

## 2. HARMONIZING THE “KINGDOM OF GOD” VERSES

The Greek word for kingdom has the basic meaning of ‘kingship’ or ‘royal authority.’ We should not think so much of the territory or population of the kingdom but of kingship. The kingship is ‘of God’ because of its heavenly origin. It is not about God’s sovereignty over all. It is an eschatological concept, a reign that the Father grants to his beloved Son, who will reign over the Earth for a thousand years when he returns. The phrase has three meanings, all referring to kingship. If these three meanings are not distinguished, the correct interpretation of the phrase will not be discerned. Early in the Gospels, the phrase is used as a metonym for the King. In parables about the kingdom concerning Jesus’ disciples, the kingdom is best understood as the monarchy, the community of believers he is gathering, of whom he said: I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. The third meaning relates to his reign in verses that relate to the future. In a third of ‘kingdom of God’ verses, the phrase is a metonym for the Messiah, in another third, it relates to Jesus’s disciples as the monarchy, and the final third relate to the future reign. They are all about kingship: the monarch, the monarchy, and their reign.

Jesus was born king of the Jews, the promised Messiah, but he had to proclaim his message in the presence of an unbelieving Jewish leadership and unfriendly Roman soldiers. As he could not speak openly about his identity as the Messiah or God’s plan for the future, he used the phrase ‘kingdom of God/heaven’ to disguise the fact that he was talking about his Messiahship, the monarchy he was recruiting, and the reign that he would establish on Earth. His message was full of significance for godly Jews who were waiting for the Messiah to come but vague for others and also for us.

This interpretation avoids the clumsy conclusion that the kingdom is both present and future, that it has been inaugurated but is not yet. It focuses on ‘kingship’ and avoids the unbiblical teaching that Jesus is ruling the world now. John said: We know that we are the children of God and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one. This interpretation emphasizes the relationship Jesus’s disciples have to the kingdom as children of God,

without confusing matters by inferring that the kingdom of God is equivalent to the church. Understanding the “kingdom of God” verses in this way results in an accurate, harmonious, and enlightening interpretation.

The kingdom of God is a majestic phrase that expresses the climax for our world and God’s destiny for mankind. The phrase does not occur in the Old Testament (OT), but the Jews knew what Jesus was talking about when he embarked on his ministry of proclaiming the kingdom of God. Their hope was in the Messiah their prophets had promised, their vindication as God’s people, and the vision of a glorious world kingdom of peace, justice, and prosperity in which Israel would be a leading example. God’s people today, however, are confused about the meaning of the kingdom. Poor exegesis has placed the kingdom in heaven or equated it with the church or God’s rule in people’s lives, none of which harmonizes with the promises of the OT prophets.

For the Jews, the kingdom of God had one and only one meaning: the Messianic reign. However, it is a complex phrase that has different shades of meaning and, unless these are understood, we are left in the dark. In addition, Jesus spoke in parables about the kingdom because if he spoke about himself as a king or his coming kingdom, it would have resulted in premature arrest and condemnation. He told his disciples that the secrets of the kingdom of God had been given to them but not to others. As Jesus’s return approaches, we must understand what the future holds. There will be much suffering and many martyrs before this age draws to a close and the kingdom of God is established.

The complexity begins with the word ‘kingdom’ which people are not well acquainted with today. Many liken it to the United Kingdom as a country or a community of people. The second complexity is about the grammatical category of the genitive and its meaning in our phrase. The third issue is to explore what the kingdom meant to the generation of Jews in Jesus’s day.

## **The meaning of ‘kingdom’**

The Greek lexicons give various meanings for kingdom depending on the context, but it is rare for it to be used in the sense of a country or a community. Some meanings are regarded as archaic and are not understood by modern readers. The word kingdom, in its modern usage, is an organised community headed by a king. It has several components:

1. the king
2. the monarchy, the royalty
3. the subjects
4. the domain (his geographical area)
5. the reign (his activity)
6. kingship (his royal authority)

The king is the supreme ruler of the kingdom, the monarchy assists him in government, the subjects are those over whom he and his government rule, the domain is the area over which they have jurisdiction, the reign is the activity of the kingdom, and the kingship is royal power or position. This last item is the basic idea of 'kingdom' in Hebrew and Greek, so primarily, 'kingdom' is an abstract word referring to the royal power or authority that a king exercises.

The phrases the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven, and related phrases occur 142 times in the NT. To understand the meaning of each, one must decide what component of the kingdom is being referred to. Bible translations like to be consistent in translating key phrases like the kingdom of God, but unfortunately, this consistency results in the loss of meaning or a vague meaning, which leads to many different interpretations of what the kingdom of God is all about. Many scholars have not always distinguished Jesus's special use of the terms 'kingdom of God' and 'kingdom of heaven' from God's sovereignty, which is quite a different matter. Vine, for example, in his *An Expository Dictionary of NT Words* defines the meaning of 'The kingdom of God' as:

(a) the sphere of God's rule (Ps 22:28, 145:13, Dan 4:25, Lke 1:52, Rom 13:1-2)

(b) the sphere in which, at any given time, His rule is acknowledged.

He says it is God call upon men everywhere, without distinction of race or nationality, to submit voluntarily to His rule. However that is not the meaning that Jesus gave to the phrase. This kind of interpretation leads many people astray because they do not grasp the basic fact that the kingdom of God, as Jesus proclaimed it, is an earthly kingdom ruled by the Messiah. He was not talking about God the Father's sovereignty or God's rule in our hearts, but the Messiah's authority. It only relates to God (the Father) since he is the origin of the kingdom. It is his Son, the Messiah, who is king in the

kingdom of God, and only at the end of the world does Jesus hand his kingdom back to his Father.

In nearly a third of the passages in which Jesus speaks about the kingdom of God, he's talking about his disciples, Christians, those Paul refers to as being 'in Christ.' They constitute the Church, the community that Jesus said he would build, and a much smaller group than the visible church, which includes adherents of all organizations that call themselves Christian. The amazing connection that Jesus taught concerning believers and the kingdom of God is that they are presently heirs of the kingdom, and they'll constitute the government when Jesus returns to reign.

Some mistakenly think that the kingdom of God is present in the world now. This comes from misunderstanding what the kingdom is all about. They equate the kingdom with the lordship of Christ or with the visible church, but a careful study of the "kingdom of God" verses shows that the kingdom of God is neither. My research offers an alternative. The verses that seem to indicate that the kingdom of God is present now can be explained in two ways: Firstly, in about a third of the verses, the kingdom of God, by metonymy, refers to the Messiah himself rather than his kingdom. The king was present but his kingdom was not. Secondly, another third of the verses refers to the disciples. As people from all nations are being born again of God's Spirit, the monarchy is building up to be a multitude of peoples. They are all children of God, and as such, they are heirs of the kingdom. So believers have already attained the kingship in the present, but as the reign has not yet started, they are called heirs of the kingdom. A remaining third of the "kingdom of God" verses are in a future context and refer to Jesus's rule on Earth after his return.

Jesus is presently on the throne in heaven with his Father, but there is a difference between the Father's heavenly throne and the Messiah's earthly throne. It is the latter that has to do with the kingdom of God as Jesus taught it. The Messianic reign cannot begin until Jesus returns. It is sad to hear preachers say that Jesus is ruling now when the world is characterized by war, corruption, greed, and immorality. It is also sad to hear preachers talk about building the kingdom, which results from equating the kingdom with the Church.

The primary meaning of kingdom is kingship, the royal authority held by the king and the monarchy, which will be expressed in a future reign. The

subjects and the domain do not have royal authority, so “kingdom of God” verses never relate to the kingdom’s subjects or its geographical area. It is a mistake to think of the kingdom of God in terms of geography or population.

## **The kingdom of God is not God’s sovereign rule**

Psalm 103:19 majestically states that God has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all. This cannot be denied, but the “kingdom of God” phrase we encounter in the NT does not have this meaning. How could Jesus talk about God’s kingdom coming, or Christians inheriting it, entering it, or being the greatest in it? It is the kingdom, or more accurately kingship, of the Son he loves (Col 1:13), not his own kingship.

The kingdom of God, τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ in NT Greek, is a genitive expression. The ‘of’ commonly indicates possession, but the Greek genitive is not only about possession. The general sense of the Greek genitive is that there is a close relationship between the two nouns involved, in this case, kingdom and God. There are many different meanings of the genitive, depending on the context, and apart from possession, the most common meaning is called the ablative, which indicates source or origin. God is the source of all things, so there are many ‘of God’ expressions in the Bible, for example, the peace of God, the joy of the Lord, and the Lamb of God. When you think about the meaning, it is not possessive; it is ablative; it is God who provides these things. The expressions ‘kingdom of God’ and ‘kingdom of heaven,’ as used by Jesus, are synonymous, and they are better expressed as ‘the kingdom from God’ and ‘the kingdom from heaven,’ thus the title of my book: *The Kingdom from God – unlocking the secrets*.

Whose kingdom are we talking about? The easy answer is God, but the right answer is Jesus. This will be amply illustrated when we look at the verses. The expression is not about God’s sovereignty.

He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingship of his beloved Son, in whom we are set free; our sins having been forgiven (Col 1:13-14).

## **The Jewish understanding of the kingdom of God**

Jesus was a Jew, and his ministry was almost exclusively to Jews. In the first century, the kingdom of God was an eschatological expression. When Jesus

proclaimed the kingdom to the Jews, he spoke about a subject that was dear to their hearts. Faithful Jews believed that at the end of this age, the Messiah would come and save Israel from their enemies. Simeon was at the temple when the baby Jesus was brought to be presented to the Lord. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit had revealed to him that he would see the Messiah before he died. Anna, an old widow, was also at the temple, speaking to people about the redemption of Jerusalem. Joseph of Arimathea was looking for the kingdom of God. The OT prophets unanimously taught the Jews that one day they would be regathered to their promised land of Israel and that there would be a glorious Messianic age in which the Messiah would rule over his people, Israel, and his rule would extend to the whole world.

The Dead Sea Scrolls give evidence of growth in Messianic expectations before Jesus arrived, and Jesus increased those expectations as he went from town to town proclaiming that the kingdom was at hand. In their minds, the kingdom was the Messianic kingdom their prophets had taught them to expect. Just before Jesus ascended to heaven, his disciples asked him whether at that time he would reestablish Israel's kingdom.

The meaning of the kingdom of God for Jesus and the Jews was clear. In addition, the OT prophets gave hundreds of prophecies about the Messiah and his return. They relate to Israel, their return to the land, their future conversion, and the Messiah's rule over them. Amillennialists spiritualize these prophecies, denying their literal fulfillment, because of their preconceived ideas about the nature of the kingdom developed over the centuries. The Reformers did great work in returning the Church to apostolic Christianity, but it is well known that they just accepted Augustine's long-standing, amillennial eschatology. There were anti-Semitic feelings at that time, which is reflected in older commentaries. They could not even envisage Israel being regathered and leading the world during Christ's reign.

All 142 occurrences of the kingdom of God phrase and its cognates in the NT relate to the Messianic kingship, and they are better interpreted and translated as 'the kingdom from God' or 'the kingdom from heaven.' God is the source of the kingdom, not the expected king. That is the role of his Son, the Messiah. God is sovereign over all, but the Jews saw the kingdom as earthly with the Messiah as the Jewish king.

The kingdom of God is not about heaven. It is a heavenly kingdom because it comes from heaven. Babylon and Rome were ungodly earthly kingdoms ruled by men from the Earth. By contrast, the Messiah's kingdom will be a godly kingdom ruled by a man from heaven. When Satan is finally expelled from heaven and thrown down to Earth, a loud voice in heaven proclaims that the salvation, power, and kingship from our God and the authority of his Messiah have come (Rev 12:10).

The kingdom of God is not primarily about the church, except in those verses where the phrase refers to Jesus's disciples. Jesus said he would build his Church, but he did not say that the kingdom was the Church or that he was king of the Church. In that context, he is Lord. Unfortunately, Augustine taught that the Church was the kingdom of God, and the Catholic Church has believed that ever since, and many preachers who talk about building the kingdom make the same mistake.

The kingdom of God is not about God's rule in our hearts. No Bible verse suggests this. The peace of Christ that rules in our hearts has nothing to do with the kingdom of God, and the mistranslated 'the kingdom of God is within you' is now generally recognized as being 'the kingdom of God is among you,' a metonym for the Messiah.

## **Three different meanings of the kingdom of God**

There is a progression of meaning of the "kingdom of God" phrase in the NT. The basic meaning relates to kingship, which is exercised by the king and the monarchy and expressed in the Messianic reign. In the Gospels, Jesus often used the expression 'the kingdom of God' or 'the kingdom of heaven' to refer obliquely to himself as the Messiah, just as he referred to himself as the 'Son of Man.' He was preaching in a sensitive political situation and could not be explicit about his identity. Israel was under Roman control, and anyone encouraging rebellion or aspiring to rule was quickly put down. Jesus could not make clear public announcements that he was the Jewish Messiah, so he taught in parables and explained them to his disciples because they were allowed to understand the secrets of the kingdom of God, but others were not. He used cryptic expressions like 'the Son of Man' and 'the kingdom of God' to disguise who he was. For the same reason, he told the people he healed not to publicize their healing.

When Jesus went public, his main aim was to give his Jewish audience a clue that the awaited Messiah had arrived and that they needed to repent. The kingdom had not arrived, but the king had arrived inconspicuously, not the way they had expected. Jesus used a figure of speech called metonymy, where an attribute is used instead of the real thing. When we give taxes to the crown, the crown stands for the king. A turf club is a horse-racing club because the turf is an important part of it. When the Jews heard someone preaching about the kingdom of heaven/God, they would immediately think about the Messiah coming. For them, the kingdom of God was the promised Messianic kingdom. Jesus was giving them an announcement that the Messiah had arrived, and if they were spiritual and knew the Scriptures, they would understand that. His statement had nothing to do with God's sovereignty. An abstract concept like kingship is not something that can be near or at hand, and the Messianic kingdom did not arrive then and has not arrived since. Jesus was born king of the Jews, but his time to reign is still in the future. Some say the kingdom was present in Jesus's person, but metonymy is a better explanation. Jesus did not reign during his first coming, and the Bible does not tell us that he is reigning, even now. It is only after the blowing of the seventh trumpet heralding Jesus's return that voices in heaven will say: The world kingdom has become the kingdom of our Lord and his Messiah and he'll reign forever ... you have taken your great power and have begun to reign (Rev 11:15, 17).

In the Gospels, 42 references to the "kingdom of God" phrase and its cognates relate to the Messiah. Taking parallel passages and duplication into consideration, this can be reduced to 24 different occasions. Jesus used the "kingdom of God" phrase to speak about himself. It was he who was near, not the kingdom.

55 kingdom passages refer to the Messianic kingship. The kingship is taken away from Israel and given to a people who will produce its fruit, the true Church. They enter this kingship by being born again and becoming heirs of the future reign. Jesus confers a kingdom on them, just as his Father conferred a kingdom on him. These passages are nearly all from the Gospels.

Finally, 45 passages, especially from Acts to Revelation, relate to the future Messianic rule. It is these passages that provide details about the returning Messiah, the monarchy, and their reign.

## The gospel of the kingdom

When one has a true understanding of the kingdom of God, it brings new light to so much of the teaching of the NT. The gospel (good news) that Jesus preached was not the same as the gospel that Paul preached. Paul said he was not ashamed of the gospel because it was the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. It was about faith in Jesus and forgiveness of sins. But Jesus was preaching before the cross, and he preached the gospel of the kingdom of God. His good news was that the Messiah had arrived. That was all. As to the Messianic reign, that would have to wait until the Son of Man comes in his glory with all his angels and sits on his glorious throne.

The gospel, as originally preached by Jesus, had the connotation of good news from God, and in the minds of his Jewish audience, the 'good news' meant the coming of the Messiah to reign (Isa 40:9-10) and salvation for Israel (Isa 52:7). Jesus quoted Isaiah 61:1 and applied it to himself, saying the Spirit of the Lord was upon him because the Lord had appointed him *to bring good news* to the poor. And he told them that the Scripture was fulfilled as they heard it (Lk 4:21). The good news was that the Messiah had arrived. It was not yet time to speak about the cross we usually associate with the gospel. The expression 'gospel of the kingdom' occurs seven times in the NT. It was the essence of Jesus's message. He went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming *the gospel of the kingdom* (Mt 4:23). Speaking to the Pharisees one day Jesus said the Law and the Prophets were until John, but since then, *the good news about the kingdom of God* was being proclaimed and everyone entering it was under attack (Lk 16:16 ISV).

The implication was that one day Jesus would reign on Earth. During the week before the crucifixion, he spoke to his disciples about world evangelism and he continued to speak in terms of the gospel of the kingdom when he said: This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come (Mt 24:14).

The gospel of salvation through faith, which promised the Jews entry into the Messianic kingship, would become the gospel of salvation through faith in the crucified Messiah, which promises people of all nations entry into the same kingship. When Philip went to Samaria, he told people about the Messiah. Crowds listened intently to him and they believed and were

baptized, as he proclaimed the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus the Messiah (Acts 8:12). He was not talking to them about the church or heaven but about the Messiah, who would one day return to rule the Earth with his followers.

The good news about Jesus is, first and foremost, that he is the promised Messiah who will one day rule the world. His power and authority come from God. He heals the sick and drives out evil spirits. He died on the cross so that the sins of those who believe in him might be forgiven. His message is for people of all nations. He rose from the dead and assures us that we also will rise from among the dead to reign with him in our resurrected bodies. When believers are born again of God's Spirit, they become God's children and heirs of the kingship. Their sins are forgiven, and they have peace with God. These are the things that Jesus taught. Most of his parables are about the kingdom from God. His teaching on the kingdom portrays the big picture of the will and purpose of God for the world.

The kingdom of God terminology is used throughout the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 8:12, 19:8, 20:25-27, 28:23, 31). It is not just teaching about a man named Jesus, but a man named Jesus, who as the Jewish Messiah, would fulfill all the OT prophecies about himself. Since the Reformation, the Church has been preaching the gospel according to Paul, and rightly so, but what happened to the gospel according to Jesus, which was about the Messiah and his rule on Earth, and the rule of Christians who receive adoption to sonship and become heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ? That has been largely ignored.

## **Is the kingdom of God present now?**

**The King** in the kingdom of God is the Messiah. A kingdom cannot be present without the king reigning or at least a regent. The kingdom of God is not yet present because Jesus is in heaven, where he *waits* for his enemies to be made his footstool (Heb 10:13). No Scripture portrays Jesus as presently reigning on Earth. In many of the "kingdom of God" verses, Jesus referred to himself as the Messiah, and some people have wrongly concluded that the kingdom was present. "Repent for the kingdom of God has come near" (Mt 3:2). "If it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Mt 12:28). This is metonymy; the "kingdom of God" represents the king who was present.

**The domain** gives us the geographical extent of the kingdom. At the blowing of the seventh trumpet at the end of the age, loud voices in heaven declare: The *world* kingdom has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he'll reign forever and ever (Rev 11:15). Verse 17 adds: You've taken your great power and *have begun to reign*. Jesus is the Son of God and shares God's reign over the universe, but the Messianic kingdom involves sovereignty over the whole world and will not be established until Christ returns. Only then will he reign from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the Earth (Ps 72:8). Only then will kings bow down before him and all nations serve him (Ps 72:11). Jesus said: Blessed are the meek for they'll inherit *the Earth*, and: Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Mt 5:5, 10).

The monarchy can't rule without their king; they can't rule until the Messiah returns. The monarchy is being formed now during the Church age. Through the new birth, believers enter the kingship. They are royal family. Being children of God is a present status and believers are presently only *heirs*, as is the Messiah (Rom 8:17). Jesus is also depicted as an heir of the kingdom in the parable of the tenants (Mt 21:38). In the parable of the sheep and the goats, when the Son of Man comes and sits on his glorious throne, he invites the righteous to come and inherit the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world (Mt 25:34). That is when they enter the reign.

In conclusion, the kingdom of God is the Messianic kingdom, which originates in God. It is the future reign over the Earth by the Messiah and the his royal family, which consists of God's adopted sons, those who believe in Jesus and are sealed by the Holy Spirit.