

## The Relation of Jesus to the Kingdom of God in the Present

Having surveyed some of the dominical sayings and parables concerning the kingdom in the ministry of Jesus, we would now do well to assess their implications for the relation of Jesus to that kingdom. Of course, we can do this only in a provisional way; no such assessment would be thorough that failed to take into account his statements concerning the future of the kingdom. On the other hand, these statements about the future of the kingdom present certain problems peculiar to themselves, problems that can be resolved only through a consideration of the relation of Jesus to the present kingdom. There is no simple escape from this vicious circle; for want of a better alternative, we will simply proceed to investigate the relation of Jesus to the kingdom of God come in the "present" (i.e., the "present" of his ministry) on the basis of the material we considered in Chapter 10.

We have seen that certain sayings depict the kingdom of God as operative in powerful *acts* of Jesus that bring liberation from evil forces (Matt. 12:28) and healing to men's bodies (Matt. 11:5). Other sayings, such as the sermon in Nazareth (Luke 4:18–21) and the summary of Jesus' preaching in Mark 1:15, imply that the kingdom becomes effective in the *word* of Jesus. In some passages (e.g., Matt. 11:5 and 13:6–7), the deeds and word of Jesus are linked as complementary indications of the presence of the kingdom. Luke 17:20–21 and Mark 4:11–12 suggest that the *totality* of the action and speech of Jesus signifies the presence of the kingdom. The parables reflect the relation of the present kingdom to Jesus in a variety of ways: the parable of the Strong Man Bound presents the kingdom in the action of Jesus, the parable of the Great Feast presents the kingdom in the proclamation of Jesus, the parable of the Bridegroom and his Friends gives a picture of the kingdom in the table fellowship of Jesus, and the parables of growth assume the kingdom to have been initiated in the ministry of Jesus generally. Our task is to define the role of Jesus in relation to the kingdom of God so as to do justice to all this varied evidence.

Otto solved the problem by assuming that in the parable of the Strong Man Bound, the figure described as the Stronger than the Strong is God, whose victory over Satan in heaven (see Rev. 12:9) was witnessed by Jesus in a vision—"I saw Satan fall from heaven like lightning" (Luke 10:18). Otto proceeded to deduce that Jesus was borne on the tidal wave of that victory in his proclamation and action, and thus that the saying "clearly presupposed that Christ did not himself bring the kingdom of God, but that his own appearance was actually only a result of the fact that the kingdom had already come, that the powers of this kingdom were working in him and through him, but in such a way that he

himself was part and parcel of this in-breaking entity of the kingdom, which was superior even to him." Thus Otto formulated his famous dictum: "It is not Jesus who brings the kingdom. . . . On the contrary, the kingdom brings him with it."<sup>1</sup>

Clearly, however, the exposition of the parable on which Otto bases his thesis is implausible—and thus the opposition posed in the epigram is equally doubtful. Let us freely recognize that the last thing anyone would assert of Jesus is that he acted or spoke in conscious independence of God. If we bear in mind the fact that Jesus understood the kingdom of God to consist primarily in God's acting in salvation and judgment, then it will be quite apparent that he was indeed "borne along" by God's sovereign action in his ministry. It is axiomatic that Jesus does not lead God but rather that God sends, guides, empowers, and sustains him. Nevertheless, as the gospel records witness, Jesus exploited to the full the authority committed to him. It was precisely his *exousia* that first impressed his contemporaries. If it astonished them to hear him use the formula "It was said to them of old time . . . but I say to you" with respect to the law of God, it was no less astonishing to hear him declare "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" with respect to the promise of the kingdom (Luke 4:21). Such a declaration would scarcely have been countenanced had it not been matched by equally impressive and telling deeds. The relation of Jesus to the kingdom of God is such that no single formula can do justice to it. We will do well to adopt a fuller vocabulary to represent its nature. In this respect, precision of language is less important than the fullness of significance that Jesus' words imply.

The parable of the Strong Man in Mark 3:27 depicts Jesus as the *Champion*, or *Contender for the kingdom of God*, who by virtue of his conquest of Satan rescues those held under the Evil One's thralldom. Luke 10:18 may conceivably extend this rescue function to the disciples associated with him in his mission.

We can assume that the role of *Initiator of the kingdom* of the last days belongs to Jesus in association with John the Baptist in the saying Matthew 11:12. John serves as a bridge between the period of law and the prophets and the period of the kingdom, but the kingdom is operative in Jesus in a fuller sense than it is in John. The parables of growth point in a similar direction, implying as they do that a decisive beginning of the divine sovereignty has taken place in the word and work of Jesus.

In the exorcism saying, Matthew 12:28, we see Jesus as the *Instrument of the kingdom*; it is by the "finger of God"—the powerful working of the Spirit of God—that Jesus performs the liberating acts of the divine sovereignty.

In Luke 17:20–21 it is not unfitting to see Jesus as the *Representative of the kingdom of God*. Had the interlocutors of Jesus recognized the nature of his ministry, they would not have needed to ask when the kingdom of God was to come.

In various passages Jesus is depicted as the *Mediator of the kingdom* and its blessings. This is notably the case in the parable of the Bridegroom and his Friends (Mark 2:18–19), since it is the presence of the Bridegroom that gives the character of wedding festival to the present and mediates to others the fellowship of the royal feast. It is little more than a matter of preference whether

we use the term Mediator or *Bearer of the Kingdom of God* to signify Jesus as he is referred to in Matthew 11:5, with mention of his healing and transfiguring powers.

Again, we need take but a short step to speak of him as *Revealer of the Kingdom* in such passages as Matthew 13:16–17, for example. Certainly that concept is present in Matthew 11:25–26 // Luke 10:21–22 and the related passage of Mark 4:11–12. In the parables of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Prodigal Son, Jesus makes reference to the fact that he associates with the lost souls of society in order to grant them the opportunity to experience the saving sovereignty of heaven; in the course of defending himself against the criticism he received for doing so, he depicts the ways of *God*—and yet the very contours of these parables reflect the ways of *Jesus*. Along these lines, Fuchs has observed that “We are confronted by a very daring line of conduct on the part of Jesus: he dares to affirm the will of God as though he himself stood in God’s place.”<sup>2</sup> Jesus’ self-defense thus constitutes a revelation of God in his sovereignty. This being the case, we find in the conclusion of Jesus’ message to John the Baptist the ultimate word on his relation to the kingdom of God: “Happy is the man who does not find me a stumbling block” (Matt. 11:6). To recognize in Jesus the Revelation of the kingdom is to find the way into the kingdom, while to stumble over the truth of his person is to stumble into ruin.

What name, then, shall we give to him whose role in the operation of the divine sovereignty is so crucial? In his teaching on the kingdom of God, Jesus portrays himself as Champion of the kingdom, Initiator of the kingdom, Instrument of the kingdom, Representative of the kingdom, Mediator of the kingdom, Bearer of the kingdom, Revealer of the kingdom. These names have been coined on his behalf—Jesus claimed none of them for himself—and yet they are demanded by his words. What then of the ancient and honorable title of Messiah? Jesus did not claim this title either in any of the passages we have considered. Nevertheless, if it is the case that the sayings of Jesus lead us to postulate his functions relative to the kingdom represented by those terms, do not those sayings and functions indicate that he *assumed* for himself the function of Messiah? This is a point of no small controversy. The voice of critical scholarship either trails off into silence or becomes strident over it.<sup>3</sup> In the end, however, we are compelled to say Yes for the simplest of reasons.

In Jewish literature generally, the relation of the Messiah to the divine sovereignty is ambiguous. The Old Testament presents the Messiah not as the agent through whom the kingdom comes, but rather as the agent of the kingdom after God has established it. In some apocalyptic writings the Messiah has a role in the coming of the kingdom, but the function that Jesus assigns to himself in relation to the kingdom goes well beyond anything said of the Messiah in the Old Testament or in the apocalyptic and rabbinic teaching of his day. Since we would do well to have a term to denote the manifold function of Jesus with respect to the kingdom of God, and since the title *Messiah* is the acknowledged umbrella term to denote the representative of the kingdom, it is difficult to avoid appropriating it for Jesus. It might be argued that the term is insufficient to convey *all* that he is in relation to the kingdom of God, but if that is so, then certainly nothing *less* than that will do to describe him.

# 11 Sayings of Jesus on the Coming of the Kingdom of God in the Future

## 1. THE DISCIPLES’ PRAYER *Matthew 6:9–13, Luke 11:2–4*

Of the two forms of the prayer taught by Jesus to his disciples, the Matthaean is the longer, and far better known through its use in the churches. Since it is unlikely that anyone would have further abbreviated the very short prayer taught by Jesus, and since liturgical texts tend to be expanded through use, it is generally agreed that Luke’s version is original in its *extent*, whereas a comparison of the two texts suggests that Matthew’s is more original in its *wording*.<sup>1</sup> Many scholars contend that the shorter version of the prayer in Luke was expanded to the form in Matthew through the addition of elements of prayer used by Jesus.<sup>2</sup> We can be almost certain that the existence of the two versions is not attributable to editing by the evangelists, however; both forms of the prayer easily revert into Aramaic, in which language they exhibit both rhythm and rhyme—a highly unusual feature, which Jesus’ prayer shares with the daily prayer of the Jews, the Tefillah.<sup>3</sup> This would indicate that Matthew and Luke have preserved for us versions of the prayer that were being used in different Christian communities of their day. In keeping with his conviction that the sermon in Matthew 5–7 represents an early pre- or post-baptismal catechism for Jewish Christians and that the version in Luke 6 represents such a catechism for Gentile Christians,<sup>4</sup> Jeremias argues that the versions of the prayer in Matthew and Luke belong to Jewish Christian and Gentile Christian catechisms on prayer, respectively (even though the prayer appearing in Luke is not included in the great sermon).<sup>5</sup> Our consideration of the prayer will of course be conditioned by our interest in the light it sheds on Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom of God.

As background to our study of the prayer, we should note its significant relationship to the Kaddish, the ancient Aramaic doxology that was used to end Jewish synagogue services, which reads as follows:

Magnified and sanctified be his great name  
in the world which he has created according to his will.