

Das Reich Gottes nach den Synoptischen Evangelien  
W. Lütgert  
*The Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 11:171-174. [1900]

This is one of the many interesting treatises that have of late years been published in Germany on the subject of our Lord's conception of the kingdom of God as the central theme of His synoptical teaching. The discussion takes its starting point from the problem involved in the twofold consciousness of the early Church as on the one hand already in possession of the kingdom, and on the other hand looking forward to its coming as an eschatological development. But the apostolic Church received this twofold mode of viewing the kingdom from the Lord Himself, in whose utterances the same problem already appears, with whom consequently the solution must be sought. Lütgert duly insists that at the outset a clear distinction should be drawn between those elements and aspects of the conception of the kingdom which were the common possession of contemporary Judaism, and those features of it which were the original creation of Jesus Himself developed by way either of correction or of enlargement of the popular ideas. The usual method in carrying out this distinction has been to collect from the apocalyptic and pseudepigraphical literature the data from which to construct the current conception, and then to compare with the result thus obtained the synoptical material. Lütgert reverses this process, it seems to us for a good reason. For, apart from the discrepancies of representation in the various sources of Jewish literature, we can never be quite certain to what extent the notions there formed are or are not the peculiar property of the individual writers or of some narrow circle of kindred spirits. "The very fact that these ideas demanded literary expression proves that they were not of general currency." The better plan, therefore, is followed of ascertaining from the synoptical gospels themselves what were the outlines of the popular expectation to which our Lord attached Himself, and to make use of the Jewish sources in so far only as they harmonize with and throw further light on this picture. The first chapter accordingly gives under the title, "The Expected Kingdom" the synoptical statistics in reference to the kingdom, the synonymous terms, words used to express its opposites, and the comparison with those of the Jewish mode of representation outside the gospels.

The conclusions to which this induction leads are formulated on pp. 26, 27: the kingdom is a gift of God (not a task, a goal, an ideal, an idea or a community); the attitude of man with reference to it is purely receptive, not productive; the kingdom is wrought by God; human activity comes into consideration only in so far as it conditions the reception or loss of the kingdom; the kingdom is a product specially of the creative activity of God, it is not evolved out of the world, but imported into it from heaven; the kingdom is hidden, celestial, future, in so far as it consists in the fullness of life, angels, light, power surrounding God in heaven, not in the sense of being a resting treasure preserved in heaven or merely ideally preexistent in the purpose of God; the world receives the kingdom in so far as the latter steps forward out of its hidden state and by drawing the world into its sphere becomes manifest; God brings the kingdom, though in Christ, and Christ through the power of God, these two being entirely synonymous. These formal definitions are then supplemented by an inquiry into the reason why the above complex of expectations is designated the kingdom, which leads to the following answer: "The kingdom is in the expectation of Israel that state of the world in which God has realized His will, in which man receives what God has intended for him and does what He has commanded, in which God's purpose with reference to man has been accomplished" (p. 38). In other words, the controlling motive of the kingdom expectation is the specifically religious

one that in the present aeon the divine purpose appears thwarted, not the eudaemonistic principle of the happiness of man.

To our mind it is somewhat doubtful whether the spirit and tendency of the Jewish literature in general justify the high religious estimate thus placed upon its most characteristic idea. The Jewish hopes were far more exclusively national and in the same proportion more anthropocentric and selfish than is allowed by Lütgert on the basis of some isolated statements. This theocentric character constitutes, if we are not mistaken, the very point in which the current Messianic ideas were religiously regenerated by our Lord's teaching and once more brought into accord with the Old Testament development which had been interrupted through the perversion of Judaism. The author himself implicitly recognizes this when he points out the inadequacy and inwardly contradictory nature of the Jewish idea of righteousness. The righteous receive the kingdom; but the righteous are not those who keep the law perfectly, rather those who keep to the law and recognize its binding character, thus placing themselves on the side of God and against the world; this attitude suffices to secure them the divine grace in the forgiveness of their transgressions of the law. As is acutely pointed out here, neither the grace of God is seriously believed in, nor the majesty of the law adequately upheld. Theoretically both are recognized, but there is not the profound practical realization of the meaning of either which would have inevitably resulted if Judaism had placed itself, as, e.g., Paul did later, on the true theocentric standpoint on which neither the law is allowed to infringe upon grace nor grace upon the law.

The second, third and fourth chapters deal with the present, the hidden and the future kingdom respectively. Lütgert refuses to accept the ordinary formula which harmonizes the present and the eschatological aspects of the kingdom by representing the former as the incipient, partial realization of the latter. He strenuously insists upon the principle that, according to our Lord's teaching, not a part but the whole of the kingdom is present, and that accordingly the relation between the two aspects must be defined as that between the hidden and the manifested kingdom. Though the distinction thus formulated is a real one and correctly expresses one of the differences between the present and the final form of the kingdom, yet we do not believe that it exhaustively explains all the difference between the two. That the kingdom now is hidden and will at the end of time be manifest does not exclude its being in another sense now partially realized or possessed in contrast with the complete realization or perfection of the future aeon. Our Lord's teaching, especially in the parables, offers as many points of contact for the latter as for the former mode of representation. Lütgert's one-sided insistence upon this point is intimately connected with another peculiarity of conception. Under his hands the term βασιλεία almost entirely loses its concrete character and assumes the abstract meaning of the rule exercised by God. For this also there may be some basis in the Gospel teaching, but as a hard-and-fast form into which all the things predicated of the kingdom are to be pressed, it is misleading and unsatisfactory. It is easy to see, however, that the ease with which the author maintains the absolute identity and coextensiveness of the present and the eschatological kingdom depends largely on the abstract character to which he has reduced the content of the idea.

The most notable and valuable feature of the book is the thoroughness with which it traces the inward connection of all the various elements of our Lord's teaching, even such as lie most on the periphery, with the idea of the kingdom as its organic centre. The Messianic character of Jesus, His work in the Spirit, the names Son of God, Son of Man, faith, repentance, the following of Jesus,

the preaching of the Word, forgiveness of sins, the Fatherhood of God, grace, renunciation of the world, love, eternal life, the law, are all placed in the light of the truth of the kingdom, and in almost every instance the result is a deeper insight into the peculiarity of our Lord's handling of these conceptions. In some cases the author is hampered in the execution of this task by the one-sidedness, above remarked upon, with which he pursues his favorite idea of the present as merely the hidden form of the future kingdom. Faith, e.g., has still another and deeper rationale than that it enables the disciple to appropriate the kingdom in its hidden form. Least satisfactory of all in our opinion are the discussion of the significance of Christ's death, pp. 141-148,—which fails to do justice to the vicarious implications of Mark 10:45—and that of the difficult problem of the relation between the Church and the kingdom, where no clear distinction emerges. But, taken as a whole, the treatment of the several points abounds in original and striking observations, which, even where they one-sidedly reproduce the Gospel data, yet never fail to be suggestive and illuminating.

The closing chapter, pp. 165-179, once more, by way of recapitulation, emphasizes the fact that all the various elements of the kingdom-idea find their unity and basis in the conception of God, and points out how, notwithstanding the relative disappearance of the name and its restriction to eschatological usage, the substance of Jesus' teaching on the kingdom in its dual form underlies the entire development of doctrine in the apostolic Church.