

The Kingdom of God in the Gospel of Mark

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It is likely that the Gospel of Mark is an example of the gospel as preached by the Apostle Peter. Though not an apostle himself, Mark was long involved with the apostolic circle (see references to him in Acts and in Paul's writings). After helping Paul and Barnabas, he had a special relationship to Peter, who called him "my son" (1 Pet. 5:13).

Mark's Gospel seems to be an expanded version of Peter's sermons summarized in Acts. For example, consider Acts 10, where under the Spirit's direction Peter opened the door of salvation for the Gentiles. His sermon to them is surveyed in verses 34-43. In his introduction (vv. 34-35) Peter recognized that God designed the gospel for all nations. Then he made these main points:

1. **Messiah's works** (36-39a). God's word had come to Israel through Jesus, the Messiah,¹ Lord of all. This has happened following the ministry of John the Baptist. Anointed with God's Spirit, Jesus went about doing good and delivering from the devil. The apostles witnessed to these facts.
2. **Messiah's death and resurrection** (39b-41). Though shamefully slain by the Jews, Jesus was raised from death and appeared to the chosen witnesses.
3. **Forgiveness through faith in Messiah** (42-43). Jesus commanded the witnesses to testify that God has chosen Him to rule (meaning of "judge") over those now dead or alive. Those who believe in Him receive forgiveness.

Observe that this sermon of Peter's in Acts 10 says nothing about Jesus' origin or divinity. Neither does it explain the meaning of His death. Instead, it looks at the facts of His miraculous works, His death, and His resurrection—and points to His coming rule. These are the emphases in apostolic gospel preaching as recorded in Acts, also in the Gospel of Mark. Like them, Mark presents a Person to believe in—but whose story is incomplete. This Person did works that, if continued, could have transformed the world materially as well as spiritually. He could have brought a kingdom on earth such as described by all the prophets. And He will. That is the point.

Jesus constantly mentioned the kingdom. If we misunderstand what the kingdom is, we twist His message. Listed below are verses in Mark that either refer to the kingdom directly or bear on its meaning. (References in parentheses are less direct.) We will consider how they help to define the kingdom. We will see that throughout His ministry He referred to the kingdom as future. In a few references it could possibly—but not necessarily—be seen as present.

1:14-15 The time has come; the kingdom has drawn near.

This was the message the Lord preached, His good news about the kingdom. Hearers were to repent (in order to enter the coming kingdom). He began preaching this message in Galilee after John's imprisonment and preached it all over Galilee (1:38-39; cf. Matt. 9:35).

The fact that the time had come and that the kingdom was "near" shows that the kingdom was not God's rule in the heart nor His universal rule. Such rules need no special time nor approach; they are always here: God has always ruled over the universe and in humble hearts. But this "near" kingdom must be one with a history, one that could come.

¹Messiah is a better translation than Christ. Both mean "anointed," but Messiah retains the connotation of rulership, which *Christ* has lost.

By not defining the kingdom, Jesus knew how the Jews would understand it: as the kingdom they were waiting for, their great hope for the future. They expected God to restore the kingdom He had taken away.² Even after Jesus' entire earthly ministry, the apostles still had this expectation (see Acts 1:6). They had good reason for their hope; the final kingdom had been described in many prophecies, starting in Genesis.³ Even as late as the birth of John and Jesus, there were several such prophecies (Luke 1:32-33, 51-55, 67-75; 2:25-32, 38). These prophecies of the kingdom often repeated certain themes, such as, the restoration of Israel and Judah in the Lord's favor, Jerusalem as the capital city, the Ruler from the tribe of Judah and the house of David, all the nations in subjection to Him, universal peace and justice, an eternal covenant, material abundance. The kingdom would be spiritual, because from God, but also material and political!

In short, the gospel Jesus preached had a solid basis in the Old Testament. Can we preach the gospel accurately without knowing those Scriptures?

1:27 His power over unclean spirits

This power, of course, showed that He could overcome the wicked world ruler in this present age. The devil's agents knew who Jesus was (24-25).

1:30-31 His many miracles

Hebrews 6:5 gives a commentary on Jesus' miracles. It refers to those who "tasted the good word of God and the powers of the world to come." "The good word" is an expression from Jeremiah 33:14, referring to the message about the glorious future kingdom in which Israel will be restored (see footnote 3). "Powers" translates the same Greek word as "miracles." "The world [Greek, age] to come" is a synonym for that future kingdom.⁴ Those who "tasted" this word and these miracles briefly saw Jesus doing what He will do when He comes in His kingdom. He proved that He had the powers of the Messiah—and could pass them to His apostles. But after that time of witness, the miracles ceased until He returns. Even the divinely inspired author of Hebrews, when speaking of such signs, wonders, and miracles, used the past tense (Heb. 2:4).

(2:19-20) The Groom's friends could not mourn while He was present.

Jesus was the Groom. His presence had to bring joy. By implication, He will again bring joy when He returns.

²Micah 4:8 identified the coming kingdom as "the first dominion."

³See Genesis 12:3, promising God's blessing for all families of the world, and 49:10-11, describing the worldwide and wealthy kingdom ruled over by a descendant of Judah. For examples in one of the prophets, see Jeremiah 3:14-18; 23:5-6; 30:8-9, 18-22; 31:1-14, 15-22, 23-30, 31-34, 35-40; 32:15, 36-44; 33:6-26. In contrast to most of his messages of doom, Jeremiah's promises of the future kingdom were called the "good word" of the Lord (29:10; 33:14).

⁴The "age to come" did not begin with Jesus or even at Pentecost. Years later Paul still contrasted "this age" with "the one to come" (Eph. 1:21).

3:14 He chose apostles to preach His message and use His power.

See comments under 1:30-31. In his account of the apostles' early preaching, Matthew makes it clear that their main message—like that of Jesus—was the nearness of the kingdom (Matt. 10:7).

4:10-11 Parables revealed the secrets of the kingdom to disciples.

“Secrets of the kingdom” were truths not previously revealed. These secrets did not abrogate earlier prophecies about the kingdom nor change its nature.⁵ Instead, they *added* facts not known before. It is important to interpret these parables in harmony with what the disciples could have understood at the time; Jesus explained all the parables to them (4:33-34), and they understood (Matt. 13:51-52).

4:26-29 Parable of the kingdom and the growing seed

In this and the other kingdom parables, interpreters find the kingdom according to their previous understanding. Those who think the kingdom is purely “spiritual” see it already in the seed when first sown—or the seed when growing. As the disciples understood the kingdom, however, they would have seen it in the harvest. What “secret” was revealed? Possibly two: the kingdom would come (1) only after an additional time of preparation unforeseen by the prophets, (2) with no need for human help.

4:30-32 Parable of the kingdom and the mustard seed

The same observations apply as in the previous parable. The hearers would have understood that the kingdom is not the seed but the tree. Old Testament prophecies had prepared them to think of the kingdom as a tree (Ezek. 17:5-6). Nothing had prepared them for some of the popular modern interpretations.⁶

8:29 The great confession: You are the Messiah.

This confession, found in all four gospels and elsewhere (Acts 2:36; 5:42; 9:22; 17:3, etc.), means that Jesus is the promised King. It is He who will accomplish God's plan.

8:38 Jesus referred to His future coming in glory.

He contrasted the sinful present with the glorious future. He will then be ashamed of (not admit into His kingdom?) those ashamed of Him now.

⁵One popular interpretation is that they reveal a “mystery form” of the kingdom. If so, most of the prophesied features of the kingdom are absent. There is no need to assume such a “form.” Both in and after the “secrets,” Jesus still presented His kingdom as future and glorious, with never a hint to distinguish supposed present and future forms.

⁶Such as, for example: “The parable of the mustard seed suggests the rapid but unsubstantial growth of the mystery aspect of the kingdom” (Scofield Bible, p. 1015). Conceivably, the Parable of the Tares, earlier in Matthew 13, could have suggested such “unsubstantial growth.” But there is no such preparation in Mark 4; in context the parable is clearly encouraging, not a warning. Even in Matthew 13, the field of mixed wheat and tares is the world (v. 38), not the kingdom, which does not appear until the end of the age (vv. 39–43).

9:1 Some standing there would see the kingdom of God come with power.

This promise clearly implied that the kingdom had not yet begun; it was future. Nor did it come at Pentecost; not “some” but all of those “standing there” were present at Pentecost. This promise was fulfilled in the Transfiguration (vv. 2-8), as 2 Peter 1:16-18 clearly states: three of the apostles had a preview of the Lord’s “power and coming [as] eyewitnesses of his majesty . . . in the holy mount.”

(9:33-35) The apostles argued about who was greatest.

This argument concerned their relative importance in the coming kingdom, as seen in the parallel passage in Matthew 18:1.

9:42-47 Eternal consequences of offenses

Entering into life (vv. 43, 45) is clearly future and is equivalent to entering into the kingdom of God (v. 47).

10:14-15 The kingdom belongs to the child-like.

In 8:38; 9:1,47 the kingdom had just been seen as future. Yet, the future can belong to someone now, as plainly stated in 1 Corinthians 3:21-23 (“All things are yours...things present, or things to come; all are yours”). Similarly, the Lord preached both before and after the Sermon on the Mount that the kingdom was “near” (Matt. 4:17; 10:7), not present. Yet, in that sermon all the beatitudes pictured true believers as owners of the future kingdom (Matt. 5:3-10).

10:17-30 The difficulty of inheriting eternal life (the kingdom)

This story of the rich young ruler begins with his question how to inherit eternal life (v. 17). Three times this is equated with entering the future kingdom (vv. 23,24,25), which is the same as being saved (v. 26), which is again equated with receiving eternal life “in the age to come” (v. 30). The best way to reconcile all these expressions is to realize that the future kingdom is the main aspect of salvation (Heb. 1:14; 2:3, 5, 10; 9:28; etc.). To enter eternal life (Matt. 25:46) is above all to inherit the future kingdom (Matt. 25:34). This perfectly agrees with 9:42-47 (above).

10:37-40 The request for glory in that kingdom

Even on their final trip to Jerusalem (10:1, 32), Jesus’ disciples certainly expected a future kingdom. James and John asked Jesus to let them sit, in His glory, on each side of Him (v. 37). Instead of contradicting the whole idea, Jesus said that such honor would be given to those “for whom it is prepared” (v. 40).

(10:45) The outline and meaning of Mark

As stated before, Mark—like the apostolic preaching—presents a Person to believe in. The two parts of this verse reflect the two parts of Mark: The Son of Man (1) ministers and (2) gives His life. Only rarely (as here and 14:24) does Mark allude to the purpose of Jesus’ sacrifice.

11:9-10 Praise to Him who comes as Ruler

These verses are full of Scriptural language from the Egyptian Hallel (Psa. 113-118), used by the Jews on many occasions. As seen in verses 1-7, Jesus was purposefully fulfilling Zechariah 9:9 (the King coming to Jerusalem on a donkey). The people excitedly looked to Him as King (“He that cometh,” v. 9, was a special name for the expected “King of Israel,” John 12:12). He would rule over “the kingdom of our father David, that cometh” (v. 10). Little did they know that there would be a long gap before He would fulfill Zechariah 9:10 by speaking peace to the nations. But a gap before the kingdom does not change its meaning nor prevent it from coming.

12:34 A teacher not far from the kingdom

Before the kingdom comes, a person can draw near to it and even enter it in the sense of enrolling in it. Occasionally there is a similar thought in the epistles, where the kingdom is normally presented as our future inheritance (James 2:5; Eph. 5:5; 1 Cor. 6:9-10; etc.). As those sure to share in that inheritance (Col. 1:12), we have already been delivered out of the darkness we now live in and been transferred to that future kingdom (Col. 1:13).

(12:35-37) How can the Messiah be the Son of David?

By asking this, Jesus did not deny that Messiah must be David’s Son. But by pointing out that David called Him “Lord,” He showed that Messiah must be more than a mere man. The implications of this fact are not shown in the Synoptic Gospels but in John and the epistles.

(13:9-10) The Good News will be preached to all nations.

This message before the end is the same one Jesus preached (and we preach), that the kingdom is near. In our eagerness to expand and explain the message, we can proclaim Jesus’ divine nature and the purpose of His sacrifice. But we should never neglect the basic facts that He is King and in Him the kingdom drew near.⁷

(14:61-62) Are you Messiah, the Son of God?

It was Jesus’ response to this question that got Him convicted and executed. Probably the high priest did not mean to ask if Jesus claimed deity; “Son of God” was used of kings, including Messiah (Psa. 2:7). Jesus’ response, however, spoke of sitting beside God and coming from heaven—Messiah indeed but greater than they imagined! Compare the same confession in 8:29 and “coming in glory” in 8:38.

15:2, 9, 12, 18, 26, 32 Jesus was crucified as King of the Jews.

Six repetitions of this thought certainly shows the emphasis. And it is not simply ironic. Israel will some day look with repentance on the God they have pierced (Zech. 12:10); in that day a fountain will be opened to cleanse them (Zech. 13:1). And then the Lord shall be King over them as well as “over all the earth” (Zech. 14:9)

⁷It is enlightening to compare the accounts in Acts with the epistles written later to the same churches. Assuming that Acts faithfully records the evangelistic messages, these apparently did not include Jesus’ deity and the theology of His death. But such subjects were taught soon after conversion. For example, compare the sermon to the “Galatians” in Acts 13:16–41 to Gal. 1:4; 2:15–21; 3:13; 4:4–5; 6:14.

15:42-43 Joseph was waiting for the kingdom of God.

This is the last direct mention in Mark of the kingdom. It gives no hint that the kingdom had already come—because it had not.

(16:15) Preach the gospel to all creation.

This means to preach that the kingdom is still coming—and the King is Jesus. It certainly helps if we get our message straight.