

The kingdom that God established

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'Kingdom' is 'kingship', 'reign'

The kingdom of God is central to Jesus' teaching from beginning to end. As soon as he was baptized he preached that: "the kingdom of God is near" (Mark 1:15) For forty days after his resurrection he still spoke to his disciples about the kingdom of God. (Acts 1:3) At the end of the book of Acts we find Paul imprisoned in Rome where "boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ." (Acts 28:31) If we feel that this concept is not so relevant today, maybe it is because we have not understood it properly.

Why the confusion? Many commentaries, and even English translations, are confused on this subject. We get confused, because in English we instinctively feel that *kingdom* means 'the territory subject to a king'. The in Hebrew and Greek the primary meaning of *kingdom* is the authority to reign as king, not a concrete realm or territory. In Boko we had no problem finding the word for *kingdom* in this abstract sense. It is a common word which means 'a position of authority or rule'. Whether you are head of the household, chairman of the committee, chief of the village or king over a region, the position you hold is your *kpala*. The word for the position is not related to the word for one who holds the position, as *kingdom* is to king in English, and likewise in Hebrew and Greek.

'Kingdom' is a political word

Even among those who talk about the kingdom of God today, it is open to question whether they really understand the concept. Preachers talk about building, extending or benefiting the kingdom, expressions that are foreign to Scripture. They relate to the concrete idea of kingdom, rather than the abstract idea of reigning. If 'kingdom' has to do with kingship or rule, how can you build or benefit it? Definitions such as "God's present reign in the lives of his people", "that dynamic new life in Christ," or "God's new society" miss the point, as do most of the expressions in David Ross' 1995 article. While 'putting faith in Jesus', 'living in heaven together with God', 'obtaining eternal life' and 'living God's new way' are Christian concepts, but really have no correlation with the concept underlying the word 'kingdom'. Salvation and all that pertains to it is a blessing found in the kingdom of God, but the basic meaning of 'kingdom' has nothing to do with salvation, so it should not be translated that way.

The Jews were expecting a kingdom that was Jewish, political and geographical. Jesus communicated to his disciples through the parables about a kingdom that it is universal as well as Jewish (the king is a Jew), spiritual as well as political, hidden until the King's return, when it will be manifested, and, if you believe in a literal Millennium, geographical.

'Kingdom' from two perspectives : possessor or source

It is often taught that the kingdom of God is God's universal rule, in spite of the fact that Jesus is king in the kingdom of God. But does the expression 'kingdom of God' mean that God is the possessor of the kingdom or that he is the source of it? There are many 'of God' expressions in the New Testament, and we instinctively tend to interpret them as possessives. But there are many relationships signaled by the Greek genitive. The following are examples:

Lamb of God

Lamb provided by God

John 1:29

kingdom of God	kingdom established by God	John 3:3
love of God	love provided by God	John 5:42
bread of God	bread provided by God	John 6:33
praise of God	praise given by God	John 12:43
armor of God	armor provided by God	Ephesians 6:11
peace of God	peace given by God	Philippians 4:7
gospel of God	good news that God gave	1 Thessalonians 2:8

Dr. Barclay Newman (1974:433) states that it is fairly well accepted among biblical scholars that the word 'kingdom' in this phrase has as its primary meaning "God's kingly rule", the basic focus being on the actual rule of God rather than on the realm or territory over which he rules. The Boko Christians, who live in a Muslim dominated society, had a problem with this. "If the kingdom of God is God's kingly rule" they asked, "how can Jesus talk about the kingdom of God coming? Hasn't God always been sovereign ruler over his creation? And if the kingdom of God is God's kingly rule, how can we possess or inherit it? (as in Matthew 5:3,10)"

In my view this question can be answered by recognizing that some Biblical passages refer to the kingdom which God possesses, that is, his own sovereign reign over the universe, while 'the expression 'the kingdom of God' or the kingdom of heaven' refer to the kingdom from God or from heaven, the kingdom he has established among men on earth, a kingdom of which David and Solomon were early kings and over which Jesus would ultimately rule. Herman Ridderbos (1962:4) says:

"A twofold distinction should be made. In the first place the Old Testament speaks of a general and a particular kind of kingship of the Lord. The former concerns the universal power and dominion of God over the whole world and all the nations, and is founded in the creation of heaven and earth. The latter denotes the special relation between the Lord and Israel."

Confusion arises when people do not differentiate between these two kingdoms of God. The kingdom of God is a kingdom within a kingdom, the smaller kingdom being an *earthly* kingdom that God has established and which he rules through a human king. It is vital for Muslims, and all of us, to understand that the kingdom of God in the New Testament is an earthly kingdom of which Jesus is king. God is ultimately reigning through this kingdom too, reflecting the subtle ambiguity of the expression.

The roots of the kingdom of God in the Old Testament

The Old Testament teaches the difference between these two kingdoms. In the Psalms we read about God's sovereign rule over the universe, God's kingdom in the true genitive sense. "For dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations" (Psalm 22:28) and "The Lord has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all." (Psalm 103:19)

But in Chronicles we read about another kingdom, not God's sovereign rule, but the kingdom he has established on earth. This is God's kingdom in the ablative sense. "Of all my sons - and the Lord has given me many - he has chosen my son Solomon to sit *on the throne of the kingdom of the Lord* over Israel." (1 Chronicles 28:5) God had spoken to David through the prophet Nathan about Solomon saying: "He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his Father and he will be my son." (2 Samuel 7:13-14) This passage speaks about Solomon, but the ultimate fulfillment was in Jesus, as prophesied in Isaiah 9:6-7.

References to God's kingdom in the Old Testament refer to his sovereign rule over his creation and they should be translated as "God's kingdom." Although the expression 'kingdom of God' does not occur in the Old Testament, 'kingdom of the Lord' occurs with reference to the house of David in 2 Chronicles 13:8 and 9:8. The Queen of Sheba words are: "Praise be to the Lord your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on his throne as king to rule for the Lord your God." The phrase 'kingdom of God' in the New Testament refers to this earthly kingdom of which the Messiah is king. In Boko we translate it as "the kingdom that came from God" or "the kingdom that God established".

As taught by Jesus and the apostles, the kingdom of God is not God's sovereign rule over the universe; rather it is a kingdom established by God in contrast to man-made kingdoms. (Daniel contrasted them in Daniel 2:31-45 and 7:13-14. It has its roots in the kingdom of Israel, and indeed the king is always in this kingdom. In the New Testament the focus is not on God as king; he rules through a man, his Son, whom he has appointed. Jesus said: "My kingdom is not of this world." (John 18:36) Paul said: "For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves." (Colossians 1:13)

Entering the kingdom

The sons of the kingdom are often thought of as subjects, in spite of the fact that the faithful are consistently told the kingdom of God is theirs, that it is given to them and conferred on them, and that they receive and inherit it. That they are subjects is not a scriptural concept.

On one occasion I was wondering about the meaning of the Boko translation of John 3:5. I asked the Boko translators, "What does it mean to enter into a kingdom?" They replied without hesitation that it meant entering into a government: someone who entered President Kerekou's "kingdom" became a minister in his cabinet. This is the scriptural teaching also, even though we often hear that entering the kingdom means becoming a subject or citizen.

Nowhere in Scripture are we called subjects of the kingdom of God. We are "sons of the kingdom", which means that our involvement is in the rule, not the realm. We are called princes, even kings! Jesus illustrated this when talking to Peter about payment of the temple tax. (Matthew 17:24-27) "From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes - from their own sons or from others?" Jesus asked. The note on Matthew 17:26 in the *NIV Study Bible* aptly says, "The implication is that Peter and the rest of the disciples belonged to God's royal household, but unbelieving Jews did not."

To enter the kingdom is not to enter into a geographical area, nor even to enter into the sphere of Jesus' reign. It is entering into his actual rule and authority. It is becoming part of his ruling hierarchy. This is made clear by the very vocabulary used, which all points to the exalted position we have in the kingdom. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, *for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*" (Matthew 5:9) "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take *your inheritance, the kingdom* prepared for you since the creation of the world.'" (Matthew 25:34) "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased *to give you the kingdom.*" (Luke 12:32) "And *I confer on you a kingdom*, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." (Luke 22:29-30) "Those who live like this will *not inherit the kingdom of God.*" (Galatians 5:21) "Therefore, since *we are receiving a kingdom* that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful. and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe." (Hebrews 12:28)

Jesus is king in the kingdom of God and the saints constitute his government. Understanding this the mother of Zebedee's sons requested that her sons sit either side of Jesus in his kingdom. (Matthew 20:21) "Sons of the kingdom" (Matthew 13:38) are the princes, those born to the

kingdom. The Jews forfeited their position (Matthew 21:43). Being least or greatest in the kingdom of God refers to the status of people in the ruling hierarchy, from the greatest down to the least. Greatness in the kingdom depends on obedience (Matthew 5:19) and humility (Matthew 18:1, 4). The apostle Paul says "If we endure, we will also reign with him." (2 Timothy 2:12) and: "Do you not know that the saints will judge the world?" and "Do you not know that we will judge angels?" (1 Corinthians 6:2-3)

Drawing on an Old Testament designation of Israel found in Exodus 19:6, John says: "To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has *made us to be a kingdom* and priests to serve his God and Father - to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen." (Revelation 1:5-6) Jesus said, "To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations - 'He will rule them with an iron scepter; he will dash them to pieces like pottery' -just as I have received authority from my Father." (Revelation 2:26-27) Daniel saw this in a vision and said: "Then the sovereignty, power and greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be handed over to the saints, the people of the Most High. His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all rulers will worship and obey him." (Daniel 7:27)

All these wonderful verses point to the fact that God has exalted us to such an extent that he calls us his sons. He has united us to his Son in such a way that we inherit all the promises and blessing conferred on him. The kingdom of God is the kingdom that God has established here on earth with Jesus Christ as king, a kingdom that will one day, when all enemies have been defeated, be handed back to the Father. (1 Corinthians 15:24)

The coming of the kingdom of God to be realized in the King's coming

How does a kingdom "come" or "draw near"? The Messiah had been predicted long ago; he was the king appointed by God to rule over his kingdom on earth. John and Jesus both announced that the kingdom was near, a word that can have temporal or locational connotations. (In Boko it is not possible to speak of a kingdom or rule as being near.) John and Jesus meant that the man appointed to be King had arrived and was about to take up his position. Thus the meaning of "the kingdom of God is near" is that that the King himself is near in the locational sense and that the establishment of the kingdom is near in the temporal sense. When looking at passages that speak of the coming of the kingdom from God, the precise meaning becomes clearer if we ask the question, "Is this passage talking about the kingdom as embodied in the person of the King, or is it talking about the establishment of his kingdom?"

Jesus said "If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matthew 12:28) This was a veiled way of saying that he was the king from God, the Messiah. In Mark 9:1 Jesus said: "some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power." In the parallel passage in Luke, it is simply "before they see the kingdom of God" (9:27) Matthew makes it more explicit: "before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom. (16:28)" They would not die before they saw Jesus coming as King. The next few verses, which describe the transfiguration, indicate they indeed saw his coming as King. When the thief on the cross said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" he meant "when you come as king." (Luke 23:42)

The Pharisees asked Jesus when the kingdom of God would come (Luke 17:20). In other words, they wanted to know when the kingdom would be established, or when the Messiah would come. Jesus answered: "The kingdom of God is among you." NIV has "within", but "among" is given as an alternative translation. Nowhere else in the Bible is it suggested that the kingdom of God is inside people or in their hearts. Colossians 3:15 says: "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts", but nowhere is it expressed that God rules in us or in our hearts. Certainly the kingdom was in no sense

within the unbelieving Pharisees or Jews to whom Jesus was talking, but the Messiah was right there *among* them.

When we pray "your kingdom come" we are praying for the future consummation of the kingdom; we are praying for Jesus' return. Only then will God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. In Boko it is translated "let the kingdom you have established be made visible", literally, "come out into the open". Similarly, when Jesus tells his disciples in Mark 14:25 that he will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the day when he drinks it anew in the kingdom of God, our translation is that he won't drink it again until the kingdom of God is manifested (see also Luke 22:18).

The timing of the kingdom from God may be broken down as follows:

- Before Jesus' arrival the kingdom was promised (Isaiah 9:6-7) but not yet established. There was a foreshadowing of it in the kingdom of Israel, but this kingdom had been cut down and it now remained for a shoot (the Messiah) to come up from the stump of Jesse (Isaiah 11:10).

- With the arrival of Jesus, the Messiah king, the kingdom is imminent. He is called king by the Magi (Matthew 2:2) and Jesus answers in the affirmative when asked by Pilate if he is a king. (Matthew 27:11) But the awaited Messiah was crucified.

- After his resurrection Jesus was exalted to the right hand of God and crowned king. (Psalms 2:7, 110:1, Daniel 7:14, Luke 19:12, 22:69, Acts 2:33-36, 5:31, Ephesians 1:20, Hebrews 1:3-5, 2:9) He now rules from heaven through his body, the church. In the parables, he described his kingdom as hidden from men's eyes (the hidden treasure and pearl), and himself as calling out a people for himself through his word (the sower). The kingdom starts off small but will permeate the whole world (the mustard seed and yeast). It will include people from all nations (the net) and the true sons of the kingdom will be separated from unbelievers when the king returns (the weeds, the net, and the sheep and the goats.) The parable of the two sons, the tenants and the wedding banquet all teach that the Jews, for the most part, would reject the gospel, and the kingdom would be given to other tenants, the Gentiles. On the one hand, the kingdom of God is a present and victorious reality; on the other; it is a thing of the future and not yet victorious. As far as translation is concerned, some references present the kingdom of God as a present reality (Colossians 1:13), while others present its future manifestation.

- At Jesus' second coming the kingdom is consummated, it becomes visible for all the world to see. Jesus (and the saints) will rule over all nations as promised in Psalm 2.

The church and the kingdom of God.

The church is closely related to the kingdom of God. When 'church' is used, the emphasis is on the body, when 'kingdom' is used, the emphasis in the kingdom is on the Head. The former emphasizes the relationship and ministry of Christians under their Lord, the latter the power and glory of the King and his political power over his enemies. The present age is the church age, because in it God is calling out a people for himself, people united to Christ on the basis of his shed blood. The age to come will be the kingdom age in which Christ's kingship will be manifested and God will make his enemies a footstool for his feet. The church eagerly awaits the kingdom age. The kingdom is the big picture of Christ's victory as in Psalm 110.

Who are the ordinary subjects or citizens in the *future* kingdom of God? The church, in its capacity as the government in the kingdom of God, will judge the world (1 Corinthians 6:2), Israel (Matthew 19:28), and demons (1 Corinthians 6:3), and they will rule over cities (Luke 19:17). He who

overcomes will sit with Jesus on his throne (Revelation 3:21) and will be given authority over the nations to rule them with an iron scepter and dash them to pieces like pottery (Revelation 2:26-27). Because the church is "in Christ", it does whatever he does.

The New Jerusalem is home for Christ and his bride, the church, which is the government in God's future order of things. The billions of unbelievers are "outside". Satan and his demons are also outside. "Outside" means that they are outside of Jesus' government, not outside of his sphere of rule. Christ will reign until he puts all enemies under his feet by destroying all dominion, authority and power, and then he will hand over the kingdom to God the Father.

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