

# The Kingdom of God and Camelot

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The expression “the kingdom of God” is the translation of the Greek expression, “*he basileia tou theou*.” This Greek expression would better be translated, “the reign of God,” with “the kingdom of God” as an alternate translation as determined by the context in which the expression is found. The reign of God (*basileia tou theou*) is the reign or rule of who God is in the lives of men, from the individual person to whole of mankind.

How one translates this Greek expression depends on how one perceives of God’s reign (*basileia*)? Is it to be understood as a realm or domain among men, or as a ruling force in the lives of men, from the individual to the whole? It happens one person at a time; hence the value of the single individual life.

The concept of the kingdom in the historical development of the church of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries was that the church and the kingdom of God were one and the same, giving rise to concept of the church as a ruling entity, eventually becoming the Holy Roman Empire. The hierarchy of the church became the rulers or sovereign authorities of the kingdom/church. But this was the natural outcome of equating the church with the kingdom of God. The intrinsic idea of “to reign or rule” cannot be taken from the Greek term *basileia*. If the kingdom of God in some way implies the rule of God, and the church and the kingdom of God are the same, then it would follow that the church on earth is the rule of God. But this is never what Jesus intended when he taught concerning the nature of the kingdom of God in his parables and saying concerning the kingdom.

## Kingdom of God and Camelot

We tend to think of a kingdom as a physical realm over which a monarch rules. It consists of persons, places, things, and events, which can be easily visualized. Arthur Pendragon was a legendary 5<sup>th</sup> century Celtic king who ruled over a realm called Camelot. Camelot consisted of Arthur's castle or fortress, his knights, his round table, his magic sword, Merlin the wizard or magician, his counselor or minister, and Guinevere his queen. The particulars we recall of the history of Arthur and Camelot are those collected and reported by Mallory or Chaucer.

The Kingdom of Camelot was supposedly located in what is now called Greater Britain. Some historians say Arthur was a Celtic king, specifically of the people later called the Scots. Historians enjoy discussing when and where Camelot existed. The Isle of Mann off the coast of Scotland is a favorite choice of many scholars. Some say it was in the lowlands of Scotland between what is now between lower Scotland and upper England.

We know the name of many of his knights: Lancelot, Perceval, Galahad, Sir Gawain, etc. We know of the numerous quests of these knights, especially the Quest for the Holy Grail by Percival. All of this is an example of how our culture has been taught to think of "a kingdom." In fact, the media of our culture even tried to create a 20<sup>th</sup> century American Camelot out of John F. Kennedy and his administration because of his affection for the musical called *Camelot*, popular in the early 1960s.

### *Basileia Tou Theou*

We have no problem with any of this until we come to a concept of "kingdom" which does not fit or allow for this imagery to be attached to it. Such is the case with the expression "kingdom of God" as used by Jesus in the Gospels. The Greek terms used in the New Testament (with similar or corresponding Aramaic and Hebrew terms) are *basileia*, the noun, usually translated by the English term "kingdom," and *basileuo*, the verb, usually translated in English, "to

reign.” When we speak of the reign of Arthur, we can see that it is an easy jump from that expression to the physical imagery elaborated above. But in speaking of the reign of God, the imagery is not so easy to visualize. This sense of it could create some confusion when we see Jesus announcing that the kingdom of God is at hand or near, yet the Old Testament clearly portrays God as forever reigning over heaven and earth. If he already rules over the earth and all in it, (i.e., his kingdom is already identified with heaven and earth), how can his kingdom be spoken of as “at hand” or “near” when it is already here or in existence?

Jesus’ meaning of the nature of the *basileia tou theou* was so misunderstood by the people of his time that it resulted in their rejecting his Messiahship. Their concept of a kingdom had to do with their desire for the restoration of the kingdom of Israel, which was then ruled by the Roman Empire. A history of the anointing of David by Samuel, the period of expectation for David to come to power, which occurred after Saul’s death, and David’s consequent conquest of Jerusalem (cf., 2 Samuel 1-6), and his rule over Israel was one of the most popular concepts in all of Israel during the time of Jesus. If Jesus was the Messiah, as many believed, then the kingdom he talked about must be understood in the same sense as the kingdom over which David ruled in 1000 BC. The whole idea is filled with the concept of territory or domain; i.e., a realm consisting of Camelot concepts and imagery.

These longings and beliefs were drawn from the Scriptures and the teaching of a number of Jewish apocalyptic groups of this period (e.g., the Dead Sea Community). With this background, we can better appreciate the problem created for the Jews of Jesus’ day, when he appeared on the scene announcing that the *basileia tou theou* was at hand! What was he talking about? Did he expect to bring about a restoration of Israel’s dominion over the land David and Solomon ruled over a 1,000 years before? Or was there something of a completely different nature in the mind of Jesus when he used this expression? If so, what was it?

## The Reign of God Is "God Ruling"

The *basileia tou theou* is God's rule or God ruling. This is the essential meaning of the Greek *basileuo* (to rule or reign) and especially *basileia*, when used with a definite article followed by a genitive as, *he basileia tou theou*. Throughout the Gospels (which are filled with this expression) we see Jesus attempting to make people understand what the *basileia tou theou* was. "The *basileia tou theou* is like unto," he would say, then give a piece of imagery which would help them to see that he was talking about the way God rules in the lives of men. Jesus spoke of the mystery of the *basileia tou theou* and repeatedly used parables or stories and explicit language and imagery to explain his understanding of the *basileia tou theou*. "The *basileia tou theou* is near" or "at hand," he would say.

He went about Galilee and Judea preaching the good news of the *basileia tou theou*. "The poor in spirit," he said, "are those who will inherit the *basileia tou theou*." "Unless one's righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law," Jesus says, "he will not enter *basileia tou theou*. One is to seek first the *basileia* and righteousness *tou theou*. When one that he can drive out demons then he can know that the *basileia tou theou* has come upon them. When one hears his message about the *basileia tou theou* and does not understand it, the evil one will take away the message of God out of their heart.

The *basileia tou theou* is like a mustard seed that can grow into a great wonder. The *basileia tou theou* is like yeast that a woman mixed into bread dough. The *basileia tou theou* is like treasure hidden in a field, it is like a merchant looking for fine pearls, it is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. "Every teacher of the law," says Jesus, "who has been instructed about the *basileia tou theou* is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old." "Unless one is willing to change and become like little children," he says, "they will never enter the *basileia tou theou*," and "whoever humbles himself like a child is the greatest in the *basileia tou theou*." "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them," says Jesus, "for the *basileia tou theou*

belongs to such as these." "It is hard for a rich man," says Jesus, "to enter the *basileia tou theou*."

To the man who agreed with Jesus that to love God was the greatest of all commandments, Jesus said to him, "You are not far from the *basileia tou theou*." "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back," says Jesus, "is fit for service in the *basileia tou theou*". When Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the *basileia tou theou* would come, he replied, "The *basileia tou theou* does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the *basileia tou theou* is within (*entos* - inside) you." To Nicodemus he says, "no one can see the *basileia tou theou* unless he is born again," and later informs him that, "no one can enter the *basileia tou theou* unless he is born of water and the Spirit." When his disciples asked him to teach them how to pray, he told them to pray that God's rule would come, and that his will would be done, on earth as it was in heaven.

When telling his disciples of the destruction of Jerusalem, Jesus spoke to them of certain things that would be signs that the destruction was near. He told them, "when you see these things happening, you know that the *basileia tou theou* is near. I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened." The coming of this destruction did not occur until 66-70 AD, if the *basileia tou theou* (kingdom of God) is to be understood as the church, then the church was not to be established on earth until 70 AD. But this is not what Jesus was saying at all. The *basileia tou theou* that was to draw near at the destruction of Jerusalem was God's judgment on Israel, which was a manifestation of the rule of God - the *basileia tou theou*.

At the last supper Jesus said to his disciples that he had a great desire to eat the Passover with them, then told them, "I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the *basileia tou theou*." Then after supper he gave his disciples a cup of wine and said to them, "I tell you I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the *basileia tou theou* comes." Later he said to his disciples, "I confer on you a kingdom (*basileia*), just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you

may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom (*basileia*) and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." In three days, following these words, he would be raised from the dead in one of the greatest manifestations of the rule of God (*basileia tou theou*) the world has ever seen. He had told his disciples earlier, "some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the *basileia tou theou* come with power." Is it possible that he intended his words to be understood as being fulfilled in his resurrection from death?

Then there is Jesus' comment at Peter's confession that the twelve believed Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of the Living God. "Upon this rock (i.e., the confession Peter had just uttered) I will build my church, and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it, and I will give to you (Peter) the keys of *tes basileias ton houranon* (of the reign of heaven)." What was Jesus saying to Peter here? In the words, "You are Peter," Jesus used the Greek word *petros*, which is a nominative, masculine, singular (i.e., "a rock," essentially a small rock). The expression "upon this rock," in the Greek text is, *epi taute te petra*. *Petra* is a dative in the feminine gender, and implies a larger rock than a *petros*.

This word is used for something of significance like a cliff large enough to create a cave for storage or a tomb, or a slab of rock large enough to build a house on, a foundation. This *petra* (rock) is something other than Peter. The demonstrative pronoun *taute* (this) is referring back to Peter's confession. It is Peter's confession would be the foundation of the reign of God on the earth and Peter was the one chosen to reveal the great news of Christ's conquest of death by his resurrection on the day of Pentecost, as recorded in Acts 2. After his resurrection Jesus had told them that all authority in heaven and earth had been given to him, implying that he was now the Lord and Savior of all men. The church would result from the proclamation of the lordship of Christ. Jesus was not implying that the church would constitute and become identical with the *basileia tou theou*, rather, the reign of God was now identified with Jesus; it is he who reigns as Lord, not the church.

## Conclusion

Most of Jesus' teaching on the *basileia tou theou* does not easily fit the Camelot concept and its imagery. Jesus told the people of his time that the *basileia tou theou* existed "within them." The inconsistency of trying to interchange the term "kingdom" with the term "church" should be apparent. The substitution of one for the other simply does not work. The church may be associated with the *basileia tou theou*, but it is not one and the same with it.

The expression *basileia tou theou* is found throughout the LXX of the Old Testament Scriptures, as well as in the words of Jesus. There it means "the reign or rule of God," as it does in the words of Jesus. It is God who reigns over heaven and earth, and he does not share his rule with the church. Because he created man in his image, after his likeness, and made him a free moral agent, man may set himself in rebellion against God's rule and seek to reign over his own life. When this happens, man rule over his own life leads to destruction and death, a truth eloquently developed in the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans.

From the creation of man to the present, God has sought to make man see that only when his creator reigns in his life can he truly reign in life at all. This is the meaning of the *basileia tou theou*. The *basileia* is near or at hand when the rule of God approaches us. We are not far from the *basileia* when we are open to the rule of God, and the *basileia* is within us when God's will has truly become the rule our lives and God reigns within us.

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