

Thy Kingdom Come

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ABSTRACT:

Starting with the prayer, 'Your kingdom come', this paper introduces the sources of the idea of the Kingdom of God which was central to the person, mission and teaching of Jesus. After some preliminary general comments about the Kingdom of God in the New Testament, the teaching of Jesus about its present and future dimensions are reviewed before the latter is more fully explored. Paul's teaching on the coming kingdom is then surveyed and finally the perspective of apocalyptic is introduced. A brief discursive mentions the relationship between the kingdom and the cross. The paper concludes by referring to the implications of praying, 'Your kingdom come'.

INTRODUCTION

When Jesus taught his disciples to pray 'Your kingdom come' he was doing nothing new. And yet, at the same time he was doing everything new.

The Lord's Prayer is closely patterned on the Jewish Prayer, the Kaddish, an Aramaic prayer regularly used at the close of synagogue worship and with which Jesus would have been familiar as a child. It began:

Exalted and hallowed by his great name
In the world which he created according to
his will.
May he let his kingdom rule
in your lifetime and in your days and in the
lifetime of
the whole house of Israel, speedily and
soon.

Praise be his great name from eternity to
eternity
And to this say: Amen.¹

As Jeremias, whose translation this is, says, 'The Kaddish is an eschatological prayer. ... the ... end in view [is] God's appearance as Lord'.² Either side of the petition, 'your kingdom come' or, in other words, 'let his kingdom rule', in the Lord's prayer are the inseparable responses of homage 'hallowed be your name' and obedience, 'your will be done'. This is why I say that from one viewpoint Jesus was doing

¹ Translation of Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, 1, trans. John Bowden, (London: SCM, 1971) p. 198. Cited by R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2007, p. 243.

² Jeremias, p 198.

nothing new. Jesus stands in continuity with Israel.

Two things, however, are new and suggest a measure of discontinuity. One, which does not concern us here, is the addition of the ‘we’ petitions in the Lord’s Prayer, which are not found in the Kaddish. The second, which does concern us, is the meaning invested in the phrase ‘your kingdom come’. Those in the synagogue were, to quote Jeremias, ‘still completely in the courts of waiting’³ – anticipating the coming rule of God as entirely future, to happen at the end of the age. Jesus’ disciples, however, were increasingly to realise that this prayer was already in the process of being fulfilled, since the kingdom had already broken in to the present world. The breath-taking newness was to affirm that with his coming, in his own person, God’s kingdom was being established in territory where Satan reigned through deception and evil currently seemed to triumph. When Jesus preached, he signalled that the revolution had begun. God was once more taking control of his world, a world that had for a time tragically and quite illegitimately come to be controlled by ‘the dominion of darkness’ (Col. 1:13).

Such blunt contrasts, however, need some qualifying.

1. WHERE DID THE IDEA OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD COME FROM?

The exact phrase is not found in the OT but it is introduced in the gospels as something that was already familiar. The OT background is complex⁴ but four OT streams might be said to

flow into the river that make up the NT concept of the kingdom of God.

(a) First, there is *the eternal fact*, as France has called it, that God was king.⁵ Ps 95:3 speaks for many other texts in proclaiming, ‘For the Lord is a great God, the great King above all gods’. The Psalms are not alone in acknowledging God as king, in looking to his throne and celebrating his reign, both present and future.

(b) Secondly, there is *the covenant agreement* that clearly established God as Israel’s sovereign, which inherently points to the idea of the kingdom, or reign, of God. As the Lord their God he promised a multitude of blessings, providing they exclusively worshipped and wholeheartedly obeyed him. That is why the eventual quest for a human king was seen as a rejection of God as their king (1 Sam. 8:7). These covenants were imperfect in their operation and so the prophets looked forward to the coming of a new covenant, envisaged in Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 34, which is fulfilled in Jesus.⁶

(c) Thirdly, *the political reality* of Israel’s history was a further source that flowed into the concept of the kingdom of God. Positively, this is seen in the kingdom of David and Solomon, the golden or ideal age of peace and prosperity. Negatively, the OT frequently uses the phrase ‘kingdoms of the earth’, by way of contrast to the ‘kingdom of God’ even if it does not use the phrase. These kingdoms are seen to be in increasingly sharp conflict with God’s rule. This theme comes to a head in Daniel who puts the tribulations of the people of God at the hands of powerful rulers and earthly empires into perspective. Those kingdoms would come and go but ‘His

3 Jeremias, p. 199.

4 See Bruce Waltke, ‘The Kingdom of God in the Old Testament: Definitions and Story’ in Christopher Morgan and Robert Peterson (eds.), *The Kingdom of God*, Wheaton: Crossway, 2012, pp. 49-71.

5 R. T. France, ‘Kingdom of God’ in *DTIB*, p. 420.

6 See further, Waltke, ‘The Kingdom of God in the Old Testament: The Covenants,’ in Morgan and Peterson (eds.), pp. 73-93.

dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation' (Dan. 4:34-35). A primary role in the revealing of that kingdom was assigned to 'one like a son of man' who was granted by the Ancient of Days, 'authority, glory and sovereign power' Of him, Daniel says, 'all nations and people of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed' (Dan. 7:13-14).

(d) To these streams, we must add that of a developing *messianic expectation*. When the hope of Israel did not seem to be realised in their own experience, and human rebellion against God seemed to maintain the upper hand, they increasingly looked into the future for the day when God would defeat their enemies and reign more completely. We could look to Daniel's visions as seminal texts here, or to Is. 45:23. But let Zechariah speak for others as he envisages the coming day of the Lord, when 'The Lord will be king over all the whole earth. On that day there will be one Lord, and his name the only name' (Zech 14:9).

Israel strongly believed that God was king *de jure* (of right) but prayed for the day when he would also be king *de facto* (in fact, or in reality).

So, the idea was in the air during the time of Jesus. And we should not be surprised when Mark, without feeling the need to explain further, says, for example, that 'Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Council, was ... waiting for the kingdom of God (Mk 15:43).

2. WHAT IS THE KINGDOM OF GOD?

We must ask more fully what the NT means in using the phrase 'the kingdom of God' which it does, if we include some variations, like kingdom of heaven – which I take to be a respectful Jewish way Matthew adopts to avoid using the divine name – on over 100 occasions, with at least 76 sayings in the Gospels.⁷

(a) It is the Kingdom of God.

We must emphasise, as Dick France has done in his writings on this topic, that it is overwhelmingly spoken of as the kingdom of God, not the kingdom. Acts 20:25 is the solitary exception, if you exclude some references in Matthew where adding 'of heaven' is made redundant by the context. It is about God being king. The emphasis is on God and to reduce it to 'the kingdom' puts the emphasis in the wrong place.⁸ It is about God's dynamic rule, not a place, a land, or a territory (like the United Kingdom). Unless we do this we hijack the term to our own ends, as has often been done and apply it to human programmes or enterprises of one sort or another. So, the word 'kingdom' has been purloined to apply to a social gospel, to particular social programmes especially in terms of poverty, to feel-good therapies, or, at the other end of the spectrum, it has been appropriated to apply exclusively to charismatic experience and signs and wonders. It has also been expropriated to further the cause of businesses, so we can have our haircut at

⁷ Statistics all depend on how things are counted. Graeme Goldsworthy says, 'There are about 100 references to the kingdom of God/heaven in the Synoptic', three in John, six in Acts and eight in Paul. ('Kingdom of God' in *NDBT*, p. 615). The figure of 76 sayings in the Synoptics is calculated by Chris Caragounis in 'Kingdom of God/Heaven' in *DJG*, p. 425.

⁸ E.g., R. T. France, *Divine Government: God's Kingship in the Gospel of Mark*, London: SPCK, 1990, pp. 12-13.

‘Kingdom Hairdressers’, or bank at a ‘Kingdom Bank’, where money is, we hope, miraculously multiplied as were the loaves and fish, or we can enjoy an opulent kingdom life-style where nothing is too good for the sons and daughters of the king. The good news of the kingdom of God is that ‘God rules’.⁹

(b) The kingdom of God is inextricably bound up with the person of Jesus.

Mark 1:15, Jesus’ first public pronouncement says, ‘The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!’ The word *engiken* may either mean is ‘fast approaching’ or ‘has arrived’.¹⁰ Tom Wright’s translation prefers ‘is arriving’,¹¹ but others more confidently assert it is a declaration of what has already happened. The arrival of the kingdom coincides with the arrival of Jesus. With his coming, the revolution has begun and God is reclaiming a world that for too long has looked to Satan as its ruler rather than to him.

(c) The kingdom is a present, if an unimagined, reality.

Jesus presents himself as the fulfilment of OT prophecies, like those of Isaiah 61:1-2 (Lk. 4:21) and Is 35:5-6 (Mt. 11:2-6), which look forward to the coming of the new age when God will defeat evil in all the varied forms it manifests itself, including the evils of sin, disease, barrenness and disability. His miracles and his exorcisms were, as John calls them, ‘signs’ of the kingdom. Here is God’s ‘saving sovereignty’ at work in the totality of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection.¹² The signs

demonstrated what it would be like to live in a kingdom where God truly ruled. In Tom Wright’s words,

The whole point of what Jesus was up to was that he was doing, close up, in the present, what he was promising long-term, in the future. And what he was promising in the future, and doing in that present, was not about saving souls for a disembodied eternity, but rescuing people from the corruption and decay of the way the world presently is so that they could enjoy, already in the present, the renewal of creation which is God’s ultimate purpose...¹³

When challenged about ‘when the kingdom of God would come’, Jesus replied that it was already ‘in your midst’ (Lk. 17:21).

The presence of the kingdom meant Jesus could speak of ‘entering it’ in the here and now, that is of voluntarily placing oneself under the rule of the king. Such a step was no light step and required commitment (Mk. 9:47), humility (Mk. 10:13-15), poverty of spirit (Mk 10:23). It also meant adopting the lifestyle of God’s kingdom, as set out in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5-7). It was a kingdom where the last people you’d expect, the disreputable and unclean, would find a home (Mt. 20:16; Lk. 5:31-32; 14:15-24) that is, ‘the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame’, the very ones excluded in the Qumran rules as ineligible to sit at the table of the Messianic banquet, because of their disabilities which rendered them unclean.

Impressive though these signs were, they were only partial. And impressive as the invitation to enter was, it was only anticipatory on a fuller experience to come. They were ‘signs’, perhaps even signposts, not the reality itself. People knew there was more to come. When Jesus entered Jerusalem, on what we call

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-25.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p 24.

¹¹ Tom Wright, *The New Testament for Everyone*, London, SPCK, 2011.

¹² G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986, p. 339.

¹³ Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, London: SPCK, 2007, p. 204.

Palm Sunday, the crowd not only greeted him as the expected king who was heir to David's throne, but clearly thought that David's restored kingdom was to be inaugurated there and then. Wright translates Mark's version of the greeting (Mk. 11:9) as 'Welcome to the kingdom of our father David, the kingdom coming right now'.¹⁴ Yet the kingdom did not dawn as they had hoped and were still hoping for as 'he was taken up before their eyes' (Acts 1:6). It was never this king's mission to re-establish the nationalistic kingdom of Israel, but rather to fulfil the covenant to Israel in a new unimagined way. His mission was to bring the story of Israel to fulfilment and let God be true to his word by establishing 'a new Israel' (Gal. 6:6). It would include those who had previously been 'excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world' (Eph 2:12). So Paul explains, 'This mystery [of Christ] is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus' (Eph. 3:6).

(d) This kingdom is yet to be consummated

That's why we still pray, 'Your kingdom come'. George Eldon Ladd describes Jesus' mission on earth as 'fulfillment without consummation'.¹⁵ The mission of Jesus is a crucial stage in the final establishment of the kingdom of God. As Ladd says elsewhere, 'The whole mission of Jesus including his words, deeds, death, and resurrection constituted an initial defeat of satanic power that makes the final outcome and triumph of God's kingdom certain'.¹⁶ And it is

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future*, rev. ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974, pp. 105-21.

¹⁶ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, Guildford: Lutterworth Press, 1974, p. 66.

to that future kingdom we turn.

3. THE COMING KINGDOM EXPLORED MORE FULLY

(a) The coming kingdom in the teaching of Jesus

i. The direct teaching of Jesus

Jesus spoke explicitly of the kingdom as something future on more than one occasion, such as when he spoke about 'the Son of Man coming into his kingdom', in Matthew 16:28, or at the last supper in Mark 14:25, or when he sought to dampen expectation about its imminent arrival, in Luke. 19:11. But it is in the parables that the future dimension of the kingdom becomes most evident.

ii. The parables of Jesus

Several parables are collected in Matthew's neat way, in chapter 13 of his gospel. The parable of the sower (vs 1-23) emphasizes the present reality of God's kingdom where we sow 'the message of the kingdom' and encounter various responses as a result. There is no particular stress on the harvest here. In the parable of the weeds (vs 24-30), however, there is an emphasis on the harvesters who separate weeds from wheat, burning the first and storing the second. According to the interpretation Jesus gives (13:36-43), this is not a parable about belonging to a mixed church but a description of the way the kingdom of God operates in the world. Ladd succinctly captures it in a sentence: 'The Kingdom has come, but society is not uprooted'.¹⁷ The parable points to the future, to a final judgment and banishment of all evil and the full future vindication of the righteous who, 'will shine like the sun in the kingdom of

¹⁷ Ladd, *Presence of the Future*, p. 233.

their Father' (v 43, cf. Dan 12:3). While other parables like that of the mustard seed and yeast (vs 31-35) deal with the enigmatic nature of the spread of the kingdom, and the parables of the hidden treasure and fine pearls (vs 44-46) stresses the joy of discovering the kingdom, the final parable in the series, that of the net, returns to the theme of judgment 'at the end of the age' (vs 47-52). The kingdom may have arrived in Jesus but it has not yet reached its culmination.

iii. The signs of the 'end'

Understandably, much attention has been paid to the apocalyptic discourses, which occur in Matthew 24, and the parallels of Mark 13 and Luke 21.

The whole discourse is traditionally interpreted as about the ultimate coming of Christ into his kingdom. Consequently, people have been fascinated by the signs of his coming and noted the catastrophic changes which will herald that coming. The signs of the approaching end, are false messiahs, wars, famines, earthquakes, persecution, increase of wickedness, declining love, and the preaching of the gospel to the whole world (Mt. 24:4-14). The catastrophe involves the abomination of the Holy Place, days of great distress, people fleeing their homes and cosmic signs of a darkened sun and moon and stars falling from the sky (vs. 15-29). All this immediately heralds the 'the coming of the Son of Man' like lightning (v 27), 'with power and great glory' (v 30), when he gathers 'his elect from the four winds from one end of the heavens to the other' (v 31).

The introduction, which explains the context of the discourse, links the coming of the Son of Man closely to the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple (vs 1-3) which occurred in AD 70. Many of the details fit with that time which brought about 'the end of the age' as far as

Israel was concerned. It was a judgement of God, provoked by their refusal to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. So, an increasing number, like Tom Wright, argue this is not about the Second Coming¹⁸

Others including Dick France, rightly I think, see the disciples, following Jesus prediction of the destruction of the Temple, as posing a double question in verse 3, 'Tell us... when will this happen and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age.' The first question relates to the more immediate situation and the other to 'the end of the age'. They argue that a change takes place in verse 36. So, verses 34-35 sum up the first section and include the promise that 'this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened'. Verse 36, then, begins with a contrast, 'but concerning that day', and speaks of a time in the future which is unknown. The new emphasis is on being ready at any time for the final arrival of the Son of Man rather than living as people did in the days of Noah when they were distracted and totally unaware of what is about to happen. The call, then, is to be always prepared 'because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him' (v 44).

The third and traditional position interprets the whole passage as about the second coming and points out that verse 14 and more significantly verse 30 were hardly fulfilled in AD 70. But verse 14 may be said to have been fulfilled in Paul's mission and by others. Similarly, verse 30 is not an obstacle to applying this to the destruction of Jerusalem unless one

18 N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, London: SPCK, 1996, pp. 339-68. In private correspondence on 27/10/2000, Wright said, 'I believe with cheerful delight in the second coming of Jesus, as taught by Acts and Paul for a start, but I don't think Jesus himself taught it [the disciples hadn't even grasped the fact that he was going to die.]

interprets it literally rather than through the lens of apocalyptic and of the OT scriptures it echoes. The destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, apocalyptically, could be seen as the dramatic intervention of the Son of Man. Those opting for the traditional view, can point to the close parallel between the verses pre and post verse 36 and argue, therefore, that their interpretation is more coherent.

Whichever interpretation is adopted, all point to the fact that the story of God's coming kingdom has not yet reached its final chapter. We may differ on what the chapters prior to this final one contains, and even, indeed, how many chapters there will be. But we know the story is not over yet.

(b) The coming kingdom in Paul's writings

Paul only refers to the kingdom of God ten times, outside of Acts¹⁹ – mainly to talk of it as a present realm we can enter or a future inheritance we will receive. Yet the whole thrust of his ministry was oriented towards the future (e.g., 1 Cor. 3:10-15; 9:24-27; 2 Cor. 11:2; 1 Thess. 2:19), as was the whole of the Christian life (e.g., Rom. 12:19; 14:10-12; 2 Cor. 5:10; Eph 5:25-27; Phil. 3:17-20; 1 Thess. 5:1-11; 2 Thess. 1:3-12).

For our purposes the statement about the kingdom of God in 1 Corinthians 15:24-26 is the most significant reference.

²⁴ Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. ²⁵ For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶ The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

His vision is of a world put to rights because all God's enemies have been vanquished, all God's

¹⁹ Rom. 14:17; 1 Cor. 4:20; 6:9-10; 15:24; 50; Gal 5:21; Eph. 5:5; Col 4:11; 1 Thess. 2:12; 2 Thess. 1:5.

people have been vindicated and transformed, and God himself assumes his rightful place in the creation, reigning supreme, 'all in all' (1 Cor. 15:28). The same vision is expressed in different language in Ephesians 1:10 when what God has purposed in Christ will 'be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment – to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ'. Similar thought forms are found in Colossians 1:20, where Paul looks forward to 'all things' (which, since the context is that of creation, does not mean a few individuals) will be reconciled to God because of the peace Christ has made on the cross.

His kingdom is categorically closely related to his cross, not something different from it, as Colossians 1:20, and other texts, show. As Jeremy Treat has recently written, 'One need not choose between the kingdom and the cross, for the cross is royal and the kingdom is cruciform'.²⁰ Briefly, the problem for humanity is a rejection of God's rule which results in a subjection to Satan's control. Consequently if people are to be rescued Satan must be defeated, which is what Christ accomplished on the cross (that is *Christus Victor*). But he did not do this superficially. He did it by pulling the rug from under Satan's feet and removing the ground by which he could keep people enslaved, which is that they are sinners. Christ dealt with humanity's problem both by defeating humanity's enemy, Satan, and by paying the penalty of our sin which Satan exploited (that is penal substitution). So Satan, like the serpent in Eden, no longer has a leg to stand on, and his rule is unmasked for the deception it is.²¹

(c) The coming kingdom in NT Apocalyptic

²⁰ Jeremy R. Treat: *The Crucified King: Atonement and Kingdom in Biblical and Systematic Theology*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014, p. 141.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

Another major and different perspective on the coming kingdom is found in the apocalyptic writings of the NT. We have already noted Matthew 24 and parallels but here I'm thinking of 2 Peter 3 and Revelation. They need to be understood and interpreted through the lens of apocalyptic rather than being taken to be in a literal, superficial way. Apocalyptic operated according to a set of conventions through visions of momentous cosmic disturbances that lay beyond normal human or creational experience, and made use of numerical and other codes.

Peter's apocalyptic uses traditional terminology about 'the last days' and 'the day of the Lord' which will come unexpectedly, 'like a thief'. His vision of that day is of the cataclysmic recreation of the present cosmos and the coming of 'a new heaven and a new earth where righteousness dwells'. Although he does not explicitly relate this to God's reign, the cumulative effect of his language leads us to conclude that this is God's righteous rule taking its unchallenged place. As Dale Patrick has said, 'The kingdom of God comes at the end of time as the culmination of everything that has happened from creation until now'.²²

Revelation, more obviously, is about the triumph of God's rule in the face of unspeakable evil. Behind the experience of setback and persecution, all of which were foretold in Jesus' teaching, believers need to understand that God remains on his throne and remains worthy to receive 'glory honour and power' (Rev. 4:11). At the centre of the throne stands the lion who, in reality, turns out to be a slain lamb. He has 'triumphed' over all evil through the shedding of his blood (Rev 5:4-6). His victory may not

yet be universally evident, but they are secure nonetheless. The conflict may be fierce, and there will be many casualties en route, but the day will come when the battle reaches its dénouement and the heavenly warrior will defeat the beast and all who have joined with him in rebellion against God. Then the devil will be 'thrown into the lake of burning sulphur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown' (20:10). Creation will then celebrate the one who is 'King of Kings and Lord of Lords' (19:16) and God will resume his place at the heart of the new creation and in the midst of redeemed humanity (21:1-22:5).

The promise of his coming to bring God's kingdom to fulfilment remains a promise to this day. He says he is coming 'soon', imminently, at any time. Until he does we continue to pray, in Jesus' own words, 'Your kingdom come' or in the closing words of Scripture, 'Amen. Come, Lord Jesus'.

To pray that is to express the longing for the day when the world will be free from all that troubles it now, because it has sought to dislodge God from his throne. To pray that is to express the hope that what we saw as glimpses of God's kingdom in the life of Jesus may become our all-consuming reality. To pray that is to express faith in God that however fierce the battle, however great the disappointments, however delayed the coming, he will one day reign unchallenged in his creation. To pray that is to place ourselves under his reign now and to live before our time, as it were, as obedient subjects of the great King. For to pray 'Your kingdom come' is also to pray, 'Your will be done on earth,' not simply sometime in the future by all but now in the present by me.

Theologians have swung between seeing the kingdom as purely future (Weiss and Schweitzer) to seeing it as wholly realized in the present

²² Dale Patrick, 'The Kingdom of God in the Old Testament' in *The Kingdom of God in the 20th Century Interpretation*, ed. Wendall Willis, Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987, cited by Waltke, 'The Kingdom of God: Definition and Story' p. 55.

(Dodd). Others have focused not on the grand picture but the detailed sequence that will lead to his coming, and especially to the continuing place of Israel in that story. But Jesus has brought the future into the present; the kingdom is already here, even if it has not yet reached its fulfilment. Our task is not to speculate on God's timetable, which is unknown, or even his steps towards that unknown day, but to live now, under the sovereignty of God, in anticipation of the way we will live then. To appropriate what Tom Wright wrote about 1 Corinthians 13 and apply it to the coming kingdom of God, "It is the music God has written for all his creatures to sing, and we are called to learn it and practise it now so as to be ready when the conductor brings down his baton."²³

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²³ Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, p. 301.