

GIVE AN ACCOUNT OF LUKE'S UNDERSTANDING OF 'THE KINGDOM OF GOD'.

INTRODUCTION

The Gospel of Luke gives the picture of Jesus as Jehovah's ideal man, a friend of outcasts (5:29; 7:29-37), compassionate, (7:13; 13:1) and neighbourly (10:30).

The book stresses the blessings of Salvation brought by Jesus. It emphasises the signs of the coming of the Messiah, prophesied in the Old Testament and seen in Jesus' healing of the sick and preaching of the Gospel to the poor and needy. The expression 'Kingdom of God' itself originates with the late-Jewish expectation of the future in which it denoted the decisive intervention of God, ardently expected by Israel, to restore his people's fortunes and liberate them from the power of their enemies. The coming of the kingdom is the great perspective of the future, prepared by the coming of the Messiah, which paves the way for the kingdom of God.

There is a clear agreement among the synoptic Gospels that 'Kingdom of God' was the principal theme within Jesus message (Matt. 4:17, 23; Mark 1:15; Luke 4:42, 43), although each attests to this fact distinctively. The expression 'the kingdom of God' (or its equivalent, 'the kingdom of heaven') is to be found in 61 separate

sayings of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels (13 in Mark; 9 in Q [the scholarly designation for material shared by Matthew and Luke but not by Mark]; 27 in Matthew, and 12 in Luke)! References to the kingdom of God are much more frequent than to any other single theme such as repentance, faith, love, the Fatherhood of God, or the Sonship of Jesus. However, my main concern according to the above question is to give an account of Luke's own understanding of 'the Kingdom of God'. But first, I will briefly mention the three different positions that (traditional) scholars have outlined on it. Then, efforts will be made to examine the various points made at every part of Luke's Gospel where the term features.

IDEAS OF SOME BIBLE SCHOLARS

In 1892, Johannes Weiss shook the theological world with the publication of his book *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God*. Following on from him, Albert Schweitzer's *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906) was both to support Weiss, and to popularise his ideas. Jesus, they argued, used the phrase 'the kingdom of God' as his contemporaries did – that is, to speak of the imminent irruption of God into

this world, to destroy evil and bring about the new creation. Jesus (according to Weiss) was saying that his contemporaries were close to the fateful day of the Lord. Thus, Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet.

In 1935, C. H. Dodd published his famous *The Parables of the Kingdom*, following it up in December 1936 with an article in the *Expository Times* (Vol. 48, 138-42) further defending his view, under the title 'The Kingdom of God has come'. As Dodd understood the matter, Weiss was utterly wrong. The central emphasis of Jesus' ministry was not that the kingdom would soon appear but that it had *already fully arrived* in his own ministry and teaching. That is, Jesus believed his ministry to be the ultimate manifestation of God as king of righteousness and salvation (Realised eschatology). Dodd even went as far, in these early writings, as to insist Jesus did not speak of any future coming of God's rule beyond his own death and resurrection. However, Dodd's weakness was that his idea left no room for alternative proposals. His work historically follows on from that of Weiss, and the case he put forward for a whole scale rejection of Weiss and futurist eschatology was done on some very weak grounds.

Oscar Cullmann was one of the first theologians to find a clear position that incorporated what seems to me as the best elements of Weiss and Dodd, with significant works published in the 1950s and 60s. He attempted to do full justice to the two aspects of the kingdom mentioned above but also to steer clear of their mistakes. According to him, the kingdom that is to come has broken into current, human history so that the signs that prove that the kingdom has come can be seen without the destruction of time and the cosmos that will still take place at another future date. We can call this an overlapping of the ages. To use another common expression, the kingdom is a 'now, and not yet' kingdom (Inaugurated eschatology).

THE KINGDOM OF GOD ACCORDING TO LUKE

Jesus was associated with John the Baptist who appears to have presented himself as an end-time prophet preparing the way of the Lord, that is, preaching radical repentance before the coming of God in judgement. John's message as seen here has a clear eschatological ring (Luke 3:7-9, 16-17).

When John the Baptist sent his disciples to ask, 'Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?' They were shown the wonderful works done by Jesus,

in which, according to the promise of prophecy, the kingdom was already being manifested: the blind were enabled to see, the lame to walk, the deaf to hear, lepers were being cleansed and dead people raised to life, and the gospel was being proclaimed to the poor (Lk 7:18).

Also in the last of these – the proclamation of the gospel – the breaking through of the kingdom is seen. Since salvation is announced and offered as a gift already available to the poor in spirit, the hungry and the mourners, the kingdom is theirs. So too the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed, not merely as a future reality to be accomplished in heaven, nor merely as a present possibility, but as a dispensation offered today, on earth, through Jesus Himself.

Luke's forms of the beatitudes are on the surface quite different to that of Matthew. In the first place, Matthew has eight of them (or ten, depending on how you count them), while Luke's parallel has four matched by four parallel woes. Matthew's version is also sometimes said to be a spiritualisation of Luke's more original and socio-economic version. For example, contrast Matthew's 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God' with Luke's 'Blessed are you poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God... Woe to you rich, for you have

received your consolation'. But the contrast should not be forced. Luke's beatitudes and woes (and those that match in Matthew) are based on Isaiah 61:1-4, and the 'poor', 'those who mourn', etc., are symbolic of Israel conscious of her need of salvation, rather than strict socio-economic categories.

Luke also has the saying on the least in the kingdom of God being greater than John (Luke 7:28). In interpreting the parable of the sower Luke too affirms that the knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom of God are given to Jesus' disciples, but the rest must be content with unexplained parables (8:10). According to Luke, in Jesus, the great future has already become the 'present time'. This present aspect of the kingdom manifests itself in all sorts of ways in the person and deeds of Christ. It appears obvious and visibly in the casting out of demons (Lk 11:20) and generally in Jesus' miraculous power. In the healing of those who are demon-possessed it becomes evident that Jesus has invaded the house of 'the strong man', has bound him fast and so is in a position to plunder his goods. The kingdom of God breaks into the domain of the evil one.

The person of Jesus as the Messiah is the centre of all that is announced in the gospel concerning the kingdom. The kingdom is concentrated in him in its present

and future aspects alike. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is presented as the One sent by the Father, the One who has come to fulfil what the prophets foretold. In his coming and teaching the Scripture is fulfilled in the ears of those who listen to him (Luke 4:21).

There is a future aspect as well. For although it is clearly stated that the kingdom is manifested here and now in the gospel, so also is it shown that as yet it is manifested in this world only in a provisional manner. That is why the proclamation of its present activity in the words, 'The blind receive their sight; the dead are raised; the poor have good news preached to them', is followed by the warning: 'Blessed is he who takes no offence at me' (Lk. 7:23).

Luke connects the death of the Son of man with the coming of the kingdom of god and envisages the latter event as taking place within the lifetime of some that were present on the occasion (9:27). This indicates not only that the kingdom is thought of as future, but also that its coming is fairly imminent. The urgency of the kingdom makes it imperative that those who aspire to it do not let anything stand in the way even the death of relatives (9:60) – but must devote themselves wholly to it, never looking back (9:62).

As in Matthew the coming of the kingdom figures prominently in the prayer Jesus taught his disciples (Luke 11:2). In the Beelzebul controversy Jesus' works of power accomplished through the finger ("Spirit") of God are a strong indication of the imminence of the kingdom (11:20)

The concerns of the kingdom of God are to affect all attitudes toward life. Undue worry about worldly matters is to be laid aside and the interests of the kingdom to be given priority. Then God will see to it that all legitimate needs are supplied (Lk 12:31). Trust rather than fear is to characterise Jesus' followers since God has been pleased to give them the kingdom (Lk 13:18, 20).

Like Matthew, Luke too makes it clear that entrance to the kingdom of God is not based on physical acquaintance with Jesus or physical descent, but it is based on accepting the conditions of the kingdom entering through the narrow gate. This, while leaving out many descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, will open the door for many Gentiles to feast with the patriarchs in the kingdom (Lk 13:28-29).

The comment made by an outsider as to the blessed state of those who feast in the kingdom of God (14:15) leads to the parable of the great banquet, in which, with a view to the Jewish rejection of Jesus and his message, the point is made that those called first were not worthy and were replaced by the sordid mob of Gentiles. Luke does not record the incident of the man who had no wedding gown.

Luke too considers John's ministry as the beginning of a new era distinguished from that of the Law and the Prophets. It is the era of the proclamation of the kingdom of God when everyone has the chance to force their way into it (16:16). This shows that Luke does not share the apocalyptic view of the kingdom of God as being introduced suddenly following great eschatological upheavals. The subject is brought up by the Pharisees. The answer is that the kingdom does not come in a way open to physical observation (17:20). No one will be able to point to it as being here or there. The kingdom of God is "within you" (Lk 17:21). The view of the kingdom advocated here is one in which God is at work quietly in those who have accepted his claims and faithfully take on them the yoke of his will (inaugurated eschatology).

The kingdom of God must be accepted in childlike trust (Lk 18:16-17). On the other hand, those who put their trust in their riches will not be able to enter into it (Lk 18:24-25). But to those who forsake everything for the kingdom of God a rich reward is promised, not only in the life to come, but even in this world (Lk 18:29-30).

By relating the parable of the pounds, Luke has Jesus correct the popular notion that the kingdom of God was about to break out in the apocalyptic way (19:11). The point is that Jesus' hearers had rather see to it that they administer faithfully what was entrusted to them and wait quietly for its full realisation than speculate on the time of its full arrival. Luke generally discourages such speculation (Acts 1:6-8). Even in the prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem, only general signs are given for the arrival in power of God's kingdom (21:31).

It is obvious that Luke thinks of the kingdom of God as something that in a way has drawn near, so that from John's time onward people can prepare for it and be actively engaged in it, while in its full power it is something future, promised to appear after the fulfilment of certain events.

That the kingdom can be spoken of as a future event is confirmed by the Last Supper, where Jesus promises to abstain from further eating and drinking until he can do so in the kingdom of God (22:16, 18). Occasionally the kingdom is ascribed to Jesus as given to him by the Father (22:29-30). The context is again eschatological.

Finally, the thief on the cross asks to be remembered by Jesus when the latter comes in his kingdom (Lk 23:42), and Joseph of Arimathea is described as a man waiting for the kingdom of God (23:51), though it is by no means easy to decide whether his expectation was for a mundane or transcendental kingdom.

In my Study, I observed that there are a lot of evidences that on the whole seems to me that the three positions are not abstract formulations invented by scholars, but that they arise out of the complexities of the biblical text itself. The biblical texts appear to have some very different time scales in mind when referring to the Kingdom of God, and it is with the desire of being true to those different perspectives that scholars have suggested their three positions. My own conclusion in the final analysis is that, there are elements of these three positions particularly

in the Gospel of Luke. Thus, Luke understanding of the Kingdom of God embraces the three positions outlined by the scholars.

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Luke characterises Jesus' life as a story of conflict and rejection... For Luke, Jesus is a prophet (Luke 4:24; 7:16, 39; 24:19), and rejection and death are the lot of all the prophets (Luke 4:24; 6:23; 11:47-51; 13:33-34) In Luke, Jesus the prophet attracted opposition especially by his concern for a brand of justice at odds with that practised by the religious leadership and by his concomitant openness to outcasts through table fellowship.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus' primary opponents appear to be the religious leadership in Jerusalem, and among them the chief priests are singled out for special development. In each of the canonical Gospels we find that the major share of blame for the death of Jesus is rather that to the Romans. This is especially clear in Luke's

Gospel, where Jesus' innocence is declared by Pilate three times and confirmed by Herod (23:4, 14-15, 22).

According to Luke, the divine anointing of Jesus for his mission is set within the immediate context of temptation by the devil (3:21-4:13), and the subsequent narrative demonstrates the continual cosmic dimensions of opposition against Jesus (e.g., 13:10-17). With the onset of the passion story, supernatural conflict moves again to center court: Satan enters Judas (22:3) and Jesus' struggle on the Mount of Olives as through out his mission is coloured in eschatological, cosmic hues (22:53).

Against this backdrop it is surely significant that Luke does not set the disciples over against Jesus as they are in the other Synoptic. Although Judas does betray Jesus, he does so under the power of Satan (22:3). Likewise, Peter's denial is related to Satan's influence (Luke 22:31-34). This is better explained in the Gospel of Luke whereby the disciple did not abandoned Jesus (Luke 22:28) as illustrated in other synoptic Gospel.

Luke sees all of human history divided into three phases: the period of Israel (Luke 16:16), the period of Jesus (from the coming of John the Baptist to the ascension), and the period of the church under stress (from the ascension to the parousia). This historical perspective is central to the unique Lucan presentation of the Christian kerygma.

The key figure in Lucan salvation history is Jesus Himself, about whom the evangelist makes not only christological but also soteriological affirmations about who Jesus is and what He has done for humanity. Certain aspects of Jesus, who is otherwise portrayed as a human being, hint at His transcendent condition: His virginal conception through the power of the Holy Spirit; His ministry under the auspices of the Holy Spirit; his special relation to His heavenly Father; His resurrection and exaltation to glory. Luke applies many traditional christological titles to Jesus: Messiah (or Christ), Lord, Saviour, Son of God, Son of man, Servant, Prophet, King, Son of David, Leader, Holy One, Righteous One, Teacher. Particularly noteworthy are the distinctive Lucan use of “Saviour” (2:11; Acts 5:31; 13:23), “suffering Messiah” (24:26, 46; Acts 3:18; 17:3; 26:23). The retrojection of the title “the Lord” (originally used of the risen Christ) even into the infancy narrative (2:11; cf. 1:43) and the ministry account, when the evangelist himself is speaking (7:13, 19; 10:1, 39, 41; 11:39; 12:42a; 13:15; etc.).

LUCAN TEACHING: - Even a brief summary of Luke’s interpretation of the Jesus story must cope with its sequel, for details in Acts sometimes bear on the message of the gospel itself. Though the Lucan picture of Jesus may not be as radical as the Pauline or the Marcan, or as sublime as the Johannine, it is nevertheless one of the major testimonies to Jesus in the New Testament.

The Lucan picture of Jesus is kerygmatic. The Christian “kerygma” has been defined by Rudolf Bultmann as the proclamation of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, as God’s eschatological act of salvation. Luke clearly depicts Jesus proclaiming himself in this way, not only as God’s agent of promised salvation (4:16-21) but also as the preacher par excellence of God’s kingdom: “that is what I was sent for” (4:43). Luke further depicts, no less than the other evangelists, Jesus’ disciples sent out to announce the kingdom and to heal (9:1).

Later, in Acts, Peter proclaims Jesus Christ not only as crucified and risen but also as “Lord and Messiah” (2:36). Indeed, Peter announces further, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to human beings by which we are to be saved” (Acts 4:12). Although Luke’s gospel has become more of a “Life of Christ” than either Mark’s or Matthew’s, it has not lost its proclamatory character. It accosts Theophilus, and other readers like him, with God’s eschatological salvation achieved in Jesus Christ. Luke’s picture of Jesus, now rooted in history in a way that none of the other evangelists root it, has played the kerygma in another key. But it still utters a time-transcending, ever-present, existential challenge to its readers to put personal faith in, and to make a deep commitment to, Jesus the risen Lord and “the Messiah of God” (9:20).

The Lucan picture of Jesus is also drawn in a distinctive historical perspective. Luke’s concern is evident from the remark that he had Paul utter before King Agrippa, “None of these things has escaped his [the king’s] notice, for this was not done in a corner” (Acts 26:26). Jesus’ story and its sequel, intended by God’s

providence to challenge human beings to Christian faith, has been rooted in human history. This is the reason that Luke has not written a “gospel,” as does Mark (1:1), a term he never uses in the first part of his work (but only in Acts 15:7; 20:24), preferring instead to designate his two-volume work as a “narrative account” (Luke 1:1).

The Lucan picture of Jesus’ ministry and its sequel also has an apologetic perspective. This is Luke’s secondary purpose in writing his “narrative account,” for he wanted to show that Christianity had as much right to legitimate recognition in the Roman world as did Judaism. Hence, he was concerned from the outset of the gospel to depict Jesus, the founder of Christianity, as born into a pious Jewish family, circumcised, and faithfully observant of Jewish customs.

2ND BOOK BEGINS HERE WITH PURPOSE AND CHARACTER

We are singularly fortunate in that Luke has given us his own statement of intention at the beginning of the Gospel. At the same time we can draw certain conclusions from the character of the work itself. His concern was to present the story of Jesus in such a way as to bring out its significance and its reliability for those who believed in Him.

The dedication suggests that it was meant for members of the church, and its contents reinforce this view, but at the same time it could be used both as a handbook and as a

tool for evangelism. Its outward form, conforming to that of historical and literary works of the time, strongly suggests that a wider audience was in view.

Luke wrote as a man of culture and education, and his work has much more of a claim to being a deliberate literary production than the other Gospels have. It is clear that the author was a man of letters, well acquainted with the OT in Gk. And also with the style of contemporary literature, who was able to produce a work that would commend the gospel by its literary quality.

Two important groups of words take us to the centre of Luke's interest. The first is the verb 'to preach the gospel', a word which characterises the Christmas message (Luke 1:19; 2:10), the preaching of John (3:18), the ministry of Jesus (4:18, 43; 7:22;).

Luke shows how the ministry of Jesus represents the fulfilment of OT prophecy (4:18-21; 10:23; 24:26, 44-47). The new era of salvation has dawned, characterised by the preaching of the good news of the kingdom (16:16). Although the full realisation of the reign of God belongs to the future (19:11), nevertheless God has already begun to deliver men and women from the power of Satan and the demons (11:20; 13:16), and sinners can enjoy forgiveness and fellowship with Jesus. In Jesus the saving power of God himself is manifested (Lk. 7:16).

The One through whom God acts in this way is clearly a prophet, anointed with the Spirit, but for Luke he is more than a prophet, more even than the unique prophet like Moses for whom the people were waiting (Lk. 24:19-21). He is the anointed King who will reign in the future kingdom (22:29; 23:42), and already he can be described

as the 'Lord', the title, which indicates the role of Jesus, confirmed by his resurrection and exaltation. Behind these roles fulfilled by Jesus there lies His unique nature as the Son of God (1:32).

In his presentation of the ministry of Jesus Luke draws particular attention to the concern of Jesus for outcasts; all the Gospels bear witness to this undoubted historical fact, but it is Luke who takes most delight in drawing attention to it (14:15-24; 15; 19:1-10). He demonstrates how Jesus was concerned for women (7:36-50; 8:1-3), for the Samaritans (9:51-56; 10:30-37; 17:11-19) and for the Gentiles (7:1-9). Yet Luke respects the historical fact that Jesus' ministry was almost exclusively to the Jews by confining himself to hints of the wider spread of the gospel in Acts (Luke 2:32; 13:28; 24:47). Another concern of Jesus to which Luke draws attention is His care for the poor and His warnings that the rich who have lived for themselves thereby shut themselves out of the kingdom of God.

Here we also observe Luke's political-apologetic bias in his description of Jesus' trial; Luke 23:2 brings out clearly that Luke describes the Jews' accusations against Jesus as a deliberate lie. By this means Luke wished to explain clearly to the Roman persecutors of the Christians of his own day that even the proceedings against Jesus, as well as those against the Christians, were based on Jewish slander. Luke supplements this apologetic by his Christology, for in exhibiting Jesus' messiahship he wants to create the opinion that the Jewish accusation has been brought forward illegally.

The political-apologetic trend becomes quite clear when the verdict is given: Luke mentions explicitly that Pilate declared Jesus to be innocent and that he made several efforts in favour of the accused. Pilate does not in fact condemn Jesus to death, but hands him over to the will of the Jews (Luke 23:25). We also observe that the mocking by the Roman soldiers is omitted by Luke and is replaced by that of Herod and his men (Luke 23:11). Luke does not even mention explicitly that the execution was by Roman soldiers, but suppresses their nationality; in the same way he replaces the mockery by the Romans with repeated mockery by the Jews. By this, we can conclude that Luke regards the Gentiles as acting in ignorance, and the Jews as bearing the burden of guilt in respect to Jesus' crucifixion.

In Luke's account, Jesus does not make directly for Jerusalem. The journey is simply one of the forms that Jesus' ministry takes. It is not the outcome of the fact that

Galilee has rejected him, but on the fact that it is God's will that he should suffer. The purpose of the journey is not merely to bring about the inevitable change of place, in order to reach the place of suffering; it is also in itself something of divine appointment, which may not be brought to an end too soon, because it has a function of its own.

LUKE'S THEOLOGY

Luke is no systematic theologian. He does not seek to develop any unified doctrine, the product of thorough reflection. Nevertheless he has a theology of his own; he sets out from definite theological premises and treats the immediate theological questions of his age. But he does not proceed by the systematic discussion of dogmatic themes: these are rather, directly or indirectly, suggested to the reader in his historical presentation by means of vivid scenes.