King/Kingdom

The idea of the "kingdom of God" (Gk βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ/*basileia tou theou*) is a fundamental theological conception that was current in the Jewish culture of the 1st century CE and that could therefore be evoked by means of this keyword. This early Jewish conception was taken up and employed by Jesus and his early followers. It became prominent in the narratives of the Jesus in the Gospels.

Scholars discuss how the Greek syntagma βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ should be translated. The semantic spectrum of βασιλεία includes both a geographical-static aspect (kingdom, realm, empire) and a functional-dynamic aspect (reign, rule). In most of the early Jewish and New Testament occurrences, the kingship of God, or his acting as king, predominates, so that "reign of God" is the preferable translation. It is more comprehensive, and can integrate the geographical aspect, for example when God's reign has its locus in heaven. But one must define the meaning in each specific context. The geographical meaning "kingdom" is present, for example, in the temptation narrative, where the devil showed Jesus "all the kingdoms of the world" (Matt 4:8).

The God of Israel as King

The idea of God as king was deeply rooted in Israel's image of God. In the Hebrew language of the Tanak (the Christian Old Testament), God's kingship is usually formulated verbally: "God is/reigns as king" (*malak YHWH*). The abstract formulation "reign of God" (*malkut YHWH*) appears relatively late in the history of the language and occurs rather seldom (e.g. 1 Chr 17:14; 28:5; Ps 103:19; 145:11–13; see Janowski, 2007). The imagery takes up the contemporary political reality: God appears as an ancient (high) king with immeasurable power. As the so-called enthronement Psalms (29; 47; 93; 96–99; 145–146) show, God, as powerful king, guarantees the

order of creation vis-à-vis the waters of chaos. His throne is in heaven, whence God exercises his power over the entire cosmos, thereby giving it stability and order (e.g. the vision of the throne room in Isa 6; 1 Kgs 22:19–22; Job 1:6–12; Dan 7:9–14; see Theißen & Merz, 2011, 226–231; Meier, 1994, 237–288; Schenke, 2004, 110–116).

The power of God, as the unique king, is especially linked to the people of Israel and to its salvation. God's instruction is reliable and gives Israel the certainty that it belongs to the only true God. The Temple in Jerusalem can be understood as the earthly place where God's presence among his people becomes visible. According to Ps 145, it is precisely in his justice, mercy, and kindness that the sovereignty and power of God the king are realized; his eternal rule benefits above all those in the people of Israel who are needy (Ps 145:14–20). The social-political dimension of the reign of God, his especial care for those who are poor, weak, sick, and needy, also emerges clearly in Ps 146.

In early Judaism, the so-called *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* from Qumran praise YHWH as a king whose throne is in heaven and who is surrounded by hosts of angels that unceasingly adore him (ShirShab; 4Q 400–407; 11 Q17; ed. Newsom, 1985). As a timeless, heavenly king, God exists far removed from all earthly reality. But the community from which these songs came is allowed, especially on the Sabbath, to join in the praise of the angels and to participate with its own worship in the heavenly liturgy.

In the apocalyptic thinking of Israel, the powerful implementation of the reign of God on earth becomes an expectation for the future, for the end time. The hope for justice and mercy, which is not fulfilled in the present because of political and social threats, is oriented to God's future rule, which signifies a total transformation of all political and cosmic reality, a "new creation" (so to speak). Then God's reign will be implemented on earth too, and will displace all the hostile political powers (Dan 2:44; 3:33; 4:31; 6:27; 7:14, 27; *1 En.* 25:3–7; 45:4–5; 60; 62–63; 93:15–17; *As. Mos.* 10:1–10; *Sib. Or.* 3:46–61a, 556–561, 616–623, 767–795; *T. Dan* 5:10–13; at an earlier date, Isa 24:18–23; 25:6–9; 33:17, 22, 24; 52:7–9; Zech 14:3–17; Mic 4:6–8; see *Pss. Sol.* 17:1–3, 46; see Schreiber, 2007, 132–139; Vanoni & Heininger, 2002, 66–74). In some texts, God establishes his eschatological rule with the help of an agent whom he commissions to act, and who represents God's power ("Son of Man," Dan 7:13–14; "The Anointed One," *Pss. Sol.* 17). The pictures of God's future rule elaborate a contrasting model to the political power structures of the present, which are experienced as negative. In this way, these pictures can bring about a critical political consciousness.

They can, however, also motivate armed rebellions, as the example of Judas the Galilean shows (Jos. *Ant.* 18.4–6, 9–10, 23–25; *Bell.* 2.118; 7.253–258). When Galilee was directly subordinated to Roman administration in 6 CE and a tax estimate was carried out, Judas demanded, as a political reaction, the strict refusal to pay the tax, on the grounds that God alone was king over Israel. From this radical theocratic perspective, Judas deduced the obligation of every Jew to support the implementation of God's rule by force of arms. The consequence was the bloody crushing of the rebellion by the Romans.

Jesus and the early Christians were able to have recourse to the conception of the kingly rule of God that was known in early Judaism.

The Historical Jesus and the Reign of God

There has been widespread agreement within the quest for the historical Jesus that the conception of the *basileia tou theou* ("reign of God") was the theological basis and the inner core of the preaching of Jesus (Meier, 1994, 289–506; Wright, 1996, 198–243, 463–472; Dunn, 2003, 383–388; Schenke, 2004, 116–142; Theißen & Merz, 2011, 232–241; Schröter, 2012, 196–213), since it fits well with the early Jewish world of Jesus' thought. It can also explain the texts we read in the Gospels and integrate many individual traits of the tradition.

The profile of Jesus' proclamation of God's kingdom consists in a characteristic linking of the temporal perspectives. On the one hand, Jesus shares with his early Jewish milieu the expectation that the *basileia* will be implemented in the (near) future. Thus, the second petition of the Lord's Prayer expresses the urgent hope: "Your kingdom come!" (Luke 11:2, see 6:20–21; 13:28–29; Mark 14:25). On the other hand, Jesus sees the *basileia* as already dawning in the present and as changing the present for the better. Jesus' exorcisms are concrete experiences of this dawning. He interprets them as the effects of the *basileia*: "But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you" (Luke 11:20; see 10:9). The aorist ἔφθασεν/*ephthasen* ("has come") denotes the arrival of the *basileia* as something that has already happened, and the motif of "the finger of God" recalls the marvelous action of YHWH in Exod 8:15. The overthrowing of the demons, who belong to the rule of Satan, shows that the good rule of God is already a reality and is spreading (see Mark 3:24–27). In principle, the power of the evil one, of Satan, is broken, and Jesus appears as the agent of God's reign.

The following thesis can explain the source of Jesus' certainty that the reign of God had already begun in his activity (Theißen & Merz, 2011, 196–198; Ebner, 2004, 100–104, 107–108). If we may trace the affirmation in Luke 10:18 back to the historical Jesus (thus Theobald, 2005, 188–190), we have evidence of a vision of Jesus that makes use of a mythological image: "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning." In the apocalyptic thought world, Satan's fall signifies the beginning of the eschatological kingdom of God (*As. Mos.* 10:1; *Jub.* 23:29; *T. Dan* 5:10–11; 1QM 6:5–6; 12:7–9; 17:5–8; Rev 12:7–10). This creates in heaven the presuppositions that allow the *basileia* to begin on earth as well. It is realized in Jesus' exorcisms, in which he exercises lordship over the demons, the instruments of Satan. It is possible that this experience by Jesus is also reflected in the temptation narrative in Mark 1:12–13, which likewise demonstrates that the power of Satan has been broken in the confrontation with the person of Jesus. The motif of peace with the animals, which is employed in this text, is a characteristic of the end time according to Isa 11:6–8 (see 65:25; Hos 2:20; Job 5:22–23) and shows that in Jesus, the *basileia* has already become a reality.

In Jesus, the present reality and the future of the kingdom of God are related to each other, as the parables of "growing" show: seed (Mark 4:26–29), mustard seed (Mark 4:30–32; Matt

13:31–32; Luke 13:18–19), and yeast (Matt 13:33; Luke 13:20–21). The imagery of growth, where something great emerges from very small beginnings, makes clear the process whereby the inconspicuous beginnings of the *basileia* in Jesus' activity will lead to the great consummation in the future. This makes the present immensely important, as the time in which Israel must take a decision. This finds expression in Matt 5:25–26: it is still possible, while on one's way to the judge, to prevent him from pronouncing judgment.

The beginning of the *basileia* in Jesus' activity concerns political reality, because in the tradition of Israel, the fully realized *basileia* means the overcoming of all evil political and social structures. Accordingly, Jesus begins to gather Israel, symbolized in the group of the "Twelve" who formed the closer circle of Jesus' pupils. Lists of their names are transmitted in Mark 3:16–19, Matt 10:2–5, and Luke 6:14–16. The "Twelve" stand symbolically for the 12 tribes of Israel, by recalling the function of the 12 patriarchs as representatives of the 12 tribes of Israel. The gathering and restoration of the 12 tribes – only two of which, Judah and Benjamin (and the Levites), still lived in the land of Israel at the time of Jesus – was regarded as an expression of YHWH's eschatological salvific action for his covenant people (Mic 2:12; Sir 48:10; *Pss. Sol.* 17:26). The "Twelve" function as a prophetic sign, through which Jesus symbolically anticipates the dawn of the *basileia* and the restoration of the national unity of Israel in the context of the reign of God. At the same time, this means the end of the foreign Roman rule, for the *basileia* can be a time of salvation for Israel only when God's righteousness is accomplished for Israel without being thwarted by any alien power. Rome's rule is indirectly delegitimized as something provisional; it loses its universal significance. This consciousness that one is already living in the reign of God implies an internal distance and freedom vis-à-vis the political power.

Jesus' political strategy, which is connected to his message of the reign of God, unites the renunciation of violence and political resistance (Schreiber, 2013, esp. 183–184). On the one hand, the commandment to love the enemies (Luke 6:27–28; Matt 5:43–44) demands the renunciation of violence against all political oppressors, religious adversaries, or personal enemies. The only response to enmity is to be goodness and social acceptance, in order to break the principle of vengeance and to overcome violence. On the other hand, the renunciation of violence does not mean that one is to suffer passively and to give assent to violence and oppression. Jesus demands extreme reactions to the experience of violence: one should turn the other cheek, give away even one's undergarment, and go along on a second mile (Matt 5:39b–41; Luke 6:29). Those who perpetrate violence are to be provoked to end the spiral of violence when they see this demonstrative self-surrender that makes the violence and injustice inescapably visible. This means that even the oppressed can retain the initiative (and hence their dignity) and offer resistance actively (even if in a nonviolent manner).

The group around Jesus lives the critical distance vis-à-vis the political power in their own social structures, which shatter the usual hierarchies (Mark 10:42–44). In its specific way of living, this group shows the beginning of the new order in God's reign and is thus a subversive countermovement to the sociopolitical structures. The reign of God acquires a concrete societal locus in the Jesus movement.

It is there that the gathering of Israel, as a hallmark of the *basileia*, takes a concrete form, when Jesus eats and holds feasts with tax collectors and sinners, that is to say, with socially marginalized persons. This is the theme of an accusation leveled at Jesus in the villages in which this table fellowship takes place, because it disturbs the social order: "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" (Luke 7:34); "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" (Mark 2:16). In the parables of the "lost" – the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son (Luke 15:4–24) – Jesus gives a theological justification of this praxis. The gathering concerns first and foremost the scattered, the outcasts, and the peripheral persons in Israel, whom God wants to win back in his *basileia*. God lays down no preconditions for this: it is God himself who creates the presuppositions. In keeping with the ancient prophetic tradition, the great feast (Isa 25:6), the wedding feast (Isa 62:5; see Mark 2:19), in God's reign has already begun with Jesus' banquets, and all of Israel is invited to this feast.

This group embodies the new order of God's reign. At the same time, it represents a counter-society to the social order in the villages of Galilee, because the withdrawal of Jesus and his disciples from the ties to family and village community, as well as the praxis of an itinerant existence (at least for a time), breaks with a regulated family and working life (e.g. Mark 1:16–20; 3:31–35; 6:1–5; 10:28–30; Luke 9:57–62; 14:26/Matt 10:37; Luke 12:51–53/Matt 10:34–36/*Gos. Thom.* 16; see Ebner, 2004, 145–146, 153–163; Moxnes, 2003, 51–53). Doing without staff, bag, purse, and even an extra tunic (Luke 9:3; 10:4) denotes a conscious dependence and makes this lifestyle a prophetic sign of solid confidence in the reign of God that has now dawned.

Jesus also calls into question the customary patriarchal structures of society and the authorities when he criticizes the behavior of the religious elite, the scribes and Pharisees (Mark 12:38–40; Luke 11:39–42, 52). In God's reign, there is only one who is the teacher and father of all, namely God himself (Matt 23:8–9), and all the others are brothers and sisters, equal in rank (Luke 6:41–42; 17:3; Mark 3:35; 10:15, 25), who address God as "Father" (Luke 6:36; 11:2, 11–13; 12:30; *Gos. Thom.* 3:4; 99).

The new order of the *basileia* includes an option for the absolutely poor, the sick, and the destitute in Israel, to whom Jesus promises a complete change of their circumstances for the better (Luke 6:20–21; 7:22). He criticizes wealth; more precisely, he criticizes the stark socioeconomic difference (Mark 10:17–27; 12:38–44; Luke 16:1–31) that was evident in Galilee in Jesus' days between the few rich large landowners and the many small farmers, tenants, and day laborers whose existence was always precarious (Jensen, 2011, 222–223; Stegemann, 2010, 248–257; Theißen & Merz, 2011, 164–167; Ebner, 2004, 57–59). The just social order of God's reign is already realized in individual cases in the Jesus movement, for example, when the beggar Bartimaeus is healed and joins the group (Mark 10:46–52). The reign of God is, of course, not only a cipher for a transformed societal program with which one could conduct politics. Rather, it is based on the expectation that God himself will implement the renewal of Israel.

The Kingdom of God in Paul and the Other Epistles

The conception of God's reign soon lost its central position among the first Christians, because

after Easter, the importance of Jesus as the heavenly Kyrios moved ever more strongly into the foreground. The conception is found only rarely in the epistles, and not as a specific theme (Vanoni & Heininger, 2002, 107–115; Schreiber, 2014, 43–45). This shows that, for the first Christians, it largely remained tied to Jesus' preaching.

For Paul, "to inherit the kingdom of God" becomes a designation of the future salvation, with which, however, an ethical motivation for the present can be linked (1 Cor 6:9–10; 15:50; Gal 5:19–21; later Eph 5:5; Jas 2:5). The kingdom of God, parallel to *doxa* ("glory"), appears at 1 Thess 2:2 as the definitive goal of the call to join the community of Christ. Heb 12:26–28 looks forward to "a kingdom that cannot be shaken" at the end of the ages, after the cosmic new creation.

The reign of God can also be linked directly to the present. For Paul, it is the reality that constitutes the specific quality of the Christian life (Rom 14:17); he knows that it is active in the present in *dynamis* ("power"; 1 Cor 4:20). When Col 4:11 speaks of "co-workers for the kingdom of God," the *basileia*, as the present-day reality of salvation, becomes a cipher for the Christian proclamation.

In the framework of apocalyptic thought, the Easter conviction that God had raised Jesus from the dead was linked to the idea of Jesus' heavenly exaltation and installation as God's eschatological vicegerent. This meant a theological transformation of Jesus' preaching that the reign of God had dawned, a reign that was immediately tied to his person. Christ now appeared as God's eschatological representative and co-ruler (1 Thess 1:10; Phil 2:9–11; Rom 1:3–4; alluding to Ps 110:1 in Rom 8:34; Col 3:1; Eph 1:20–21; Heb 1:3–4). In 1 Cor 15:20–28, Christ takes on the function of the heavenly ruler in the unfolding of the events of the last age, before he ultimately hands over the perfect rule to God alone. Behind this lies the model of the "Messiah" who establishes the kingdom of God as the eschatological representative whom God has commissioned. Some epistles speak of the *basileia* of Christ. God's saving action can be linked to "the kingdom of his beloved Son" (Col 1:13), who shares in God's universal power since the act of creation, which took place "in him," the Son (Col 1:15–18). Later epistles speak of the (heavenly) rule of Christ, which they can indicate as the goal of the salvation of those who belong to him (2 Thess 1:4–5; 2 Tim 4:1, 18; 2 Pet 1:11). Formulations such as "the kingdom of Christ and of God" (Eph 5:5; Heb 1:8) show that one and the same rule is involved here: it is founded in God, and Christ shares in it as his representative. The rule of Christ is a part of the rule of God.

The Kingdom of God in the Gospels

In the Synoptic Gospels, the idea of God's reign appears as the central category for the presentation of Jesus' message (Schreiber, 2014, 31–36).

In the Gospel of Mark, the conception of God's reign characterizes the present moment of Jesus as the time of the dawning of a new rule. Mark 1:15, at the beginning of Jesus' public activity, gives a programmatic summary of his preaching: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." The perfect form ἤγγικεν/*ēngiken* ("has

come") connotes the temporal aspect: God's good rule is now dawning on earth, it is already present to some extent, and it will soon be fully realized. It is now a contrast to all rulers and authorities, and it is manifested in Jesus' healings and exorcisms. The discussion about Beelzebub makes it clear that the reign of God is already pushing back the power of Satan in Jesus' exorcisms (Mark 3:22–27). Jesus' pupils can understand his parables, because to them "has been given the secret of the kingdom of God" (4:11). The parables of the growing seed and the mustard seed (4:26–32) are explicitly marked as a comparison that describes the coming of the *basileia* of God: it is initially inconspicuous, but it is unstoppable.

The middle part of the Gospel of Mark focuses on the future, perfected rule of God, which will soon be accomplished (9:1). One who confesses his belief in Jesus' message (8:38), who practices the new order of the rule of God precisely vis-à-vis "these little ones," those at the bottom of society (9:42, 47), and who does not succumb to the danger of wealth (10:23–25), may hope to share in the perfected rule of God. The future aspect is obvious when the *basileia* is parallel to "(eternal) life" (9:43, 45; 10:17). At the Last Supper, Jesus himself expresses by means of an image his confidence that he will be present at the eschatological feast of the rule of God: he will drink wine again in the coming *basileia* (14:25).

Children become examples of the reception of the *basileia* (10:14–15), because classical antiquity gave them the societal role of subordination and serving; they fulfill thereby Jesus' demand that one renounce one's status in the community (10:42–44). The rule of God is realized in the double commandment to love God and one's neighbor (12:28–34), and it integrates the death of Jesus on the cross as the ultimate act of his serving (15:42–46 and 10:45). In the Gospel of Mark, the conception of the rule of God is given a new content in view of a changed social behavior in the communities.

The Gospel of Matthew characteristically speaks of the "kingdom of heaven," which occurs roughly 50 times and is a key concept for the contents of Jesus' message. "Heaven" is a metonym for "God": in the Jewish tradition, it denotes the majesty of the God who reigns in heaven and intervenes only indirectly in the world. Matthew emphasizes more strongly than Mark that Jesus' message is anchored in God's salvific plan. He anchors it already in John the Baptist (Matt 3:2) and affirms the abiding task of proclaiming this message to Israel (10:7) and to all the peoples (28:19–20). In Matthew too, God's reign unfolds in the teaching and the miracles of Jesus, who works in Galilee "teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people" (4:23). Matthew creates a new emphasis, especially in the Sermon on the Mount, when he applies the *basileia* to the correct existential praxis of the community (Vanoni & Heininger, 2002, 104–105). To "strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness" (6:33) means to expound Torah anew in the light of the *basileia*; this exposition, which orients human behavior to God's mercy (see 18:10–14), aims at the righteousness "that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees" (5:20). The kingdom of heaven thus becomes a future reality at which one aims (e.g. 7:21; 25:34) and into which one can enter, but which thereby already guides and shapes one's conduct in the present.

The parabolic discourse forms a second focus (Matt 13). In the ten parables that Matthew

explicitly calls parables of the kingdom, he clarifies what it means to take the decision in favor of the *basileia* in the present (six in 13:24–47; also 18:23–35; 20:1–16; 22:2–14; 25:1–13). The kingdom of the Son of Man (13:41; 16:28; 20:21) brings the exalted Christ into the *basileia* as God's representative, to whom all authority is given (28:18). When Peter receives the "keys of the kingdom of heaven," he (and with him, the community) receives the authority to expound the tradition of Israel: he is able to "bind" and to "loose" (16:19). In Matthew, the community does not understand itself as the realization of the *basileia* in the world. It lives in the expectation of the *basileia* and in the orientation to it.

In the Gospel of Luke, the syntagma *basileia tou theou* characterizes the period of Jesus' ministry: "The law and the prophets (are) until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is proclaimed" (Luke 16:16; my translation). God's eschatological new beginning with his people Israel takes place in Jesus. It does not signify a salvation-historical breach with Israel, but is realized within the history of Israel. The *basileia* is present in Jesus' working and teaching (4:43; 11:20; 14:15–24; 17:20–21). Jesus gives the "Twelve" the authority to proclaim the reign of God and to heal the sick; in this way, they continue his own activity (9:1–2, 11; see 10:9, 11). The *basileia* that is perfected in the future also plays a role, as in the image of the great banquet in which people from all the nations will have a share together with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the prophets (13:28–29; see 22:16, 18). It appears as a heavenly reality into which the individual can enter after death (16:19–31), although 23:42 speaks of the reign *of Jesus*. Here, Luke takes up the idea that the exalted Christ shares in God's reign. The parable of the great dinner (14:15–24) is the only one that Luke designates as a parable of the kingdom of God, linking this notion to the social option that is typical of this evangelist: after the first guests refuse the invitation, the householder gathers together "the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame" (14:21; see 6:20). The parable of the ten pounds looks forward to the time before Jesus will return in the perfectly realized *basileia* and characterizes this as a period of testing and of commitment to the *basileia* (19:11–27).

The Acts of the Apostles takes this up when it employs "the kingdom of God" as a keyword for the Christian proclamation (Acts 19:8; 20:25), with a christological expansion through "the name of Jesus Christ" in 8:12 (see 28:23, 31). Even after Easter, therefore, the *basileia* remains tied to Christ (Wolter, 2009, 298–301). When the "reign of God" in Acts 1:3 harks back once again to Jesus' preaching, this is immediately followed in 1:6–8 by a relativization of an imminent expectation that is limited to Israel and by an opening for the pupils' role as witnesses before the whole world, a role that is based on the working of the Spirit. The *basileia* is now a part of the proclamation of Christ, and the future aspect can be heard clearly: "It is through many persecutions that we must enter the kingdom of God" (14:22).

All that remains of the kingdom of God in the Gospel of John are rudiments, when Jesus in his conversation with Nicodemus links participation in the *basileia* to a new birth (John 3:3, 5). The *basileia* recedes almost completely behind the Christological focus on the figure of Jesus himself. The true, eternal life is decided by participation in this figure (e.g. 3:14–19; 6:29–58).

The Kingdom of God in the Revelation of John

The conception of God's kingdom once again becomes important at the end of the 1st century CE in Revelation. The vision of the throne room in Rev 4 has a strictly theocentric structure: it sees God's throne in the center of heaven, surrounded by various heavenly beings in concentric circles, so that God appears as the universal, omnipotent king of heaven and earth. This divine rule is contrasted with the kingdoms of the world in 11:15–18. The expulsion of Satan from heaven recalls the motif of the fall of Satan in the Jesus tradition (Luke 10:18) and signals the beginning of the eschatological implementation of God's reign (Rev 12:7–9). But it is the new Jerusalem, with God's throne in its center, a city accessible to all, that appears at the end of the book as the image of the perfectly realized reign of God (20:1–22:5). By that point, "Babylon," a cipher for the political and economic power of Rome, has already been destroyed (18:1–19:21), and "the Lord our God the Almighty reigns" (19:6).

The exalted Christ shares in God's rule as his eschatological representative; he rules together with God (Rev 11:15; 12:10; 21:22–23; 22:1, 3) and sits with God on the throne (3:21; 22:1, 3). Christ already appears as a heavenly ruler in the description of the epiphany to the seer John at the beginning of the book (1:9–20), and the authority to bring about the end time is handed over to him – in the figure of the Lamb – in the vision of God's heavenly throne room (5:1–14). This includes his function of carrying out "the harvest of the earth," the eschatological judgment (14:14–16; 19:11–21). To reign with Christ for a 1,000 years, before God definitively perfects his rule, is promised to those who have remained faithful to their relationship with Christ in the face of the Roman emperor cult (20:1–6). The Christian's identity is defined by belonging to Christ as ruler (and via him, to God's rule). The doxology at the beginning of the book praises Christ as the "ruler of the kings of the earth" (1:5; see 19:16), who draws into his rule those who belong to him: he "made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father" (1:6; see 1:9; 5:10), and he possesses "glory and dominion for ever and ever" (1:6; see 11:15).

The Kingdom of God in the Early Church

The theme of the kingdom of God tends to recede from the center of interest in the period of the early church and acquires a conceptual theological significance only in isolated cases. One can distinguish as an ideal type of classification four principal trends in its understanding from the 2nd to the 4th centuries CE, each of which became influential in the further course of history (Viviano, 2014, 35–56; Knapp, 1996, 31).

In the 2nd century CE, one strand of the New Testament tradition, the *eschatological interpretation*, continued in the Apostolic Fathers. The kingdom of God appears as a future reality that guarantees God's universal salvific will for the entire creation, and the coming of the kingdom is expected. To some extent, it is linked with the motivation to ethical conduct (at the end of the 1st cent. CE, *1 Clem.* 42.3; 50.3; then *2 Clem.* 11.7; 12.1; *Did.* 9.4; 10.5; *Barn.* 7.11; Ign. *Eph.* 16.1; *Phld.* 3.3; Pol. *Phil.* 5.3). We also find chiliastic ideas that go back to the 1,000-year reign of Christ on earth in Rev 20:1–6 and that hope for an earthly rule of the righteous (*Barn.* 15.4–5; Papias in Eus. *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.12; Iren. *Haer.* 5.33.3; Just. 1 *Apol.* 11; 52.3; *Dial.* 84.4; 140.2).

A *spiritual-mystical interpretation* understands the kingdom of God either as a spiritual attitude

in the soul of the believers in the present or as a future state of salvation in heaven after the resurrection; in either case, the focus is on the salvation of the individual. Origen (d. c. 254 CE) equates Christ with the kingdom of God; Christ is himself the kingdom (*autobasileia*; Or. *Comm. Matt.* 10.5; 14.7). He internalizes and spiritualizes the kingdom of God as the perfection of the soul by means of reason, wisdom, and virtue, and discerns it "in us" (see Luke 17:21); at the same time, Origen holds fast to the eschatological idea and links the kingdom with the resurrection of the dead (Or. *Or.* 25; *De principiis*). This, of course, means that the kingdom of God loses its historical dimension, the implementation of God's righteousness in peace and just social structures. The Christological intensification is also found in gnosis. For example, Marcion is quoted: *In evangelio est Dei regnum Christus ipse* (Tert. *Marc.* 4.33).

After Emperor Constantine (d. 337 CE) had allowed Christian praxis and indeed favored this as a bond that would unify the entire empire, a *political interpretation* of the kingdom of God became possible at the beginning of the 4th century CE, which equates it with the political empire under the rule of a Christian emperor. According to Eusebius of Caesarea (d. 340 CE), the divinely endowed Constantine realizes the kingdom of God on earth in the Roman Empire, and this is why Eusebius defines monarchy as the best form of government (Eus. *Laud. Const.* 3.3–7; 4.3; 5.1–2). The Roman Empire coalesces with the church.

Almost a 100 years later, it was necessary to look with sober eyes at the identification of political rule with the kingdom of God, and the question arose once more: where is this kingdom to be found? An *ecclesial interpretation* now identifies the kingdom of God or of Christ with the church. We find the first approaches to this interpretation in Augustine of Hippo (d. 430 CE), for whom the kingdom of God ultimately consists of eternal life with God in heaven (Augustine, *De civitate Dei* [*The City of God*]). He can no longer understand it on earth as the realm of the emperor (Aug. *Civ.* 19.21); he equates it with the church: "The church is already now the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of heaven" (20.9). In this way, the church corresponds to the 1,000-year kingdom of the saints (see Rev 20:1–6). But Augustine is aware of the eschatological reservation: the church is provisional. It unites in itself both good and bad persons, and it is only in heaven that it finds its perfection.

Historiography

Research into the historical Jesus has repeatedly sought to dissolve the tension between the present and the future dimensions of the kingdom of God in favor of one aspect, either by postulating a non-eschatological Jesus or by understanding the *basileia* wholly as an event in the future (for an overview, see Theißen & Merz, 2011, 223–226; for recent titles, Schreiber, 2007, 144; Frey, 2006, 55–58, 68–79, takes a critical view of a non-eschatological Jesus). The texts themselves argue for a combination of the two temporal levels. Against the supposition that the kingdom of God should be understood only "as a symbol for the actual sphere of access to the saving presence of God, a sphere which is that of a household" (Eck, 2011, 72), we must bear in mind the real political significance of the Jewish conception of God as king.

The relationship of the kingdom of God to the prevailing political power is described by means

of keywords such as "utopia" (Beavis, 2006; see Moxnes, 2003, 109–110: "imagined places") or "heterotopy" (Stegemann, 2010, 323, 345–348: a movement of the poor). More recently, stronger importance has been attached to the national-political aspect of the traditional conception. It has long been acknowledged that Jesus did not act as a revolutionary ready to use violence. E.P. Sanders (1996, 275–277) speaks of the restoration of Israel, the people of 12 tribes, which is accompanied by the separation of the elect from the godless. N.T. Wright (1996, 171–174, 202–209, 490–493) sees in Jesus a national hope for Israel, which he understands as a renewal of the covenant and a political liberation, but not as a violent revolution. R.A. Horsley (2003; 2011, 98–105) understands the *basileia* as a concrete position taken against the Roman occupation and emphasizes the anti-imperial viewpoint and the potential for political criticism. He interprets Jesus as a peasant social revolutionary who aimed at establishing societal justice in the villages of Galilee in the face of the economic exploitation by the elites. Jesus pursued this goal by prompting the solidarity of the peasant population and a covenantal renewal of the families and villages (Horsley, 2011, 88–105, 131–153; 2010, 132–136). G. Theißen (2002; 2004, 248–251) coins the concept of "symbolic politics": Jesus acts politically by means of symbolic actions such as exorcisms, without engaging in violence. In the group around Jesus, an alternative ancient ideal of government, which follows humane principles and functions without oppression, is transferred to simple persons; the renunciation of violence and wealth displays a "downwards transfer of upper-class values."

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