

MY KINGDOM IS NOT OF THIS WORLD (JN 18:36)

What We Can Learn about Jesus From the Historical Background of His Teaching on the 'Kingdom of God'

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Abstract

The Kingdom of God is a key theme in the New Testament preaching. It is the point of departure that clears many a concept in Jesus' pronouncements. The present article begins by asking what distinguished the teachings of Jesus from that of the socio-political and religious figures of his time. In the first part, it briefly goes through the lexicography of the terms regarding the Kingdom both in Hebrew and Greek. The article then goes on to reflect on the socio-political and historical context of the first century Israel-Palestine, with a special emphasis on four geographical entities: Caesarea Maritima, Tiberias, Gamla and Capernaum. Each of these specimens reveals certain aspects of the volatile life-situation of the time. The comparison and contrast among these representative places sheds light on what distinguished the message of Jesus from many others and made it unique.

Introduction

Who was Jesus? What distinguished him from the various socio-political and religious figures of his time? A clearer understanding of the historical background of the teaching of Jesus can help us greatly in our attempt to reflect on these questions. Among those teachings, the one regarding the 'Kingdom of God' is of pivotal significance,

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because, “That which Jesus recognized and desired is fulfilled in the message of the kingdom.”¹ And thus, “the Kingdom of God implies the whole of the preaching of Jesus Christ and His apostles.”²

Moreover, the contemporary NT scholar finds it embarrassingly difficult to trace the authentic teachings of Jesus from the Gospels at the face of the onslaught of critical methods like historical criticism and redaction criticism. This complexity has further increased because of a hypothesis that the traditions relating to Jesus have been radically modified by those who handed them on in the earliest Christian communities and by the evangelists themselves. However, there is one theme in the Gospels, regarding the authenticity of which most of the scholars agree: the teachings of Jesus on ‘the Kingdom of God.’³

What kind of a Kingdom did Jesus have in mind? Was there a radical difference between His concept of ‘Kingdom’ and that of Herod and Augustus? A clearer understanding of the context of this theme can help us to dwell profoundly on the question: ‘Who was Jesus?’

The Dynamic Nature of the ‘Kingdom’

In order to understand the historical background behind Jesus’ use of ‘the Kingdom’ (βασίλεια), we have to analyze the Old-Testament/Hebrew concept of מַלְכוּת (*malkût*). A preliminary philological analysis of the Greek and Hebrew expressions reveals three aspects of the ‘Kingdom’: 1. The Kingdom is not just a ‘realm’, but rather a ‘reign’; 2. The Kingdom is not something statically possessed by a divinity, but rather a ‘making’, of which the agent is God; 3. The Kingdom is not brought about by natural phenomena or human effort, but rather by a transcendental input.

***malkût* (מַלְכוּת) and *Basileia* (βασίλεια): A Philological Analysis**

In English when we translate מַלְכוּת הַאֱלֹהִים (*malkût hā’ēlohîm*) or ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ (*hē basileia tou theou*) as “Kingdom of God,” it may seem that the ‘Kingdom’ is to be understood as a physical or territorial reality.⁴ The Delitsch translation of the New Testament

¹D. Flusser, *Jesus*, Jerusalem: The Magnes Press and The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1998, 111.

²K.L. Schmidt, “βασίλεια”, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* I, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1964, 583.

³G.R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God*, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1986, x.

⁴The Latin translation ‘*Regnum Dei*’ and the Italian translation ‘*Regno di Dio*’ seems closer to the dynamic connotation of the Hebrew and Greek originals than the

translates 'Kingdom of God' as מְלֻכּוֹת הָאֱלֹהִים (*malkût hā'ēlohîm*) (Mt 12:28). *malkût* is obviously an abstract construction of the Hebrew root *mlk* which has the basic meanings of 'become/be king, reign as king, reign, function as king'.⁵ The abstract constructions of the Hebrew root *mlk* are in part influenced by Aramaic.⁶ They include the feminine forms *melûkâ* "kingship," and *malkût* ⁷ "kingdom" and the verbal nouns *mamlākâ* and *mamlākût* "dominion, kingdom."⁸ The corresponding word in Biblical Aramaic is *malkû*.⁹ It is open to dispute whether Jesus used the one or the other in the original Aramaic.¹⁰ The meaning of the Middle/Late Hebrew term *malkût* is indistinguishable from that of its earlier counterpart *mamlākâ*: "kingdom".¹¹

As a rule, LXX translates *mlk* forms and their derivatives with *basil* equivalents,¹² of which the verbal form is βασιλεύω (*basileuō*), which means 'to be king' or 'to reign.'¹³

The verbal nature of the words *malkût* and *basileia* sheds more light on to the reality which these words indicate, and tells us that the 'Kingdom' is not merely a 'realm', but rather a 'reign.' The term *mamlākâ*, an *m*-preformative of *mlk*, which can express an action and its results, place, type and manner of an event, and finally the instrument of action, is thus predisposed to bring to expression the functional system "kingship" in all these aspects: as dominion, residence and reign, power apparatus — in a word, as an

English phrase 'Kingdom of God,' as the word 'regno' is from a verbal root (*regnare*). Considering that in the contemporary world the notion of a 'kingdom' has increasingly become redundant, a translation like 'Reign of God' seems to convey the original nuance better.

⁵K. Seybold, "מֶלֶךְ," *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament VIII*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1996, 357.

⁶Cf. Seybold, "מֶלֶךְ," 353.

⁷*malkût* replaced *mamlākâ* almost completely in the Late Biblical Period. Though these Hebrew words denoting 'kingdom' are used apparently in the same meaning, the Aramaic influence on the term *malkût* gives it a slightly stranger nuance. *malkût*, "with its more sharply accentuated phonetic character, was better suited as a designation for an institution that was largely dominated by foreign influence." Cf. Seybold, "מֶלֶךְ," 360.

⁸Seybold, "מֶלֶךְ," 353.

⁹Cf. Seybold, "מֶלֶךְ," 353.

¹⁰Schmidt, "βασιλεία", 582.

¹¹Cf. Seybold, "מֶלֶךְ," 360.

¹²Cf. Seybold, "מֶלֶךְ," 353.

¹³Schmidt, "βασιλεία", 590.

institution.¹⁴ Thus it becomes clear that the term is used not just to connote a territory or a physical reality of the ‘kingdom,’ but rather the dynamic act of ‘ruling.’¹⁵

Kingdom of God and Kingdom of Heaven

The Gospels seem to mention ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ and ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν interchangeably. Schmidt considers that, “In general, the very fact that the expressions are interchangeable both in the manuscripts and in the Synoptic parallels forces us to the conclusion that they are used *promiscue* and have exactly the same meaning.”¹⁶ Hence, what is true of the ‘Kingdom of Heaven’ is also true of the ‘Kingdom of God’.

However, the fact that we can, in all probability, semantically substitute these two expressions with each other, tells us something about the nature of the reality denoted by ‘Kingdom of God’. It is not a reality that can be established by human beings themselves. “This Reign cannot be a realm which arises by a natural development of earthly relationships or by human efforts, but is one which comes down by divine intervention.”¹⁷ It requires a transcendental input, a ‘heaven’ element. As Weiss writes, “By force and insurrection men might establish a Davidic Monarchy, perhaps even as glorious a kingdom as David’s had been; but God will establish the Kingdom of God without human hands, horse, or rider, with only his angels and celestial powers.”¹⁸

The Old Testament Connotation of the ‘Kingdom’

An analysis of the context of the use of ‘Kingdom of God’ in Jesus’ proclamation is incomplete without relating it to the notion of the Kingdom in the Torah. Jesus of Nazareth was not the first to speak of the Kingdom of God; nor was John the Baptist. Schmidt makes a point that the proclamation regarding the Kingdom of heaven in the teachings of both Jesus and John the Baptist, “is not to the effect that there is such a kingdom and its nature is such and such,” instead, both preach that “it is near.”¹⁹ This would imply that the audience of

¹⁴Cf. Seybold, “מְלִכּוּת,” 359.

¹⁵Cf. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God*, 17.

¹⁶Schmidt, “βασιλεία,” 582.

¹⁷Schmidt, “βασιλεία,” 582.

¹⁸J. Weiss, *Jesus’ Proclamation of the Kingdom of God*, trans. & ed., R.H. Hiers and D.L. Holland, *Lives of Jesus Series*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972, 102.

¹⁹Schmidt, “βασιλεία,” 584.

both of them were already aware of such a notion. Jesus and John the Baptist must have, in all probability, derived the notion of the Kingdom from the Old Testament Prophecy.²⁰

However, strangely, the phrase "Kingdom of God" as such rarely appears in the Old Testament.²¹ But a few references are made to the Kingdom that YHWH rules. By contrast, the term *king* is applied to YHWH forty-one times in the Old Testament (Eg. Ps 10:16; Is 44:6). It must also be taken into consideration that long before the establishment of monarchy in Israel, the concept of the LORD as the King must have been prevalent, especially because all Semitic peoples thought of their gods as kings.²²

If so, what are the implications? Its pre-monarchic usage shows that the word "מֶלֶךְ" had earlier denoted more than merely the head of a monarchical state. Discussing the origin of the word group *mlk*, Seybold points out connections with several other ancient Semitic languages like Akkadian, Aramaic, Arabic, etc., to show that the root in ancient times had as its semantic field of 'advice,' 'counsel' and so on.²³ Hence, in the early days of the nomadic Hebrews, the term "מֶלֶךְ" must have been attributed to YHWH in the meaning that He is the "accompanying God who guided his people through unknown areas to good pastures and afforded them protection from their enemies."²⁴

Thus, when Jesus speaks of the 'Kingdom', as a Jew understanding all the nuances of the term used in the Torah, we must rightly think that he had these connotations in mind.

The Kingdom-Vision that Emerges from the Galilean Scenario

In order to get a genuine understanding of the 'Kingdom-Vision' of Jesus, our journey has to begin from a mountain-view from the eastern side of Lake Galilee. When we look into the panorama, among the other sights of natural beauty, three archaeological sites stand out as imageries enlightening the Jesus-event: Tiberias, Gamla and Capernahum. Tiberias, along with Caesarea Maritima far away on the Mediterranean coast and the other Roman cities of the time of Jesus, reminds us of the pomp and glory of the great political powers of the time. Gamla, along with Mazada and the other centres of Jewish nationalistic movements, reminds us of the territorial ambitions of the

²⁰Schmidt, "βασίλεια," 584.

²¹One of such rare examples is the use of מֶלֶךְ יְהוָה in 2 Chr 13:8.

²²Cf. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God*, 17.

²³Cf. Seybold, "מֶלֶךְ," 352.

²⁴Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God*, 18.

Jewish people of the time. However, according to the gospel narratives, it is Capernaum that Jesus makes his 'home' (Mk 2:1).

We are prompted to ask, what was the special quality that Capernaum possessed, that leaving all the other prominent cities which were apparently more suitable to become the stage for the great proclamation of the coming of a Kingdom, Jesus opted this small village as the centre of his activity in Galilee? Analyzing this point can help us to comprehend the nature of the 'Kingdom' that Jesus envisaged.

The Roman Empire at the Time of Jesus

The birth of Jesus was placed in the course of a census ordered by Augustus Caesar (Lk 2:1). Jesus was born and grew up as a boy in a political society that was thoroughly influenced by the mystique built around the emperors of the Roman Empire. Raymond Brown points out,

As for the Roman world, the achievements of Octavian, who was the survivor of the wars that followed the death of Julius Caesar on the Ides of March in 44 BCE, were recognized by the Senate's grant of the title 'Augustus' in 27 BCE. Latching on to the mantle of peacemaker, this master of propaganda dotted the empire with monuments celebrating his achievements. The Greek cities of Asia Minor adopted his birthday as the first day of the year; indeed an inscription at Halicarnassus called him 'saviour of the world.' The altar of peace at Rome, dedicated to the achievements of Augustus, was part of his mystique.²⁵

Among the many 'Roman' cities thriving in Palestine at the time of Jesus, Caesarea Maritima was of prime importance. The ancient harbour city of Caesarea on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea was built by Herod the Great about 22-10/9 BCE,²⁶ and was named in honour of Augustus Caesar. It was the seat of the Roman prefect, and the administrative capital from 6 CE.²⁰ 'Pilate Stone,' the only archaeological item that mentions the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate, was discovered here in 1961. The stone commemorated Pilate's dedication of a public building honouring the emperor Tiberias.²⁷

²⁵R.E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, New York: Doubleday, 1997, 58.

²⁶K.G. Holm, "Caesarea," *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of Archaeology in the Near East* I, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, 399.

²⁷The discovery of this stone was a breakthrough in the historicity-seeking archaeological expeditions of modern times. It is considered crucial as a contemporary witness to the prominent New Testament figure Pontius Pilate. Cf. J.L. Reed, *Archaeology and the Galilean Jesus. A Re-examination of the Evidence*, Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2000, 18.

With all its pomp and glory, Caesarea spread its wings around the harbour, with a majestic temple dedicated to the emperor Tiberius in about 30 CE.²⁸ Caesarea Maritima, Looking towards the west, to the direction of Rome, to the epicentre of the commanding political supremacy of those times, epitomized power. Anybody living in the days of Jesus must have connected the notion of 'the kingdom' to the idea of the Roman power, so well conveyed through the magnificence of Caesarea, and of the other Roman cities of the time.²⁹ However, keeping this notion of the existing magnificent kingdom of power and dominion on earth, Jesus always spoke about the Kingdom of God in contrasting categories of humbleness and ordinariness.

Tiberias: Capital City of Tetrarch Herod Antipas

Another city of symbolic nature which can be looked at as embodying the sense of kingdom in the first century mindset of the people of Palestine is Tiberias. It was named for the Roman emperor Tiberius, and was founded in 20 CE during the reign of Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great.³⁰ The fame of the city was so immense that the lake of Galilee was eventually called by its name (Jn 6:1; 21:1). Excavations in the site have revealed the existence of a magnificent Roman city with colonnaded streets, bathhouses and markets.³¹

The city was basically built around the many natural hot water streams which functioned like a modern day spa. Josephus Flavius writes, "And now Herod the tetrarch, who was in great favour with Tiberius, built a city of the same name with him, and called it Tiberias. He built it in the best part of Galilee, at the lake of Gennesareth. There are warm baths at a little distance from it, in a village named Emmaus."³² Seen in the background of the splendour and glory of the capital city of Herod Antipas, its contrast with the

²⁸Cf. Holum, "Caesarea," 399.

²⁹Apart from the ten magnificent cities of the Decapolis, the cities fortified and built by the splendid architectural endeavours of Herod the Great were essentially part of the historical context of Jesus. Recent scholarship that gives comparatively much more credit to the rule of Herod bases its hypothesis on the splendour of his architectural undertakings in cities like Caesarea Maritima, Herodium, Jericho, Jerusalem, Machaerus, Masada, and Sebaste. Cf. B.R. McCane, "Simply Irresistible. Augustus, Herod, and the Empire," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 127/4 (2008) 726.

³⁰Y. Hirschfeld, "Tiberias," *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of Archaeology in the Near East* V, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, 203.

³¹Hirschfeld, "Tiberias," 204.

³²Josephus Flavius, *The Antiquities of the Jews* XVIII 2.3.

ordinariness of the concept of the Kingdom presented by Jesus in his teachings becomes all the more stark.

Gamla: Centre of the Kingdom-Ambition of the Zealots

Gamla was an ancient fortress on the Golan Heights, believed to have been founded as a Seleucid fort during the Syrian Wars. It was called Gamla because it was situated on a hill shaped like a camel's hump as the Hebrew word 'Gamla' means camel.³³ It is a high, almost isolated, precipitous rocky spur in the southern Golan Heights.³⁴ Archaeological finds at Gamla show that along with the other Galilean cities and villages, Gamla also grew during the time of Antipas after years of neglect in the reign of Herod the Great.³⁵ "The Hasmonaean village/stronghold was built on the North-Eastern corner of the hill and was abandoned during part of the end of the first century BCE, may be as a result of the Herodian campaign in 38 BCE."³⁶ As a reminder of the sacrificial spirit of the Jewish patriots, Gamla is a symbol of Heroism even for the modern day Israel.³⁷ It was here that the events described by Josephus Flavius regarding the Roman siege of the site took place.³⁸

Though most of these narratives about the heroic uprising by the Jewish Zealots took place a few decades after the death of Jesus, Gamla obviously used to be a centre of the Zealots' activities much earlier. Therefore at the time of Jesus, this place must have existed as a powerful symbol of the Jewish sentiments against the foreign dominion and their strong political aspirations.³⁹

³³M. Avi-Yonah, "Gamala," *Encyclopaedia Judaica* VII, 295.

³⁴A.M. Berlin, *Gamla I, The Pottery of the Second Temple Period*, Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority, 2006, 1.

³⁵M. Aviam, "Socio-Economic Hierarchy and Its Economic Foundations in First Century Galilee. The Evidence from Yodefat and Gamla," *Flavius Josephus. Interpretation and History*, ed. J. Pastor - P. Stern - M. Mor, 36.

³⁶Aviam, "Socio-Economic Hierarchy," 36.

³⁷Cf. Berlin, *Gamla*, 1.

³⁸Josephus Flavius, *The Wars of the Jews* 4.2.

³⁹S.G.F. Brandon argues that Jesus' relationship with the Zealots "seems to have been deliberately obscured in the Christian sources." He considers the possibility of Jesus being a Zealot himself, or at least being closely in contact with them. "The fact that Simon was known as 'the Zealot' seems to have twofold significance: by thus distinguishing the apostle, it would appear that Jesus himself was not a Zealot leader; but Simon's inclusion among the apostles suggests that the profession of Zealot principles was not inconsistent with the teaching of Jesus." However, from a Christian point of view, this cannot be fully accepted considering the violent nature of the Zealots' ideology. S.G.F. Brandon, "Zealots," *Encyclopaedia Judaica* XVI, 947.

Writing on 'the Kingdom of Heaven,' David Flusser discusses the question whether it would be correct to agree with those who maintain that Pilate was right when he executed Jesus because he (Jesus) was a political agitator, or the leader of a gang in the Jewish war of liberation against Rome.⁴⁰ R.A. Horsley says regarding the Kingdom-teaching of Jesus that "in modern parlance that would be labeled a 'revolution.'"⁴¹ S.G.F. Brandon in his book analyzes the nuances of the Markan Gospel and investigates its interpretation of Jesus both in the light of what we know of primitive Jewish Christianity and makes a strong argument that Jesus was closely connected to the Zealots.⁴²

However, by not selecting Gamla as his centre of activity, by not involving directly in the activities of the Zealots, Jesus distinguishes the Kingdom of his preaching from the nationalist agenda of his revolutionary contemporaries.

Capernaum: 'Kingdom' of the Small Things

Mark's Gospel calls Capernaum the 'home' of Jesus (Mk 2:1). "Frequently mentioned in the gospels, Capernaum was apparently the closest to a permanent base that Jesus had during the Galilean ministry," says Murphy O'Conner.⁴³ The crucial point here, which helps us to understand the nature of the 'Kingdom' preached by Jesus, is his choice of an ordinary village like Capernaum above the other prominent and available choices like Caesarea, Gamla and Tiberias, all of which were grand symbols of political grandeur and nationalism.

What marked Capernaum distinctively from the other coastal villages of Galilee? Nothing! It was an ordinary village of the poor people. As O'Conner writes, "The poverty of the inhabitants can be inferred from the fact that the latter (the Centurion of Capernaum), a Gentile, had to build them a synagogue" (Lk 7:5).⁴⁴ The village was comparatively a small one, stretching some 300 meters. Jesus had no

⁴⁰Cf. Flusser, *Jesus*, 105.

⁴¹R. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence. Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine*, San Francisco: Fortress Press, 1987, 207.

⁴²Cf. S.G.F. Brandon, *Jesus and the Zealots. A Study of the Political Factor in Primitive Christianity*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967, 220.

⁴³Quoting from ancient sources like Egeria and the Piacenza pilgrim, Murphy O'Conner shows that the historicity of the archaeological site at Capernaum is quite demonstrable. J. Murphy O'Connor, *The Holy Land*, Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008, 250.

⁴⁴Murphy O'Connor, *The Holy Land*, 251.

unique advantage in settling there, except that his early disciples, especially the fishermen Peter and Andrew, were from that village. One could see that in choosing to stay in Capernaum, Jesus was opting to stay with the ordinary folks. Thus, the 'Kingdom' of his vision is a reality that has to do with the ordinariness of the everyday life of humble people.

Thy Kingdom Come!

Our philological analysis of the terms showed that the 'Kingdom-vision' of Jesus was not territorial but dynamic. Our glimpse into the historical background of the concept showed that the 'Kingdom' was to be associated not with power but with the ordinariness of everyday human life. From the teachings of Jesus, especially from the sublime prayer that He taught, we also learn about the means to 'enter the Kingdom' as envisioned by Jesus: "Thy Kingdome come: Thy will be done..." (Mt 6:10). It is by fulfilling the will of God in the day-to-day life that one enters the 'Kingdom' envisaged by Jesus.

Jesus' preaching of the Kingdom was not merely a call to a higher set of ethical principles, though ethics itself is transformed as a result. His preaching of the Kingdom was intended not just to present to us a better notion of God; rather it was in itself an act of giving God to us. "Jesus did not announce to the Jews that a loftier notion of God was now available – but that their God *had acted!*"⁴⁵

Jesus Himself is the supreme model of the one who is 'of the Kingdom' and 'brings about the Kingdom.' He was a King, less like a ruler and more like a pastor.⁴⁶ "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."⁴⁷ Jesus was 'the Kingdom of God in action.'

⁴⁵Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God*, 144.

⁴⁶Cf. P. Di Luccio, "Re e 'Pastori' Prima della Nascita di Gesù," *La Civiltà Cattolica* 3852 (2010) 552-563.

⁴⁷Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God*, 144.