

Direct and Indirect Consequences of the Concept of Kingdom on the Life of the Believers

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ABSTRACT: The concept of “Kingdom” is well-known on the pages of the Bible, especially in the New Testament. God, the Father, and the Son, Jesus, are called and behave as kings of the Universe. Jesus Christ was very interested in speaking about the kingdom and in explaining its concepts to his listeners. Due to their beliefs, according to the concept of kingdom, many times, Christians relate differently to the values vindicated by the majority of people in the society. Their faith guides the believers when speaking about loving, appreciating, approving, or disapproving things and events around them. In this article, the author presents both, what the Bible teaches about the concept of Kingdom and some direct and indirect consequences of the biblical concept in the life of the believers. The biblical concept about the Kingdom influences believers both in terms of personal and community. When it comes to interacting with others, believers' beliefs may conflict with those who struggle with worldly principles.

KEYWORDS: Kingdom of God, Kingdom of Heaven, king, faith, belief

Introduction

Though the expressions “kingdom of heaven” or “kingdom of God” are absent in the Old Testament, the concept of kingdom was well-known both in the Old Testament and in the Judaic world. The God of the Old Testament was always viewed as King of kings and of the whole Universe and those who trusted Him related to Him in that way. The message about the Kingdom played a central role in the proclamation of Jesus Christ from the very beginning. Most places where the concept of Kingdom appears are concentrated in the synoptic Gospels. Matthew portrays Jesus as “going throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the Kingdom” (4:23). Mark introduces Jesus’ mission with the words “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (1:15). Luke, did not mention the name Kingdom in his introductory material, but quoted instead from Isaiah about the coming of the kingdom, and then related Jesus affirmation to “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled” (4:21). John used the word kingdom only five times in three verses (3:3, 5; 18:36) within his Gospel and almost in the same percentage in Revelation. Paul, Peter, and James do not use the dedicated expressions for the concept of Kingdom so often but the concepts are there being present by other parallel expressions or nuances. Christian believers, who read both the Old Testament and the New Testaments, are strongly influenced by the concept of kingdom in the Scripture, and as a result, they take different action in the midst of the society. Some believers give up their jobs, titles, or even their lives because of the concept of kingdom proving the importance of the concept in their lives.

Terminology and distribution of the concept of kingdom

The New Testament uses three terms to express the idea of “the kingdom”: *hē basileia tou theou* (the kingdom of God), *hē basileia tōn ouranōn* (the kingdom of Heaven) and *hē basileia* (the kingdom). The word *basileia* includes both the act of ruling and the territory ruled by a king (Danker 2001, 168-169). Most of the sayings are in the Gospels, being part of Jesus’s discourse. The distribution of the three “Kingdom” expressions in the Bible, demonstrates the importance of the theme in the Scripture and the importance given to them by Jesus Crist himself, during His ministry on the earth at the incarnation time. For a detailed discussion on the distribution of the

three expressions in the New Testament one could study the article written by G. E. Ladd (Ladd 2001, 657).

The content of the first two expressions, indicate their meaning and also their interchangeability. (Gaffin 1998, 367; Ladd 2001, 657). Caragounis holds the same idea, coming with proper explanations for the way the Jewish people used the same expression.

The Greek for “the kingdom of Heaven” is a literal translation of the later Jewish *malēkūt šamaim* where the word “Heaven” replaces “God” out of reverence, as (“lord,” “master”) had replaced *Yahweh* (“Lord”) and (“place”) in due time replaced (“Heaven”). The expression “kingdom of God” points obviously to The One who reigns over his Kingdom. The primarily meanings of the Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek *basileia* is sovereignty” or “royal rule.” The sense of realm (a territorial kingdom) is secondary one, arising out of the necessity for a definite locus as the sphere for the exercise of sovereignty (Caragounis, 1998, CD-ROM).

From a practical point of view, one of the main aspects of the concept of kingdom is related to ”the reign of God in human hearts wherever obedience to God is found” (Erickson 2004, 1163).

The concept of kingdom in the Old Testament

The expressions “kingdom of God” and “kingdom of heaven” are totally absent in the Old Testament, but though the terms are absent, the idea of “the kingdom” was well known and among believers. The Hebrew Scriptures present God as the creator of the Universe (Gen 1:1), as King and God to whom prayers are offered (Ps. 5:2, 44:4), as the true God among the false ones (Ps. 95:3), as the judge of the nation of Israel (Ps. 99:4). There are many places where Yahweh is presented directly as king (1 Sam. 12:12; Ps. 47:2, Isa. 6:5; 33:22; Zech. 14:16, 17). In other instances a royal throne is attributed to him (Ps. 9:4; 45:6; 47:8, Isa. 6:1; 66:1; Ezek. 1:26) His continuous or future reign is also mentioned (Ps. 10:16, 145:13, 146:10; Isa. 24:23). The Old Testament people had a mindset on the idea of being created by the only real God, who reigns over the whole universe, the giver and sustainer of life, and the final judge of the believers and of the whole world. Most of them believed also in the continuity of life after death, in an endless time spent in the presence of God, namely in his heavenly kingdom. One very telling example is the way how Job reacts to his life’s trials. For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, (Job 19:25-26 NRS).

The concept of kingdom In Judaism

In Judaism, the establishment of the Messiah’s kingdom was centered on Palestine involving the gathering of the scattered Israelites and the restoration of Jerusalem, ending with the ultimate reign of God over his people, fulfilling in that way the Old Testament idea of God being king over Israel. Generally, one may distinguish between two main tendencies in the Jewish “kingdom thinking”: an earlier, political, temporary, Davidic kingdom, having Jerusalem as center and the Jews as the primary beneficiaries and a later, apocalyptic conception of a transcendental and everlasting kingdom, conceived in universalistic terms. In the first case, there is a judgment following the early Kingdom and a new world was announced where God had to reign in heaven with greater bliss than that in the messianic Kingdom. As a contrast, the apocalyptic view is presented, according to which, the kingdom of God comes by a direct intervention of God and is transcendental and everlasting under a similarly “universal” Messiah, described as Son of man. In this case, Messiah is seen as the one taking part in the judgment, which thus precedes the messianic kingdom. This kingdom is the final kingdom of God, supposed to last forever.

In the Hellenistic world and in there were two important Jewish figures to mention. Josephus used only the word *theokratia* (Kittel 1999, 576) instead of *basileia* in his writings

about the Church and his commentaries on LXX. Unlike Josephus, Philo made use of the phrase *basileia tou theou* without hesitation.

The concept of Kingdom in the Gospel of Matthew

Although Matthew has universal relevance, even from the beginning of Christianity, the Gospel has been understood as reflecting a form of Jewish Christianity (Hagner 2000, 268). Thus, for a good understanding of Matthew's Gospel one has to keep the Jewish people in mind. Thinking to the distribution percentage the predominant term used within this gospel is "The Kingdom of Heaven". The Gospel's author choice seems to receive a good explanation counting the fact that the Jews were avoiding the pronunciation of God's name.

Matthew started his Gospel by referring to the kingdom with the preaching of John the Baptist, who had in view the need of repentance and the nearness of the Kingdom of Heaven (3:2). When John was put into the prison, Matthew presents Jesus as the one taking over the proclamation of the Kingdom (4:17). Jesus' preaching about the Kingdom is summarized two times (4:23; 9:35). The emphasis in those two places was that Jesus' preaching was accompanied by healing. In the Sermon on the Mount, from the very beginning, Jesus started by speaking about the Kingdom. The central theme of the discourse is found in (5:20) emphasizing that the entrance into the Kingdom of God will not depend on what somebody says or thinks but on what that one really is (7:21). Christ in that sermon repudiated pharisaic righteousness as providing a basis for acceptance by Messiah into his kingdom (Pentecost 1981, 172). The Lord's Prayer points out to the future coming of the Kingdom (6:10). The extension of the Kingdom, including many Gentiles, while many of the "children of the kingdom" (i.e. physical descendants of the patriarchs) will be excluded is emphasized in 8:11–12; 21:43; 22:2. The imminence of the Kingdom of God is strongly expressed in 12:28, where Jesus' miracles are interpreted as a sign of it, being present in the midst of and in the people.

The chapter on the parables of the Kingdom contains twelve Kingdom tales. They reveal the fact that there were many old known things but also others new things about the Kingdom, unknown to the Jews. Matthew attributes the Kingdom to the Son of Man (16:28; 20:21) and describes those who will inhabit the Kingdom by mentioning the Children's humility (18:3–4; 19:14) and the principles of forgiveness and love (18:23; 19:23–24). The rewards are also different from how the Jews were thinking about them. In God's evaluation scheme the last can become first and the first last (20:16).

Starting with the Olivet discourse, the Kingdom of God is presented in the future and even in apocalyptic terms and the accent is on the perseverance and watchfulness (25:1). Those who persevere faithfully to the end will be saved. They will go into place, which had been prepared for them from the time of the foundation of the world (25:34), while the unjust people are to go, to everlasting torment. The last occurrence of kingdom in Matthew is in connection with the Last Supper, when Jesus, looking forward to the eschatological feast in the Father's kingdom, promises to abstain from wine until that day.

The concept of Kingdom in the Gospel of Mark

Mark presents the beginning of Jesus' ministry with the statement that Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God (1:15). This saying does not give any clear indications whether "kingdom" refers to the national or to a more apocalyptic type of hope, but mentions the requirements of the Kingdom: "repent" and "believe". Mark uses only the phrase "the Kingdom of God".

In Jesus' parabolic teaching (Mark 4) the Kingdom is presented as the mystery given to his disciples. The description of the Kingdom of God as seed shows the way it is developing and producing fruit (4:26). It is quietly, not in nationalistic terms of open revolt for liberation as some Romans might have believed. The Coming of The Kingdom is described as imminent (9:1) and for entering into it no price is too costly (9:43–44).

Regardless Matthew, who emphasized on humility when reminding children, Mark stressed on the importance of having a childlike faith (10:14). The Kingdom of God demands a childlike faith (10:15).

In the group of sayings at 10:23, 24 and 25, Mark shows the danger of being too much attached to the material possessions as a hindrance to enter the kingdom of God. At the time of the Last Supper (14:25) the continuity of the kingdom of God is stressed.

According to Mark, to be part of the Kingdom any person is required to start with repentance and belief and to continue by growing in faith quietly, considering the value of the Kingdom as being more important than everything one could have on the earth. The faith of such a person should be childlike and strong enough, helping for the detachment of the heart from material things and its attachment to the hope of eternal life.

The concept of Kingdom in the Gospel of Luke

In Luke, there is no mention of the term “the Kingdom of Heaven”. The first reference to the Kingdom is in connection with Jesus’ ministry in 4:43 and presents the purpose of Jesus’ mission, namely the proclamation of the Kingdom of God. In presenting the Sermon on the Mount, Luke has a similar line with Matthew but the emphasis is on sociological interest. The saying in 6:20 is directed to the poor rather than the humble. In interpreting the parable of the sower, Luke stressed also on the fact that the mysteries of the Kingdom of God were given to Jesus’ disciples (8:10).

The imminence proclamation of the Kingdom was shown by Luke by the mission of the Twelve and by the mission of the seventy-two who proclaimed that the Kingdom of God was near (10:9, 11). The same idea of imminence is found in 9:27, 62; 11:20. Being a participant in the Kingdom of God should affect ones’ attitudes and priorities in life. God is the one who takes care of the needs of those who trust him (12:31). What should characterize Jesus’ followers is trust rather than fear, since God has been pleased to give them the kingdom (13:18, 20). Similar to Matthew, Luke makes it clear that the entrance into the kingdom of God is not based on physical descent but on accepting the conditions of the kingdom: entering through the narrow gate 13:28–29. In 14:15 by parable of the great banquet, Luke shows how those called first were not worthy and were replaced by the gentiles. In 16:16 the emphasis is on the proclamation of the kingdom of God, where everyone has the chance to force his or her way into it. The Kingdom does not come in a way open to physical observation (17:20) but within the heart “within you” (17:21). God works quietly in those who have accepted him and his yoke (11:28). In referring to the example with the children, Luke emphasized on childlike trust (18:16–17).

In 21:31 Luke described the kingdom of God as being near. The Last Supper confirms the idea of the Kingdom as a future event, when Jesus promises to celebrate it again in the Kingdom of God (22:16, 18). The idea of continuity is also found in the thief’s request in 23:42 and 23:51.

The concept of Kingdom in the Gospel of John

The expression “kingdom of God” did not play a significant role in John’s Gospel but its place was taken by the concept of “eternal life” or simply “life” (26 times in John). John’s avoidance of the term “kingdom of God” may be due to his purpose of writing to non-Jewish readers to whom such a concept would have produced some understanding problems.

The concept of the “kingdom of God” occurs two times in Jesus dialogue with Nicodemus and the expression “my kingdom” occurs three times in Jesus’ answer to Pilate. Jesus is presented as king through Nathanael’s confession, “Rabbi ... you are the king of Israel!” (1:49). In the Nicodemus incident no indication is given that the Kingdom of God had been the main emphasis in Jesus’ teaching or even a subject of discussion. In 3:3, 5 Jesus tells Nicodemus about the spiritual regeneration as the condition of seeing or entering into the “Kingdom of God”. The emphasis is not on the Jewish hope for a national deliverance but on the sovereignty of God under which the people by accepting the message of Jesus in faith are set free from the bondage

of sin. The Kingdom has been God's and it will not be following Israel's own expectation but God's plan. The emphasis on God (Jesus) as the one who owns the Kingdom is mentioned three times in Jesus' answer to Pilate's interrogation (18:33; 18:36).

The Use of the “Kingdom” in Acts

The expression, *basileia tou theou* is found at least seven times in the Book of Acts. In the first place (1:3) the text talks of Jesus's teaching about the “Kingdom of God”. In the second place, there is Philip preaching the Gospel of the “Kingdom of God” and the Name of Jesus (8:12). The third place (14:22) presents a possible social problem of some of the believers whose entry into the “Kingdom of God” might be preceded by tribulation. In the fourth place (19:8) the book talks about Paul's teaching on the “Kingdom of God”. The last three instances mention Paul, preaching about the “Kingdom of God” (20:25, 28:23 and 28:31).

Though Luke uses *basileia tou theou* so many times within his Gospel, and only seven times in Acts, the concept is widely spread in the whole book. One important detail to be mentioned for the purpose of this study is that in the book of Acts Luke moved from the expression “Kingdom of God” to the owner, the King Jesus, and to his teaching. Within this book, the reason that created social conflicts between Christians and the pagan world was the proclamation of the Name of Jesus and His teaching. The most important teaching about Jesus was related to his resurrection. Christians were entering into different conflicts because of their style of life based on the fact that their Lord Jesus was proclaimed to be alive and on the belief that He left only for a while, being expected to return and take the faithful ones into his eternal house. Though Luke used the expression *basileia tou theou* he links some of the main characters to the heavenly realm. About Jesus, Luke said that He was lifted up to the heavens (1:09), where the word *ouranōn* is used three times. The Holy Spirit came down from heaven *ek tou ouranou* (2:2) and the same expression is used to describe the light which descended from heaven in the case of Paul's conversion (9:3), the large sheet which was coming from heaven within the Peter's vision (11:5) and the voice of God coming from heavens (11:9). About God, the creator of the world, Luke says that He is the Lord of heaven *ouranou* and earth (17:24). The disciples, at the time when Jesus was lifted up were gazing up toward heaven (1:10). The same expression *eis ton ouranon* is used for Stephan, who at the time of his martyrdom, gazed into heaven (7:55). The spatial thinking about the Kingdom of God being placed somewhere above earth is revealed in the case of Cornelius, when it was said that his prayers and alms ascended to God (10:44). Christians are people living on the earth but whose minds and style of life are continually linked to Heaven and its King.

The concept of Kingdom at Paul

Apostle Paul does not use the expression *hē basileia tōn ouranōn* at all and *basileia tou theou*, very often. Within the letter to the Romans, the expression *basileia tou theou* occurs only one time. About this concept Schreiner says, that, “it typically has an eschatological reference, though in this context the present dimension of the Kingdom comes to the forefront” (Schreiner 2000, 740). “For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom 14:17 NRS). If righteousness, peace and joy, refer to humans virtues, and if they are found in the life of a believer, they are to be seen as fruits of the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The context of the chapter, and the first half of the verse, worn the Christians about the danger of evaluating earthly things, as food and drink, over the eternal things. From this point of view, the concept of Kingdom affects the way how Christian believers treat things and persons around them. Earthly things are to be seen as less important and persons are to be seen as more important than the standard of this world. The “Kingdom of God” is to be understood from a moral point of view, and includes “the spiritual goods which were given to the Christian” (Brockhaus 2011, 221).

In 1 Corinthians, Paul uses different expressions about the “Kingdom of God” (4:20; 6:9, 10; 15:24, 50). In the beginning, Paul’s discourse focuses on the power which the believer received from God (4:20). Later he warns believers, as sons of the Kingdom, about the responsibility of living a moral life (6:9, 10). Near the end of the letter, there are two eschatological teachings: one about the Jesus handing over the Kingdom to God, the Father (15:24), and one about the resurrection of the believers and their new bodies they are supposed to have in the heavenly realm (15:50). The responsibility of a moral life for the people of the Kingdom is mentioned as well in the letter to the Ephesians (5:5). In this letter, the Kingdom belongs to Christ and the same idea is mentioned in Colossians “the kingdom of his beloved Son” (1:13). Believers, who preach the word of God, are named “workers for the Kingdom of God” (Col 4:11). To the Thessalonians, Paul speaks about the great calling of God for his children, that of living a life worthy of the calling “into his own Kingdom” (1 Tes 1:2). Later on, Paul encourages them in the midst of persecution, reminding them about the purpose of trials, namely that of proving them worthy for the “Kingdom of God” (2 Tes 1:5).

For Paul, God the Father and Jesus are the owners of the Kingdom and these two persons with the help of the Holy Spirit minister to the heat of people converting them, helping them get ready for eternity in the presence of God. In the earthly life, believers are to live a life worthy of their calling, that of representing God in the front of the lost and of reaching them with the Gospel. As well, any believer has a calling in becoming efficient in ministering to other believers.

The Use of the concept of Kingdom at Peter and James

Peter encourages his readers to learn about God and his Kingdom principles as much as possible. Living with a mindset on the principles of the Kingdom brings blessings, both during the earthly and the heavenly life. “For in this way, entry into the eternal Kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly provided for you” (2 Pet 1:11). In their daily life, believers are called to be or to become heralds of righteousness as Noah (2:5). Despite the emphasis on moral effort, final salvation is not man’s achievement but the gift of God’s lavish generosity (Bauckham 1983, 193). Any believer is called to perform good deeds because he is saved not to be saved. In the midst of the society, believers must stay humble, no matter how many good works have done.

James (2:5) reminds the believers that they are to behave in a way worthy of their calling of being children of God. Believers are not allowed to show favoritism for people according to their wealth. God has chosen the poor ones, who love Him, to make them rich and to give them the right to enter into the promised Kingdom. “God promises the kingdom to «those that love Him» (James 2:5), not to those who love this world and its riches” (Wiersbe 1996, S Jam 2:5). From this point of view, the principles of life of the believers could come into conflict or to the displeasure of the unbelievers around them.

The Use of the concept of Kingdom in Revelation

The Revelation of John is not focused on using certain expressions but on showing how the earthly kingdoms will become one day the Kingdom of God and Christ (Rev. 11:15). One important mention about the Kingdom is that there is a perfect harmony between God the Father and Christ, the Lord (12:10). With regard to the concept of Kingdom, and especially keeping in mind the whole content of the book of Revelation, George Elton Ladd has a very clear commentary and conclusion to the meaning of the Kingdom of God:

“The Kingdom is God’s deed. It has come into the world in Christ; it works into the world through the church. When the church has proclaimed the gospel of the kingdom in all the world as witness to all nations, Christ will return (Mat 24:14) and bring the kingdom in glory.” (Ladd 2001, 660)

Conclusion

Even though it has different names, like “kingdom of God” or Kingdom of Heaven” or “Eternal Life”, or the concept is implied by the related terminology, the concept of the Kingdom is present both in the Old and the New Testament and in the life of the Jews and Christians alike. The terms, the recipients, the temporary goals were different but the message was the same. The Kingdom is present and future; it is grace for all and will be glory for those who received its message like the children. It is growing slowly but safely and bringing fruits because it is God’s Kingdom and He is taking care of it. Believers both in the old and modern times considered God as the creator, the King of the Universe, the only one worthy to be trusted, worshiped, glorified and followed. Starting with those in the Old Testament times until nowadays believers understood the holiness of God and his good desire for them. Always believers tried to live lives worthy of God thinking, praying and hoping to spend eternity in the presence of God, namely in his heavenly realm. Jesus made the message of the Kingdom the core of his ministry. The promise of eternity spent in the glorified Kingdom of God offered believers enough strength to face trials and even persecution and death. Because of the concept of kingdom, believers enjoy a high level of inner life and satisfaction, being able to rejoice even in the midst of the hardest trials being aware that God is in control over everything and all things work for the good of those who love God.

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