun! Matthew 11.5 and 12.28 unmistakably interpret the healing ministry of Jesus as the saving sovereignty of God at work in Jesus. Mark 2.18-19 implies that in Jesus' table fellowship with the despised sinners of society the joy of the feast of the kingdom is known. The remarkable saying that links the ministry of Jesus with that of John the Baptist (Matthew 11.12 and Luke 16.16) yields the statement: 'The law and the prophets were until John; from that time the kingdom of God is powerfully breaking into the world, and violent men are strongly attacking it'. Moreover there is reason to render Jesus' answer to the Pharisees' question as to the time of the kingdom's coming: 'The kingdom of God is within your grasp' (Luke 17.21). One has to have a hardy hide to resist the clear import of these sayings, which is confirmed by the teaching of the parables of Jesus. What is so interesting about the parables is that they mirror the situation of Jesus and his hearers, and they frequently portray the initiation of the kingdom which is pressing on to its future consummation (see, for example, the parables of Matthew 13). The most characteristic modes of the teaching of Jesus accordingly set forth the inauguration of the kingdom of God which is destined to be manifested in power and glory in the future.

3. On this broad conviction scholars who have written on the life and teaching of Jesus are largely united. It has implications for the understanding of Jesus, however, that have not been emphasized as widely as they deserve. The gospels, unlike the New Testament Letters, make it plain that God's saving action in Christ was already operative in his ministry, prior to his death. In his proclamation and revelation of the Kingdom of God through his powerful deeds of deliverance he is seen as the Representative of the kingdom of God, its Initiator and Instrument, its Bearer and therefore its Mediator. This has immense implications for the question as to who Jesus conceived himself to be. It further presses us to ask how he related his service of the kingdom in his proclamation and action to his forthcoming death. An examination of the sayings of Jesus concerning his death confirms what one would in any case suspect from his kingdom sayings, namely that his death formed the climax of his service for God and man whereby the kingdom of God came for all mankind. But since the kingdom of God means above all life from God that conquers death, in Biblical terms 'resurrection life', he who mediates it by his living and dying completes his mediation in resurrection and final consummation of the kingdom. In the teaching of Jesus the salvation of the kingdom is one (redemption for the perfected Kingdom of God), and the process of mediating it is one, through the Christ who dies, rises and is to be manifest in his parousia glory (his 'coming' again).

The clearest exposition given by Jesus of this understanding of his death occurs in the Last Supper. Jesus viewed the meal as an anticipation of the feast of the kingdom of God in its future manifestation (see especially Luke 22.15-18). The giving of the bread and wine to the disciples was a double parable of the sacrifice whereby they would share in the benefits of the new covenant brought into being through Christ. And that 'new covenant blood' is explicitly related in Luke 22.29-30a to participation in the joy of the final kingdom; the saying should be rendered: 'I appoint to you in covenant, as my Father appointed by covenant to me the kingdom, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom' (or, 'I appoint to you in covenant the kingdom, as my Father appointed it to me by covenant...'). Either version makes it clear that the new covenant brought into being through the death of Christ is for life in the kingdom of God in company with the exalted Son of God.

This eschatalogical significance of the death of Jesus is more frequently represented in the so-called Son of Man sayings of the gospels. There are three 'predictions of the Passion' recounted in Mark 8.31, 9.31, 10.32. Whether the three were uttered on different occasions, or are three forms of a single item of instruction, may remain an open question. The first states that the Son of Man must suffer many things, be rejected and killed, and after three days rise again. The term 'must', as in various passages of the Greek Old Testament, is probably an intensive form of the future 'shall'. The second saying tells that the Son of Man 'will be delivered into the hands of men...', a passive verb which allows for the handing over of Jesus to suffering and death by human agencies (e.g. by Judas to the Jewish leaders, by the High Priests to the governor Pilate, and by Pilate to the soldiers for crucifixion), but above all by God himself, as in Isaiah 53.10-12. But this teaching is not to be explained by one passage alone in the Old Testament. There is a complex background in Judaism to the concept of suffering for the kingdom of God. The Son of Man may be said to suffer first, as *the Righteous Man who is opposed by the unrighteous, but who is vindicated by God's intervention.* The principle frequently appears in the psalms of the Old Testament (cf. Psalms 22, 34, 69). It has a lengthy exposition in the Book of Wisdom, chapters 2-5, where wicked men plot to put to death the righteous man who trusts God, but finally see him exalted to the presence of God. This concept dominates the passion narratives of the gospels, which frequently echo the language of the psalms of the righteous sufferer. A second strand in the Jewish tradition is a special application of the first, namely *the Servant of the Lord,* whose sufferings for others are accepted by God and are followed by God's exaltation of him before the world; this is above all set forth in the Fourth Servant Song, Isaiah 52.13-53.12. A third related motif is that of *the Prophet of the End,* the Bearer of the message of the kingdom, whose message is rejected by his contemporaries, but who is vindicated by God's bringing his word to pass (the concept lies behind the extended passage, Matthew 23.29-39, cf. also Luke 13.31-35). A fourth motif, of which the Jews were very conscious in the time of Jesus, is that of *the Martyr for the cause of God,* whose obedience to God culminates in a sacrifice for the guilty, but who is granted a place of honour in the kingdom of God. This concept was very present to the minds of the Jews in the period of Jesus, as may be seen in the

records of the martyrs in the time of Antiochus Epiphanes, recounted in the second and fourth books of the Maccabees; here the martyrs are viewed as 'a ransom for our nation's sin' by virtue of their sufferings. Modern scholars tend to select one element of these traditions as determinative for Jesus (and/or his followers). It is better to acknowledge the existence of them all as significant elements in the thought of God's people in the time of Jesus, and above all as *significant for him.* Observe that for Jesus it is *the Son of Man,* the representative of the kingdom of God and its mediator to man, who suffers. The binding link that holds together the sayings in the gospels regarding the Son of Man in his earthly ministry (e.g. Mark 2.10,28; Matthew 8.20 and 11.19), in suffering unto death, and in his parousia at the end of the age (e.g. Mark 8.38 and 14.62) is his service for the kingdom of God which he is commissioned to achieve. In humble service of God for man, in suffering unto death, in rising to life, and in parousia in glory he is the Mediator of the kingdom of God, representative of God and representative of man.

This interpretation admittedly differs from many contemporary solutions of the Son of Man 'problem'; some select one group of the Son of Man sayings as authentic (whether those relating to his earthly ministry, or those to his sufferings unto death, or those to his parousia); others reject all of them as emanating from the early Church (a favourite notion is to ascribe them to Christian prophets speaking in the name of the risen Lord); and one popular line of interpretation postulates that in the Son of Man sayings a distinction is drawn between Jesus and the Son of Man (cf. especially Luke 12.8-9 = Matthew 10.32-33). These hypotheses appear to me needless when recognition is given to:

the centrality of the kingdom of God in the life and teaching of Jesus,

the indissolubility of the Son of Man and the kingdom of God (cf. Daniel 7.13-14),

the profound link between suffering and the kingdom of God in the Jewish heritage of Jesus, plus the fact that Jesus chose such a path in fulfilment of his vocation from God,

the unity of the Son of Man sayings regarding his lowly service, his suffering to death, his resurrection and his parousia.

This all comes to a head in the critical utterance of Jesus before the Sanhedrin, Mark 14.62, when asked by the High Priest if he were the Messiah he replied, 'I am; and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of God and coming with the clouds of heaven'. This was the sole public declaration of Jesus that he was the Messiah, but in making the affirmation he qualified it by defining it in terms of the Lord at God's right hand (Psalm 110.1) and of the Son of Man coming to rule in the kingdom that replaces all kingdoms. There is no question of his distinguishing here between the Messiah and the Son of Man; the Messiah is he who comes to rule in the kingdom of God, and the Son of Man comes on the clouds of heaven to rule in the kingdom of God. But he who so confesses his identity is a prisoner, on trial for his life - the suffering Son of Man, and he knows that in so speaking he will suffer death for his confession. His utterance is

deemed blasphemy, not simply because he said he was *Messiah,* but because he, the *prisoner,* declared that he will come as *the Son of Man at God's right hand,* and withal subduing his opponents in accordance with Psalm 110.1, in this case the High Priest and his court! In my judgment this saying throws light on every ambiguous passage about the Son of Man which has preceded it in the gospels, and it confirms our interpretation of them: *the Son of Man is Jesus in his total ministry for the kingdom of God.*

4. An examination of the teaching of the Bible in its entirety on the kingdom of God shows a rich use of symbolism in its pictures of the coming of that kingdom. The materials of this pictorial language are very ancient, and by no means confined to Israel. When one recalls the use of parables by Jesus, not least in his teaching on the kingdom of God, one is not surprised to see that he freely used traditional symbolic language with reference to the coming of the kingdom of God, alike in his ministry, in his death and resurrection, and in his parousia. It is illuminating to set Luke 4.18-21 on the background of Isaiah 61.1-3, Leviticus 25.8-17 and the Qumran Melchizedek fragment, 11QMelch; in the last named text the final Jubilee of history is declared on the point of arrival, and it is to be ushered in by a day of slaughter through Melchizedek; in the deeds and words of Jesus it is a time of joyful emancipation now begun. So also Matthew 11.5 applies to the healing and liberating work of Jesus the joyful picture in Isaiah 35 of the transformed world through which the exiles return to Zion on the day of redemption. There is no question of literal fulfilment of Scripture promise here, but of a divine action through Jesus whereby the lives of people are transformed in the very earthy territory of Judea and Galilee. The eating and drinking in the new way, to which the Last Supper points, is that depicted in Isaiah 25.6-9, which has already happened in the homes of the tax-gatherers (Matthew 9.9-10, Mark 2.19). The vision of the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven (Mark 14.62) amid cosmic convulsions (Mark 13.24-27) likewise harks back to descriptions of the coming of God and of the Day of the Lord in the Old Testament, when the heavens and earth fall into confusion and dread before the Lord of creation. The mythic images are the ancient equivalents of cartoons to depict the all-powerful action of God in Christ to deliver his people and to replace the kingdoms of this world with the saving sovereignty of righteousness, peace and abundant life. If therefore 'kingdom of God' itself be viewed as a symbol it should not be restricted to an individual experience of salvation, which it most certainly includes, but it must be broad enough to embrace the action of God for the accomplishment of his purpose for the world and its history.

5. The investigation into the relation of Jesus and the kingdom of God has many lessons for preachers and theologians alike. For preachers it is especially significant as showing the positive character of the Christian concept of salvation and of life lived under the saving sovereignty of God. For theologians it requires the rethinking of the death of Christ in relation to the kingdom that comes through the incarnate life, and death-and-resurrection of the Christ who presses forward to his parousia; and perhaps still more urgently, the Christological consequences of the understanding of Jesus as the Mediator of the kingdom of God in the new creation, which embraces

this world and the unimaginable world beyond time and space. Not a little of the christological discussion of today is conducted without reference to this central feature of the revelation of God in Christ, and without recognition of the bedrock attestation of this element of the witness of Jesus in the gospels. Systematic theologians will do well to ponder afresh the theme of Jesus and the kingdom of God!

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## REVIEWS

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