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THE KINGDOM OF GOD — REIGN OR REALM?

GEORGE ELDON LADD

FULLER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

INSUFFICIENT attention has been given to the question whether the basic meaning of *basileia tou theou* is the reign of God or the realm in which his reign is experienced. As one surveys the literature since Dalman, he would be led to conclude that the prevailing consensus is that the kingdom of God is God's effective reign or rule to be established over the world.¹

A number of scholars have not accepted this conclusion. W. G. Kümmel, who admits that the kingdom of God was in some real sense present in Jesus' person, accepts the basic understanding of the kingdom of God as the new eschatological order, the age to come, the *eschaton*. Jesus' mission was to announce the coming of this new order and to prepare Israel for its coming.² The consensus that the kingdom is God's rule was challenged in a paper by Professor S. Aalen of Oslo, read before the Society of New Testament Studies in St. Andrews in September, 1961. The contention has also been challenged by Professor H. Conzelmann in his articles on Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God in the new edition of *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*.³ Both Aalen and Conzelmann insist that the imagery in the phrase, the kingdom of God, is that of entering a room; but these two scholars make very different use of the basic imagery.

From the point of view NT theology, it may make little difference which idea — reign or realm — is taken as the point of departure. Many scholars, especially in Germany, accept the basic consistent eschatology of Schweitzer as the correct historical understanding of Jesus' teaching; and both concepts, reign and realm, can be used in the interests of a consistent futuristic eschatology. Conzelmann, for instance, accepts the idea of the kingdom of God as the future eschatological order, the age

¹ For the prevailing view see Liddell-Scott-Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*; Moulton and Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the New Testament*; Arndt and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*; K. L. Schmidt, *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, I, pp. 579 f.; E. Klostermann, *Das Matthäusevangelium*, p. 35; J. Schniewind, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*, pp. 23 ff.; G. S. Duncan, *Jesus, Son of Man*, pp. 45 ff.; A. M. Hunter, *The Work and Words Jesus*, pp. 68 ff.; A. E. J. Rawlinson, *St. Mark*, p. 13; C. J. Cadoux, *The Historic Mission of Jesus*, pp. 111 ff.; V. Taylor, *St. Mark*, p. 114; John Bright, *The Kingdom of God*, p. 197; S. E. Johnson, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, p. 42; F. V. Filson, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, p. 32; G. E. Wright and R. H. Fuller, *The Book of the Acts of God*, p. 240; R. Schnackenburg, *Gottes Herrschaft und Reich*; J. Bonsirven, *Le Règne de Dieu*.

² W. G. Kümmel, *Promise and Fulfillment*.

³ See "Jesus Christus," RGG³, III, col. 641-46; "Reich Gottes," *ibid.*, v, col. 912-18.

to come. Rudolf Bultmann, on the other hand, understands the concept of the kingdom as God's reign or rule; but it is God's rule which is to be manifested at the end of history in a mighty, transcendent event, breaking off history and introducing the new eschatological order. Bultmann insists that any interpretation which sees the kingdom as a present reality in Jesus' person is "escape-reasoning" designed to avoid the difficulty created by the failure of the promised apocalyptic manifestation of God's rule.⁴

Other scholars, influenced by Bultmann, have placed great emphasis upon the element of immediacy. Jesus not only announced the coming of the apocalyptic manifestation of God's kingly rule and the inauguration of the new age; he strongly emphasized the immediacy of this eschatological hour. In this interpretation, the *immediate* coming of the eschatological kingdom becomes the central message of Jesus even more than the coming of the kingdom itself.⁵ However, the two elements of consistent futurity and imminence ought not to be confused. This is illustrated by the writings of Michaelis who, in an early work, espoused the thoroughgoing futuristic interpretation of the kingdom in Jesus' teaching,⁶ but later opposed the "konsequente Eschatologie" of such scholars as Martin Werner as erroneous in making imminence the central feature in Jesus' teaching.⁷ It is therefore not necessary in this study to deal with the question of imminence; it may be left for separate consideration.

As background for our discussion, it is of utmost importance to note that Schweitzer did not arrive at his interpretation of consistent eschatology through an unbiased exegesis of the gospels. On the contrary, he was controlled by a certain presupposition, viz., that the person and teachings of Jesus must be interpreted in terms of their religious and historical background which, Schweitzer thought, was that of Jewish apocalyptic.⁸ This assumption has recently been reiterated in the writings of Hans Conzelmann, already mentioned.

One of the most significant discussions of this problem is that of Hans Windisch. He maintains that historical exegesis, i. e., the interpretation which tries to discover what was meant by a given text in its own historical context, must insist that the kingdom of God meant to

⁴ "But such a view (of a present kingdom) cannot be substantiated by a single saying of Jesus," R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, I, p. 22.

⁵ See especially Martin Werner, *The Formation of Christian Dogma*; E. Grässer, *Das Problem der Parousieverzögerung in den synoptischen Evangelien und in der Apostelgeschichte*. This view underlies the important work of H. Conzelmann, *The Theology of Saint Luke*. See the review and discussion of this problem by Oscar Cullmann in *ThLZ*, 83 (1958), col. 1-12.

⁶ Wilhelm Michaelis, *Täufer, Jesus, Urgemeinde*.

⁷ W. Michaelis, *Der Herr verzieht nicht die Verheissung*. See Cullmann's discussion of Michaelis' work in *Kirchenblatt für die reformierte Schweiz*, 21 (1943), pp. 36-38.

⁸ A. Schweitzer, *Paul and His Interpreters*, p. ix.

Jesus what it meant to the Jews: the new apocalyptic order.⁹ However, such a message has little relevance for today, for the "modern man" no longer thinks that history is to be broken off and to be followed by an apocalyptic order. In fact, the imminent coming of the kingdom which Jesus announced did not occur. However, Windisch allows that theological exegesis may find depths of relevance and meaning which are inaccessible to historical exegesis. Such theological exegesis may make use of the finding that rabbinic thought conceived of the kingdom of God as the reign or rule of God, and may reinterpret Jesus' message in terms which are historically erroneous¹⁰ but theologically relevant to the modern man. Thus theology may conceive of the kingdom of God not as an imminent apocalyptic order but as God's rule working in the world through the gospel; but in so doing, it must realize that it is going far beyond Jesus' own thought.

Other scholars find the central meaning of the kingdom of God in sayings in which the kingdom is present, and interpret the apocalyptic language symbolically,¹¹ or attribute it to the false apocalyptic ideas of the early church.¹²

The problem which exegesis has to solve is that of the diverse character of the sayings about the kingdom of God which are attributed to Jesus in the gospels. The problem is whether these diverse sayings are mutually exclusive so that one is compelled to select one group as primary and interpret the rest as secondary, or whether there is some key which can interpret the diverse sayings as variations of a single idea.

There are four different kinds of sayings about the kingdom of God in the gospels. In a few places, the term clearly carries the dynamic meaning of reign or rule. This has been recognized by the translators of the Revised Standard Version who render *basileia* by "kingly power" in Luke 19 12, 15; 23 42, and by "kingship" in John 18 36. A second group of sayings refers to the kingdom as a future apocalyptic order into which the righteous will enter at the end of the age. In such sayings, the kingdom of God is quite interchangeable with the age to come (Mark 10 23-30). In a third group the kingdom is something present among men. The most notable sayings of this type are Matt 12 28 and Luke 17 20. In the former saying, exorcism of demons is a proof of the presence of the kingdom; and in the latter Jesus answered the question of the Pharisees about the time of the coming of the apocalyptic kingdom by asserting that it was already present in their very midst.¹³

⁹ Hans Windisch, *The Meaning of the Sermon on the Mount*, pp. 28, 62, 193.

¹⁰ Windisch does not express himself in such terms, but this is what is involved in his position. See *ibid.*, ch. iv, esp. pp. 199 ff.

¹¹ C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, pp. 106, 197; A. N. Wilder, *Eschatology and Ethics in the Teaching of Jesus*, 26 ff., 59; E. J. Goodspeed, *A Life of Jesus*, pp. 126 f.

¹² F. C. Grant, *The Gospel of the Kingdom*; L. Waterman, *The Religion of Jesus*.

¹³ For discussion of this verse see B. Noack, *Das Gottesreich bei Lukas* (Uppsala, 1948).

A fourth group of sayings represent the kingdom as a present realm into which men are now entering. This concept of being in a present kingdom is found outside the gospels in Col 1 13, and it is the most natural exegesis of a number of sayings attributed to Jesus.¹⁴

Perhaps the basic question for the historical exegete in dealing with this problem is whether Jesus' teachings find their historical analogy in Jewish apocalyptic or in rabbinic thought. Windisch's insistence that the primary *historical* meaning of the kingdom of God is the age to come amounts to the claim that apocalyptic is the only possible background for Jesus' thought; and Conzelmann has recently repeated this claim.¹⁵

In dealing with this problem, we must evaluate several facts. First, the rabbinic teaching about the kingdom of God as the reign or rule of God is as much a fact of history and an element in Jesus' religious environment as the apocalyptic writings. To be sure, the question of the rôle of apocalyptic ideas on the one hand and "normative" legalistic Judaism on the other in first-century Judaism remains an unsolved problem. G. F. Moore believed that apocalyptic ideas were entertained only by a sort of lunatic fringe on the borders of normative Judaism,¹⁶ while W. F. Albright believes Palestine was swarming with apocalypticists.¹⁷ The discovery of the Qumran literature has reminded us how scanty our knowledge of first-century Palestine is; but the literature of this proto-Essene community with Hasidean origins would appear to strengthen Charles' thesis that legalistic and apocalyptic Judaism stem from the same source. The critical problems as to the dating and history of the rabbinic materials are notoriously difficult, but experts in the field believe this literature reflects first-century usage. Therefore it is arbitrary to rule out, as Windisch does, the possibility that the rabbinic idea of the kingdom as the kingly rule of God provides the key for Jesus' teaching.

Second, the rabbis looked for an eschatological new order of the age to come.¹⁸ This view is by no means limited to the apocalypticists.

Third, it is a fact that the expression "kingdom of God" and especially its Semitic equivalent, "kingdom of the heavens," is practically nonexistent in both apocalyptic and nonapocalyptic intertestamental

¹⁴ See Matt 11 11 || Luke 7 28; Luke 16 16; Matt 21 31; 23 13; cf. Luke 11 52.

¹⁵ See the references in note 3; cf. the older work by Hans Windisch, "Die Sprüche vom Eingehen in das Gottesreich," *ZNTW*, 27 (1928), pp. 163-92. Conzelmann does, however, admit that the kingdom of God can mean "Gottesherrschaft," but the predominating viewpoint must be that of the apocalyptic age to come.

¹⁶ G. F. Moore, *Judaism*, I, p. 127.

¹⁷ *From The Stone Age to Christianity*, p. 287. See R. H. Charles, *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, II, p. vii, for a mediating position.

¹⁸ See Joseph Klausner, *The Messianic Idea in Israel*, Part III; Strack and Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, IV, 2, pp. 799-976 ("Diese Welt, die Tage des Messias u. die zukünftige Welt").

literature, but is found on numerous occasions, if with relative infrequency, in the rabbinic literature.¹⁹

Fourth, it is clear that we cannot force Jesus *rigidly* into either pattern of thought, rabbinic or apocalyptic. There are elements of novelty in his teaching. We do not know enough about first-century Palestinian thought to know whether such elements merely reflect current usage, or whether we must attribute them to the originality of Jesus. Contrary to both apocalyptic and rabbinic usage, Jesus used the term "kingdom of God" to designate the eschatological salvation and the age to come. In Judaism, the kingdom of God is never a realm into which men enter.²⁰ Therefore if Jesus used the term in a novel way at this point, we must allow for possible novelty at other points. The historian must never smother creative originality in his desire to find historical analogies.

Fifth, there are other points at which Jesus' eschatological thought differed from that of Jewish apocalyptists, admitted by those who interpret Jesus basically as an apocalyptist. Maurice Goguel attributed to Jesus a consistently eschatological view of the kingdom, but he attempted to distinguish between Jesus' eschatological teaching and Jewish apocalyptic by holding that the former looked for a day of judgment and a new eschatological (apocalyptic?) order; but apocalyptic attempted to picture in advance the form which the cosmic drama would take and the events which would accompany it, and therefore tried to calculate the time of the coming of the eschatological event.²¹ Werner Kümmel distinguishes sharply between "eschatological promise" and "apocalyptic instruction," devoting an entire chapter to this distinction. Jesus' eschatological promise is marked by a "complete absence of any delineation of eschatological conditions."²² Apocalyptic reveals future events; eschatology prepares men for the future. Even Bultmann recognizes a difference between Jesus and the apocalyptists in that while Jesus proclaimed the imminent apocalyptic event, he had no interest in the content of the event, but only in the fact itself that God would rule.²³

¹⁹ The nearest equivalent to the phrase is Ps Sol 17 4, "the kingdom of our God." See Wisd Sol 10 10, "(wisdom) showed him God's kingdom"; Asmp M 10 1, "Then his kingdom shall be manifested in all creation"; Test Benj 9 1, "the kingdom of the Lord"; Sib Or 3 47 f., "the mightiest kingdom of the immortal king." III Bar 11 2 has the phrase, "the keys of the kingdom of heaven," but this writing is second or third century A.D.

For the rabbinic materials, see the standard surveys of G. Dalman, *The Words of Jesus*, pp. 91-101; G. F. Moore, *Judaism* II, pp. 371-76; Strack and Billerbeck, *Kommentar*, I, pp. 172-84; H. G. Kuhn, *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, I, pp. 570-73. For the infrequent appearances of *malkuth* in the Qumran literature, see R. Schnackenburg, *Gottes Herrschaft und Reich*, pp. 29 ff.

²⁰ E. Percy, *Die Botschaft Jesu*, (Lund, 1953), pp. 21-22.

²¹ M. Goguel, *Revue d'Histoire des Religions*, 106 (1932), pp. 381 ff.

²² W. G. Kümmel, *Promise and Fulfillment*, p. 91.

²³ R. Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting*, p. 87.

Finally, as already noted, there are at least a few sayings where the kingdom of God is God's reign and not the new age; and at this point, a clear analogy is found with rabbinic thought. The nobleman who went into a far country to obtain a "kingdom" sought authority to reign as king, that is, kingship (Luke 19 12, 15). Jesus' "kingdom" which is not of this world is the measure of authority resident in him, his kingship (John 18 36). The prayer of the dying thief to be remembered when Jesus comes "in his kingdom" refers to the hope that Jesus, now dying as a criminal, will one day show himself to possess the authority and power of a king (Luke 23 42).

There are other passages in which the meaning "God's rule" is most easily understood. Outside the gospels it appears in Rev 12 10; 11 15; 17 12. The abstract meaning suits the context best in the following gospel sayings: Luke 1 33, "he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom (or reign) there will be no end." The prayer for the coming of God's kingdom (Matt 6 10) undoubtedly refers to the eschatological event, but it is a petition for a divine act which has its parallel in the Jewish prayer, "May he set up his kingdom in your lifetime and in your days."²⁴ It is a prayer for the act of God which will establish the eschatological order. Again, the kingdom which must be received like a child (Mark 10 15; Luke 18 17) is not a realm, present or future, but God's reign. This again is analogous to the rabbinic idea of taking upon oneself the yoke of the kingdom, but with this exception: the reign of God demanding acceptance is now dynamically present in Jesus. Man is asked to respond to the present divine act with complete submissiveness.

When we are exhorted to seek first his kingdom and his righteousness (Matt 6 33), we are asked, as Dodd says, "to make the doing of His will the supreme aim."²⁵ Again, taken out of context, this is similar to rabbinic teaching,²⁶ but the content of the kingdom is differently defined.

In the upper room, Jesus said to his disciples, "As my Father appointed a kingdom for me, so do I appoint for you" (Luke 22 29). The "kingdom" promised is "royal rank."²⁷ The promise has an eschatological reference, for the disciples are to exercise their rule by sitting on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (vs. 30).

On the basis of these facts, we would suggest that it is likely that the analogy to Jesus' thought about the kingdom of God is to be found in rabbinic usage rather than apocalyptic. In rabbinic thought the kingdom is always an abstract or dynamic concept — God's reign, not the realm over which he reigns.²⁸ However, there are two aspects to

²⁴ G. Dalman, *Words of Jesus*, p. 99.

²⁵ C. H. Dodd, *Parables*, p. 42.

²⁶ Mundle in *RGK*², iv, col. 1820.

²⁷ C. J. Cadoux, *The Historic Mission of Jesus*, p. 290; Arndt and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 134.

²⁸ See the literature cited in note 10.

his rule. In this age, God manifests his rule through the Torah. God's rule is experienced on earth when men "take upon them the yoke of the kingdom," i. e., when they submit themselves in obedience to the Torah. Therefore, God's rule in this age is limited. The initiative for realizing God's rule rests with men; they may accept the yoke of the kingdom by obeying the Torah, or they may cast it off. God has revealed his will in the law; it is up to men to decide whether or not they will acknowledge the God of Israel as the supreme ruler and king, and submit to him and his law. A large portion of the world — the gentiles — do not obey God's law nor acknowledge his kingdom.

However, this ambiguous situation cannot go on forever. There will come a day when God will act, when God will take the initiative, when his universal kingship, which exists *de jure* now, will be manifested in all the world. Then God will be king *de facto*, not only over submissive Israel, but over all men. His kingdom will then appear and will prevail in all the world.

Jesus' use of *basileia tou theou* (and *tōn ouranōn*) follows a similar pattern, but with two important modifications, one of which has been already noted. The kingdom of God is the *Herrschaft Gottes* to be manifested at the end of the age in power and glory. However, when God acts to establish his effective reign in the world, the resulting *order* is also called the kingdom of God. *Basileia* can have two eschatological meanings: the eschatological act of God, and the eschatological order created by God's act. Dalman has gone too far in suggesting that Jesus' thought, like that of the rabbis, must always refer to God's reign. Windisch and Conzelmann are correct in emphasizing that the kingdom of God is an eschatological order into which the righteous enter. That we are not shut up to choosing one or the other of these two meanings is shown by the fact that both meanings of *malkuth* are found in the OT describing political affairs. *Malkuth* can be either a monarch's kingship, his reign,²⁹ or it can be the realm over which he reigns.³⁰ It is our thesis that both meanings are to be recognized in the teachings of Jesus, and that the primary meaning is the abstract or dynamic one, for it is God's kingly act establishing his rule in the world which brings into being the realm in which his rule is enjoyed.

A second innovation in Jesus' message is theologically even more significant, and it is this which sets him quite apart from all other Jewish teachers. If the *basileia tou theou* is God's kingly rule which is to be manifested in glory at the end of the age, there is no philological or

theological or logical reason why God's *basileia* may not also be thought of as his reign manifesting itself in other ways. The rabbis thought that God's reign had been committed to Israel in the Torah, but would also manifest itself at the end of the age to all men. Jesus taught that the rule of God, which would manifest itself to all men at the end of the age, was also manifesting itself in his person, mission, and message, to those who would hear and respond. Before the eschatological manifestation was a manifestation of a different sort. God, who would act at the end of history to transform history, had invaded history in the person and mission of Jesus to bring his reign and rule to men. Such a conclusion best explains many gospel sayings. "If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matt 12 28). In spite of the long debate over the meaning of *ephthasen*, I believe Kümmel is right when he insists that this passage clearly asserts that the kingdom of God is a present reality.³¹ Kümmel solves the problem by saying that what is present are the powers of the *eschaton*; the eschatological order is already at work in advance. Other scholars have held that sayings like this reflect the view that the kingdom is so very near its powers can already be felt. Like the dawn before the sunrise, like the bud before the unfolding rose, like the clouds before the storm, the kingdom makes its approach felt before its actual arrival. What is present is not the kingdom itself but only signs of the imminent eschatological kingdom.³² Such expedients do not satisfy the demands of the text if a better solution can be found. The verse does not say that signs of the kingdom, or powers of the kingdom, or the preaching of the kingdom, are present; the kingdom itself is present.

If the primary meaning of the kingdom of God is God's dynamic reign, the difficulty residing in the saying can be solved. God's kingdom is present in Jesus in a new and unique way. In the mission of Jesus, God has taken the initiative. God has acted. God has manifested his kingly rule. The exorcism of demons is indeed a sign of the kingdom, but it is not a sign of an imminent approaching kingdom; rather it is a sign of a present kingdom. In the coming of Jesus God has entered into history in his kingly activity to accomplish his redemptive purpose.

This sets Jesus apart from the rabbis. In rabbinic thought, God's rule was present in the world through the law; but the initiative rested with men to accept or reject God's rule. The only *coming* or *manifestation* of the kingdom which the rabbis could conceive was the eschatological manifestation at the end of the age. Jesus taught that before the

³¹ W. G. Kümmel, *op. cit.*, pp. 105–09.

³² See E. F. Scott, *The Kingdom and the Messiah*, pp. 111 ff.; M. S. Enslin, *Christian Beginnings*, pp. 158–66; Riddle and Hutson, *New Testament Life and Literature*, pp. 90 f.; M. Dibelius, *Jesus*, pp. 69–88; R. H. Fuller, *The Mission and Achievement of Jesus*, pp. 25 f., 32.

²⁹ I Sam 20 31; I Kings 2 12; I Chron 12 23; II Chron 7 18; Esther 1 2, 4; 4 14. In over twenty places *malkuth* is translated "reign" in the AV.

³⁰ II Chron 20 30; Dan 1 20; 9 1; 11 2; II Chron 36 22; Ezra 1 1; Neh 9 35; Esther 1 14, 20; 3 6, 8.

eschatological manifestation it had come into the world, in advance in his person and mission.

This interpretation is reinforced by a comparison of the concept of God found in apocalyptic writings, rabbinic thought, and in Jesus' teachings. It has often been noted that apocalyptic thought was pessimistic with regard to this age. God had become the remote God who was no longer active in history. The world had been given over to evil powers; and when God's righteous people suffered at the hands of evil, God remained aloof and unmoved (En 89 71, 75). God's deliverance could be expected only in the day of the eschatological visitation.

Rabbinic thought could not conceive of God as an absentee or remote God; but it had lost the consciousness of a God who was redemptively active in history. At one time God had been redemptively active in giving Israel the law. Now, however, the initiative rested with men to accept the yoke of the kingdom. God would manifest his kingdom only at the day of the eschatological visitation.³³

In Jesus' teaching there is a new element about God which parallels the dynamic present concept of the kingdom: God has once again become dynamically active in history. The Jewish scholar, Montefiore, recognizes this unique factor. "The greatness and originality" of Jesus "opened a new chapter in men's attitude towards sin and sinners" because he sought out sinners rather than avoiding them.³⁴ The seeking God, the God who is not content to wait for men to turn to him but who searches for the lost, the God who has again become active in history for man's salvation — this is the corollary of the God who has become dynamically active in his kingly rule in Jesus to bring men into the blessings of his rule.

³³ See W. G. Kümmel, "Die Gottesverkündigung Jesu und der Gottesgedanke des Spätjudentums," *Judaica*, 1 (1945), pp. 40-68.

³⁴ C. A. Montefiore, *The Synoptic Gospels*, 1, p. 55.