

## 4. WHEN ‘KINGDOM OF GOD’ MEANS MESSIAH

*If I'm exorcising demons by the power of God, then the kingdom of God (i.e. the Messiah) has come to you (Lk 11:20).*

### **Metonymy**

When Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God in a present context, he often spoke about himself. This is a figure of speech called metonymy; the substitution of the name of an attribute for that of the thing meant. For example, the crown for the monarch, turf for horse racing, the golden arches for McDonalds, or the White House for the US government. In this case, the word ‘kingdom’ is a substitute for the king.

When John the Baptist and Jesus called Israel to repentance, the reason they gave was that the kingdom of God was near. As you can't have a kingdom without a king, what they said was, for security reasons, a coded way of saying that the Messiah himself was near. Below are the verses where the expression ‘kingdom of God’ is best interpreted as a substitute for the Messiah. Read the following verses while interpreting ‘kingdom of heaven’ or ‘kingdom of God’ as ‘the Messiah’ and you will find that it makes more sense. A kingdom can't exist without a throne, a territory, and a population, none of which existed during Jesus' time on Earth, and even now. The significant thing was that he, the Messiah, was there.

#### **1. Repent - the Messiah is near**

Repent, for the kingship from heaven (the Messiah) is near (Mt 3:2).

From that time, Jesus began to preach, saying: Repent, for the kingship from heaven (the Messiah) is near (Mt 4:17).

After John's arrest, Jesus departed to Galilee, proclaiming good news from God. The time is fulfilled, he said, the kingship from God (the Messiah) is near. Repent and believe the good news (Mk 1:14-15).

One thing is clear. The kingdom did not appear at that time and has not appeared since. Despite what some theologians say, the kingdom has never been inaugurated. Some say the kingdom came near to people in the person of Jesus. No, Jesus was near, but his kingdom was not. Metonymy is a better solution that can be applied not only to this verse but all the verses where the word 'kingdom' points to the Messiah. Jesus began his ministry in Judea and preached to Jews who prayed for the prophesied Messiah to come. He was that Messiah but he could not travel around proclaiming the fact openly. He spoke in parables and used cryptic expressions like 'kingdom of God' and 'Son of Man' to disguise his identity. Using metonymy, he was proclaiming to the Jews that the Messiah was near, right there among them. At the same time, he didn't want unbelievers to understand, so he spoke about himself with ambiguity. 'The kingdom of God' could be understood as either the Messiah or the Messianic reign, while his healings, exorcisms, and teachings were evidence of his authority.

## **2. Jesus' proclamation of the Messiah's arrival**

Jesus travelled throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom (the Messiah), and healing people from every kind of sickness and disability (Mt 4:23).

But he said to them: I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom from God (the Messiah) in the other towns also because that is why God sent me. And he kept on preaching in the Judean synagogues (Lk 4:43-44).

After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, preaching and proclaiming the good news about the kingdom from heaven (the Messiah) (Lk 8:1).

The crowds realized this and followed him. He welcomed them and spoke to them about the kingdom from heaven (the Messiah) and healed those who needed healing (Lk 9:11).

Jesus' healings and miracles got the attention of people. As Nicodemus said: Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. No one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him. News that the Messiah had arrived was wonderful news

for the oppressed Jews who were hoping for the vindication of Israel and a reign of peace, righteousness, and prosperity. The gospel that Jesus announced was the gospel of the kingdom from God: the good news that the promised Messiah had arrived. There could be no kingdom without him. Jesus quoted Isaiah 61:1 in the synagogue at Nazareth and applied it to himself: The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is upon me because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners. Jesus wasn't telling them that the kingdom had arrived. It was evident to everyone that it had not. His Jewish audience could never believe the kingdom from God had arrived while being ruled by the Romans.

### **3. Seek the Messiah first**

But seek first his kingdom (the Messiah) and how he causes people to be right with him, and all these things will be given to you as well (Mt 6:33).

But seek his kingdom (the Messiah), and all these things will be given to you (Lk 12:31).

When Jesus told the Jews to seek the kingdom from God and his righteousness, what was he telling them to seek? Not the church or the Messianic reign that did not exist yet. Jesus was telling the crowds not to be anxious about their lives. There is more to life than eating and drinking and clothes. The answer to their problems is found when they seek and believe in the Messiah who would give them the right to become God's children and come under his loving provision. Unbelievers are concerned about many things, but God-fearers should first seek to know the Messiah and the glorious royal future that characterizes their glorification. In finding him, they'll have everything. Entering God's kingdom is entering into a relationship with God through Jesus and being part of his eternal reign.

### **4. The disciples' proclamation of the Messiah's arrival**

Go and preach, saying: The kingdom from heaven (the Messiah) is near (Mt 10:7).

The message Jesus' disciples were instructed to proclaim was the same message that he was proclaiming: The Messiah had come near.

The verb can indicate the nearness of location or time, but as the kingdom has still not appeared 2000 years later, the sense must have been locational, pointing to Jesus, who was nearby.

## **5. The Messiah is mistreated**

From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom from heaven (the Messiah) has been subjected to violence, and violent people have been raiding it (attacking him) (Mt 11:12).

Scholars have found this verse difficult to translate and interpret. It is difficult to comprehend how the Messianic kingship could be subjected to violence and raided. But certainly, Jesus was subjected to violence and attacked by the Jewish leaders (Jn 6:15). Cf. Lk 16:16 where the monarchy is mistreated.

## **6. Exorcisms evidence the Messiah's presence**

As it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, know that the kingdom from heaven (the Messiah) has come upon you (Mt 12:28).

As I drive out demons by the finger of God, know that the kingdom from heaven (the Messiah) has come upon you (Lk 11:20).

This was Jesus' response to skeptics in the crowd who accused him of casting out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons. He tells them, albeit cryptically, that he is the Messiah who has come to them. A kingdom or kingship cannot come upon people, but Jesus did. He was not talking about the church coming to them. Only metonymy makes sense of his statement.

## **7. Satan opposes the preaching about the Messiah**

When someone hears the message about the kingship (from God) and doesn't understand it, Satan comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart (Mt 13:19).

Jesus is explaining the parable of the sower. The sower teaches the message about the kingdom, or better, the kingship, and more specifically, the Messianic kingship. People respond in different ways.

The majority are distracted for various reasons and do not embrace it, but some seed falls on good soil and these bear fruit.

So is the word of my mouth; it won't be spoken in vain. It'll accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which it was sent (Isa 55:11).

## **8. The parable of the hidden treasure**

The kingdom from heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When someone discovered it, he covered it up again and, in his joy, went and sold all that he had and bought that field (Mt 13:44).

The treasure is the Messiah. What could be better than discovering Jesus? When people come to know him, they realize he is priceless and are prepared to surrender all they possess and follow him. Like Paul, they count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ and being found in him (Php 3:7-8).

## **9. The parable of the pearl**

Again, the kingdom from heaven is like a merchant who was looking for fine pearls. When he found an expensive one, he went and sold everything he had and bought it (Mt 13:45-46).

This is similar to the previous parable. What these men find is the Messiah himself and the status that results from receiving him (Jn 1:12). They become God's children and constitute the monarchy during the Messiah's reign. This is truly the greatest treasure one could find. The kingship from God is priceless, an eternal treasure that can't be compared with any other possession. Only faith enables people to surrender everything they have, but in doing so, they will be glorified at the resurrection, ruling the world and possessing everything.

## **10. The Messianic rabbi**

He said to them: When a rabbi has been instructed in the kingship from heaven, he is like a householder who brings new and old treasures out of his storeroom (Mt 13:52).

Any rabbi instructed in Messianic matters, as Jesus's disciples were, can now teach with new insights into God's word, both from the old and new covenants.

### **11. Jesus' royal power exhibited at the transfiguration**

I tell you the truth, some standing here will not die until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom (Mt 16:28).

This passage is a riddle for most readers. The disciples died and where is the kingdom they would see coming? In the previous verse, Jesus spoke about the Messiah coming with his angels in the glory of his Father. What he is promising here is not that they would see the Messianic reign before they die, but a manifestation of his royal power as the glorified Messiah.

And he said to them: I tell you the truth, some standing here will not die until they see the kingdom from heaven come with power (Mk 9:1).

I tell you the truth, some standing here will not die until they see the kingdom from God (Lk 9:27).

You cannot see a kingdom coming. What some disciples would see is the Messiah coming in his majestic glory, as Matthew makes clear. Matthew speaks of the Son of Man coming, whereas Mark and Luke speak of the kingdom of God, which supports my thesis that Jesus used the phrase 'kingdom of God' as a metonym for himself as the Messiah. Peter confirmed that Jesus's promise was fulfilled at the transfiguration, which happened a week later. He said that they (Peter, James, and John) were eyewitnesses of Jesus' majesty when he received honor and glory from God when he said: This is my Son, whom I love, with him I am well pleased. They heard the voice that came from heaven when they were with him on the sacred mountain (2 Pet 1:16-18). God said: This is my Son, alluding to Ps 2:6-7 which says: I've installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain. I'll proclaim the Lord's decree about me. He said: You are my son, today I have become your father. 'Son' in this context means 'regent.'

### **12. Some choose celibacy for the Messiah's sake**

Some eunuchs were born that way, and some were castrated by others, and some people choose to live like eunuchs for the

sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who can accept this accept it (Mt 19:12).

When a Christian chooses to live a celibate life, he does it for Jesus' sake rather than for the kingdom. The unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs – how he can please the Lord (1 Cor 7:32).

### **13. Awaiting the kingdom means awaiting the Messiah**

Joseph of Arimathea was a prominent member of the Jewish Council who was waiting for the kingdom from heaven to come. Being bold, he went to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body (Mk 15:43).

Now there was a man named Joseph, a member of the Council, a good and upright man, who had not consented to their decision and action. He came from the Judean town of Arimathea and was waiting for the kingdom from God (Lk 23:50-51).

The Gospel writers, not Jesus, spoke these words, yet they expressed the same metonymy, which was no doubt common among the Jews. Many faithful Jews, like Joseph of Arimathea, were waiting for the Messiah to come.

### **14. Only Jesus' disciples understand the Messianic mysteries**

Jesus said: God has given you the right to know the mysteries of the kingship from God but to others I speak in parables so that they look without seeing and hear without understanding (Lk 8:10).

In Matthew 13, Jesus teaches the crowds many parables that relate mainly to the Messianic monarchy, not to their future inheritance, but to their initial response to the news about the Messiah, the growth of the community, and their eventual salvation. After telling the parable of the sower, the disciples ask why he speaks in parables. He answered that these secrets or mysteries were for them to know and understand but not for others. His disciples are blessed because they see, hear, and understand that he is the Messiah, and as his disciples, they become fruitful. Many prophets and righteous people longed to see the Messiah and hear his teaching, but they did not have that opportunity.

## 15. Disciples sent to proclaim the Messiah

Then he sent them to proclaim the kingdom from heaven and to heal the sick (Lk 9:2).

Jesus said to him: Let the dead bury their own dead. As for you, go and proclaim the kingdom from heaven (Lk 9:60).

Jesus told his disciples to proclaim the kingdom of God, and Luke says that they were evangelizing and healing people everywhere (Lc 9:6). They were announcing the good news that the Messiah was around and their healings were evidence of his healing power (Isa 35:5-6, Lk 7:22).

Let those who are spiritually dead bury their own. Christians are God's servants, and their primary responsibility is to bear witness to their Lord. The enquirer wanted to bury his father first, which probably meant that he did not feel free to follow Jesus while his father was still alive. Jesus knew if he did not respond then and there, the opportunity might be gone.

Heal the sick who are there and tell them the kingdom from God has come near them. ... Even the dust of your town we wipe from our feet as a warning to you. Just understand that the kingdom from God (the Messiah) came near (Lk 10:9, 11).

Jesus sent his disciples ahead to places that he would come to so that they would inform people that the Messiah was around. Healing the sick was a Messianic activity that gave credence to their proclamation. It was the Messiah who was near, not his kingdom. For the Jews to accept that the kingdom of God had arrived, they would first want to know who the new king was.

The Pharisees asked Jesus when the kingdom from heaven was coming, and he replied saying: The coming of the kingdom from God is not seen by observation. People won't say, here it is or there it is. Look, the kingdom from God (the Messiah) is among you (Lk 17:20-21).

An early NIV version read, the kingdom of God is within you, which encouraged the misunderstanding that God's kingdom can be in people or their hearts. Unless the kingdom of God is interpreted as a metonym for the Messiah, this verse is difficult to understand. He was

telling the Pharisees that the Messiah was already among them. A kingdom cannot be in a person or among people. No scripture teaches that, especially in this context where Jesus is talking to Pharisees. As he was there among them, his coming could not be observed. They should not be looking for signs of the Messiah's coming, as will be seen at the second coming. Some like to interpret the kingdom of God as God's rule in a person's life, but no Scripture teaches that. Misunderstanding verses like this has caused many Bible scholars to teach that the kingdom of God has already been inaugurated. Jesus is coming back to reign, but his reign has not started. If so, where is his throne? Where is the righteousness and peace that will characterize his reign?

## **16. People making sacrifices for the Messiah will be rewarded**

I'm telling you the truth, Jesus said to them, no one who has left home or wife or brothers or sisters or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom from heaven will receive much in this present age, and in the coming age, eternal life (Lk 18:29-30).

Parallel passages (Mt 19:29, Mk 10:29) have 'for my sake' instead of 'for the sake of the kingdom of God,' supporting the argument for metonymy. Jesus is the reason why people make such sacrifices to serve him, not his kingdom. Faithful servants are rewarded here during this lifetime, and they will be rewarded again in the age to come with eternal life when they rule the nations with the Messiah.

## **The coming of the king(dom)**

Most of the messianic prophecies of the OT focus on the promised Messiah. Daniel focuses on the kingdom because Nebuchadnezzar's dream and his own visions were about the kingdoms of this world and the final world kingdom, which would be given to the saints to rule (Dan 7:27).

When John the Baptist began preaching in the wilderness, he told people to repent because the kingdom of God was near (Mt 3:2). By metonymy, the word 'kingdom' represents the king. It was the king (the Messiah) who was near! Jesus said that if he drove out demons by the Spirit of God, that was evidence that the kingdom of God had come

to them (Mt 12:28). It was a veiled way of saying that he, the king appointed by God, had come to them. At the end of his ministry, when Jesus knew it was time for him to be condemned as the king of the Jews, he publicly declared before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, that he was indeed a king.

When we pray for God's kingdom to come (Mt 6:10), we are praying for the Messiah to come and establish his kingdom, the kingdom of God. Only when Jesus comes to reign on earth will God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. He will rule the whole world and bring in an era of justice, righteousness, and peace that the world has never known. In praying that prayer, we are praying for all that must necessarily happen before the Messiah returns, including the evangelization of the nations.

Postmillennialists believe something different. They think that Jesus will return after the millennium. For them, it is the gospel that will change the world and bring in an era of peace and righteousness. The gospel *will* be preached in all the world and millions of people *will* be gloriously saved and transformed, but history shows us that the gospel doesn't change the world. Governments, by and large, are godless and are characterized by pride, greed, and corruption. The problem is that the whole world lies under the power of the evil one (1 Jn 5:19). How can we have a millennium while Satan is so active? The book of Revelation teaches that the world's history will culminate in the Great Tribulation and the rule of a satanically inspired Antichrist, resulting in God's judgment of the ungodly at the battle of Armageddon and the pouring out of his wrath on a godless world. It is out of the night and darkness of that time that the Morning Star will arise to usher in a kingdom of righteousness and peace.

The Messiah was predicted long ago. He is the king appointed by God to rule the earth. When looking at 'kingdom of God' passages, the precise meaning becomes clear if you ask yourself if the passage is talking about Jesus, his disciples, or his future reign.

Paul exhorted the Colossians to let the peace of Christ rule in their hearts (Col 3:15). He is talking about the 'peace' that Christ gives them, something quite different from saying that God rules in them, or in their hearts.

When Jesus told his disciples (Mt 26:29) that he would never again drink the product of the vine until the day when he would drink it with them once again in his Father's kingdom, he was saying that he wouldn't drink it again until the messianic kingdom which comes from the Father, is manifested. The parallel passage in Luke 22:18 says, until the kingdom of God comes. In other words, when Jesus returns to earth as the Messiah. This feast is not in some imaginary kingdom in heaven; it will take place here on earth when Jesus confers kingship on his followers so that they might eat and drink with him at his royal table and sit on thrones governing Israel (Lk 22:30). This feast should not be spiritualized. Jesus said he would drink wine once again when his kingdom was consummated. Isaiah was the first to describe this feast, saying: On this mountain, the Lord will prepare for all peoples a banquet of rich food, tender meat, and well-aged wines (Isa 25:6). The mountain is Mt Zion and Jerusalem where the Lord Almighty will reign with great glory in the presence of his governmental leaders (Isa 24:23).

In a present context, the kingdom of God often refers to the King himself. As a kingdom is a subordinate adjunct of the king; the kingdom is present in his person. The Messiah is the embodiment of the kingdom. That is the significance of metonymy. That is why Jesus could say: the kingdom of God is near, the kingdom of God is among you, or the kingdom of God has arrived. Verses like Luke 22:16-18 teach that the promise of the kingdom awaits future fulfillment.

The criminal on the cross asked Jesus to remember him when he came into his kingdom (Lk 23:42). He had faith in Jesus as the promised Jewish Messiah. This verse has been variously translated as, 'when you come to your throne' (New English Bible), 'when you come as King' (Good News Bible), or 'when you come to reign' (Moffatt). The basic meaning of kingdom is kingship or royal rule, so any of those translations is valid.

The kingdom of God, by extension, also refers to the royalty, or the wider ruling class, as will be explained in the following chapter. Christians entering the kingdom of God enter the monarchy, the government in Messiah's kingdom. The kingship is given to them, conferred upon them. As children of God, they inherit it. They will participate in the future messianic reign. That is why Jesus said that he

would share his throne with those who conquer, just as he conquered and shared his Father's throne (Rev 3:21).

John the Baptist proclaimed that the kingdom of God was near (Mt 3:2). In its commentary, the NIV study Bible definition of the kingdom of God is typical of current ideas that result in misunderstanding of what the kingdom of God is about. It says:

The kingdom from heaven began when God himself entered human history as a man. Today Jesus the Messiah reigns in the hearts of believers, but the kingdom from heaven will not be fully realized until all evil in the world is judged and removed.

This is an amillennial statement and all three of these statements are open to challenge. The Messiah arrived when Jesus was born, but his reign did not begin during his life on earth. No Bible verse teaches that or that he reigns in the hearts of believers. The kingdom of God is a political concept, not a spiritual one, and it will not be established until the Messiah returns to earth. A vast army of evildoers will be judged and removed upon his arrival at the battle of Armageddon and other opponents will be removed during his reign. The final enemy, death, and Satan also won't be removed until the very end of his 1000-year reign.

The mistaken view that the kingdom of God is God's reign in our hearts is lamentable. The only verse that comes close to supporting this view is Lk 17:21 which says that 'the kingdom of God is within you' (NIV 1973). The footnote suggests 'among you' and most modern translations follow that interpretation. The New American Standard Version (NASB) has 'in your midst', the New Living Translation (NLT) 'is already among you', and the NIV (2011) was changed to, 'in your midst'. This is metonymy. It was Jesus who was in their midst, not the kingdom. In the next verse, following the discussion about the coming of the kingdom of God, he tells the disciples the time is coming when they will long to see to one of the days of the Son of Man, but they won't see it. People will say, he's here or there, but the Son of Man in his day (when he returns) will be like lightning which flashes and lights up the sky from one end to the other. That is how the kingdom of God will come!

A major thesis of this book is that the kingdom of God should not be spiritualized; it is a literal, political, earthly kingdom, the Messiah's future reign. Any teaching suggesting that the kingdom of God is God's rule in our hearts, or that the kingdom of God is a present reality in the church, has no scriptural foundation. What is significant about the present time is that God is secretly at work through the preaching of his word, calling out people for himself from all corners of the world. People are entering the monarchy right now. They are born again into God's family as heirs of the Earth and the creation is waiting in eager expectation for these children of God's to be revealed (Rom 8:19).