

Florin Vârlan

General Considerations on the Notion of “God’s Kingdom”

Abstract

Although “The Lord’s Prayer” is very well known and it is uttered more times a day, it is not sure how many people fully understand the meaning of the words “your kingdom come”. However, what does the phrase “God’s Kingdom”, a phrase that we often refer to when we are praying, really mean?

Searching for an answer in the Holy Bible, we might find ourselves quite disappointed, as we cannot easily make a proper definition. Our Lord Jesus Christ reveals the Kingdom of Heaven through parables. Thus, we can assume that His listeners were familiar with the terminology used and did not need any further explanations to understand it.

In His preach, our Savior Jesus Christ revealed himself as the “way, the truth, and the life” (Jn. 14.6), and presented the Kingdom of God as a reality to which all people are invited, if they believe in Him as the Son of God.



Rev. Assist. Prof. Dr. Florin Vârlan, is Assist. Prof. of Biblical Theology at the Faculty of Theology and Sciences of Education of the Valahia University of Târgoviște, Romania

Keywords

God's Kingdom, Kingdom of Heaven, Salvation, Eternal Life

1 Introduction

Besides the fact that “The Lord’s Prayer” constitutes the best-known prayer, we are aware that we don’t have an exhaustive understanding of the content of its requests. For instance, we don’t know how many of those who utter this prayer – and maybe they say it innumerable times every day – understand the meaning of the words “Thy Kingdom come”. We know that God, Whom we address, is the King of the entire Creation, but does this request want to emphasize this aspect? Or does it want to awaken in us the desire to understand God as our Master, and to become inhabitants of His Kingdom?

The first question we come across when we open the *Catechism*, refers to the first and foremost concern that man should have in his life, namely: *salvation*¹. To be saved is to have been rescued, pulled out of a danger, having the certainty that you are out of any danger², and, in a religious sense, it means “man’s recuperation of the state of holiness, of completion.”³

Whatever the recorded meanings may be, the word makes us think of a state of security, happiness, holiness, characteristic of God’s Kingdom. Consequently, *salvation* is seen as synonymous to the eternal life of the kingdom of heaven, and those who have been saved are the inhabitants of this *Kingdom*. So, the greatest interest of each one of us is to obtain our salvation, to acquire

1 *** *Învățătura de credință creștină ortodoxă* (București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, from here: IBMBOR, 1992), p. 7.

2 These are the meanings of the original Greek word for *salvation* (σωτηρία); see Ș. Slevoacă, *Raze din lumina lui Hristos*, (Buzău: Editura Episcopiei Buzăului, 1996), p. 105.

3 I. Mircea, *Dicționar al Noului Testament*, (București: IBMBOR, 1995).

the eternal kingdom and, to the extent to which we have accomplished this desideratum, we shall find answers to life's numerous questions.

But what is God's Kingdom?

As different dictionaries explain⁴ it, by the term "kingdom" we understand "the country ruled by a king"; in other words, the territory whose inhabitants acknowledge the sovereignty of a king, to whom they submit and who they thoroughly listen to and follow, even to the point of sacrificing their lives. In this case, God's Kingdom refers to God's dominion in heaven and on earth, over the angels and over people, over the whole universe.⁵ And because God is Love (1 Jn. 4.8, 1 Jn. 4.16) and Light (1 Jn. 1.5) and Truth (Jn. 14.6), then His Kingdom is the Kingdom of Love, of the Light that never turns to darkness, of Truth, of Good, of Peace, of Eternal Happiness.

In the Kingdom of Love there is no despotic dominion, but, in everything and over everything, there is the spirit of love, because God "rules" through love. In this kingdom there are no subjects and rulers because "everyone is the brother of everyone, because they are sons of the heavenly Father and brothers of His Son, turned into a man for eternity and united with them, being the One sacrificed for them."⁶ This status gives those who live here the right to be all rulers, because in God's Kingdom, there is "neither slave, nor free, but all are one in Jesus Christ" (Gal. 3.28).⁷

⁴ See I. Coteanu (ed.), *Dicționarul explicativ al limbii române* (Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language), (Academia Română Institutul de lingvistică „Iorgu Iordan”, Bucharest: Univers Enciclopedic Publishing House, 1996²), p. 516.

⁵ I. Mircea, *Dicționar al Noului Testament*, s. v. *împărăția lui Dumnezeu* (God's Kingdom).

⁹ D. Stăniloae, *Spiritualitate și comuniune în liturghia ortodoxă*, (București: IBMBOR, 2004), p. 9.

⁷ See: D. Munteanu, *God the Father – Spring of everlasting love and life. Trinitarian impulses for a culture of love and healing communication*,

So, rephrasing the above-mentioned definition, we can say that *the Kingdom of Heaven is characterized by the dominion of God, which He realizes through His love*. This aspect of the Kingdom is highlighted by the Holy Scripture in the allegory of the Good Shepherd (Jn. 10.1-18), where our Savior, calling Himself the Good Shepherd, shows His relation to those whom He leads, His talking sheep, who know Him and follow Him, for whom He has laid down His soul, “so that they may have life, and have it in abundance” (Jn. 10.10). God’s image as a “shepherd” can be found in the vision of the Old Testament, where Yahweh guides the chosen people like a shepherd.

In the Prophetic Books, Yahweh guides the chosen people just like a shepherd. In the Prophetic Books, this name of God receives an obvious Messianic sense: “He will tend His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs in His arms; He will carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those that are with young” (Isa. 40.11) and expresses the living faith of the people of Israel, that God will lead them to a fine pasture, in the promised kingdom. God being eternal (Gen. 21.33), reigning “forever and ever” (Exod. 15.18), His Kingdom is eternal, coming from beyond the centuries. “Because it is not appropriate to say that God’s kingdom has begun or that it falls under centuries and times”.⁸

Interpreting the 4th request from the Lord’s Prayer, “Thy kingdom come”, Saint Cyprian of Carthage makes a distinction between God’s dominion over the world and the Kingdom that we ask for in this prayer. The first is since eternity and has no end as “when does God not rule? Or when does that-which-has-

in: International Journal of Orthodox Theology 1/1 (2010), pp. 160-162.

⁸ Sf. Maxim Mărturisitorul, *Capete gnostice*, in: D. Stăniloae (ed. and trans.), Filocalia, vol. 2, (București: Humanitas Publishing House, 1999), p. 198.

always-been-and-never-ceases-to-be begin in His case?”⁹ Concerning the second, the Holy Father states that this is the Kingdom that Christ has won for us through the blood He has shed. It has two stages: *the first* one is given by Christ’s presence in the world, which inaugurates the Kingdom at the moment of His Embodiment.

Saint Cyprian goes even further with His argumentation, showing that the Kingdom is our Savior Jesus Christ Himself: “because just as He Himself is the Resurrection, as it is in Him that we resurrect as well, similarly He Himself can be understood as Kingdom of God, as it is in Him that we will be kings.”¹⁰

The second stage concerns the Eschatological Kingdom that shall be shown on the Lord’s return and shall be given as a heritage to the righteous as it is written: “Come, you who are blessed by My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Mt. 25.34).

God’s Kingdom is the content of our Christian Life, is the “knowledge of God, the love for Him, the unity with Him and life in Him. The Kingdom of God is the union with God, as He is the source of life, Life Itself. God’s Kingdom is the content of eternal life: “And this is eternal life: that they know You the only true God” (Jn. 17.3)¹¹.

The teaching about God has been brought to us by the embodied godly Word, the divine Logos (Jn. 1.18); it is in the same way that we have received the discovery about God’s Kingdom. The message transmitted by Jesus Christ to His listeners is the imminent coming of the Kingdom (Mt. 4.17; Mk. 1.14-15) and this topic will constitute the center of His

⁹ Sfântul Ciprian al Cartaginei, *Despre rugăciunea domnească*, vol. 3, trans. N. Chițescu et al., (Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești, București: IBMBOR, 1981), p. 470.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 471.

¹¹ A. Schmemmann, *Euharistia – Taina Împărăției*, trans. by B. Răduleanu, (București: Anastasia Publishing House, 1993), p. 47.

Messianic activity, the message being accompanied by miracles, as signs of the presence of this Kingdom (Lk. 7.22-23).

Moreover, our Savior identifies Himself with this Kingdom, and by turning Himself into a man, He has restored the communion between man and God, opening heaven and making it accessible for all those who shall believe in Him. Our acceptance into God's Kingdom or the Kingdom of Heaven is conditioned by a total purity of our being, identical to that of young children, as He has stated by the words: "Let the little children come to Me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the Kingdom of Heaven" (Mt. 19.14).

These few aspects related to God's Kingdom only introduce us into our topic. We consider that, at the same time, it would be useful to discuss a few philological issues related to several biblical terms.

2 The Notion of "king", "kingdom" and "God's Kingdom" in the Old Testament

The teaching about God's Kingdom represents the main subject of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5-7; Lk. 6) and the core of all our Savior's parables. It is about it that He discusses for forty days after His Resurrection (Acts 1.6) and the preaching of the Evangel of this Kingdom throughout the world is the last commandment entrusted to His disciples (Mk. 16.15-16).

Following this idea in the pages of the Holy Scripture, the reader cannot help noticing that although our Savior uses the expression "the Kingdom of Heaven" or "God's Kingdom" a lot, there is no definition or explanation for it anywhere.

"This means that we are dealing with a well-rooted and well-known religious formula for His contemporaries" – according to the explanation of a famous Romanian exegete, formulated at the beginning of the 20th century – which our Lord has used, first of all, as a traditional framework, in

which he framed a painting that was largely new both as inspiration and as execution.”¹²

In other words, at the moment of Jesus' coming, the people of Israel was familiarized with this notion, impatiently waiting for the coming of the Messiah - the messenger of God -, and the instauration of His kingdom.

Even though the Messianic prophecies go back to the times of our forefathers (Gen. 3.15), it is only after the escape from the Egyptian slavery that the idea of “God's Kingdom” (מלכות יהוה) as an expression of God's sovereignty and providence for the Jewish people, clearly appears. It is then that Moses - showing the particular care that the God of Israel's fathers feels for them (cf. Exod. 3.16-17) and the power by which they were freed from the Egyptians' hands - brings in front of the Jews the divine will: if they keep His commandments, they will be God's chosen people among the gentiles, “kingdom of priests and holy nation” (Exod. 19.5-6), over which the Lord will rule forever and ever (Exod. 15.18).¹³

In his Song (Exod. 15), Moses highlighted the character of *leader* of Yahweh, the Lord that will guide and advise the Jewish people towards His Holy Place (according to verses 13 and 17), which suggests the idea of Divine kingdom, where the sovereignty of God is acknowledged and accepted.

In their pilgrimage through the Sinai desert, the people of Israel felt and understood what it were like to be the chosen people of God, and lived the experience of knowing God's power as sovereign. This connection between the Lord God and the chosen people was sealed by a covenant according to which the

¹² G. I. Ghia, *Împărăția lui Dumnezeu după Noul Testament*, (Craiova: Institutul de Arte Grafice "Ramuri", 1925), p. 9.

¹³ M. Buber states: “la réalisation du Règne universel de Dieu est le Proton et l'Eschaton d'Israël” (“the realization of the universal dominion of God is the Proton and Eschaton of Israel”), apud R. Schnackenburg, *Règne et Royaume de Dieu*, (Paris: Édition de l'Orante, 1965), p. 11.

divine sovereignty is exercised by respecting certain laws, given by the Sovereign Himself.

Through this covenant, the people of Israel does not become the people of God's Kingdom and the Promised Land does not become the place of the Kingdom, even though God is present among them; this is only achievable to the extent to which the divine will is accomplished with full willingness and not just as a ritual. This is why one can say that during this historical period of Israel, the idea of Kingdom existed just as a wish, but whose realization did not depend on the animal sacrifices offered at the Temple, as something more was necessary: Man's life itself.¹⁴

According to Moses and Joshua, the son of Naue, the people of Israel was led by judges, who were the messengers of God. When the Jews, freed from the Midianites, ask Gideon that he and his lineage rule over them, he refuses them saying that God will rule over them (Judg. 8.22-23). Later on, after the instauration of the state royalty, in the person of Saul and of David, it is still God that remains the true king of Israel, as they were chosen and anointed following a divine indication, being themselves aware of their status, as representatives of the Great King and, at the same time, as His servants (1 Chr. 28:4-9). In their person, the people of Israel saw the accomplishment of the Messianic promises, considering that the state of peace and welfare they were experiencing was the very description of the Kingdom.

This state determines the king-prophet to sing God's greatness and to exclaim: "Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and Your dominion endures through all generations" (Ps. 145.13). Actually, in the Psalms we encounter a true "cult of praise to God's Kingdom"¹⁵, to whose celebration all the nations are

¹⁴ The Prophet David, in the humility psalms will accentuate this aspect, saying: "The sacrifices God desires are a humble spirit" (Ps. 51.17).

¹⁵ R. Schnackenburg, *Règne et Royaume de Dieu*, p. 19.

invited to participate, so that they may all know God as their King:

“Sing praises to the Lord, sing praises; sing praises to our King, sing praises (...). The nobles of the nations assemble as the people of the God of Abraham, for the shields of the earth belong to God” (Ps. 47. 6-9).

Reflecting on these words, we can notice the change in the thinking about the Kingdom, which is no longer perceived as belonging exclusively to the Jewish people, but embraces the whole mankind. Our Savior, in His Sermon on the Mount, will illustrate this even further: “But now I tell you: do not use any vow when you make a promise. Do not swear by heaven, for it is God’s throne; nor by earth, for it is the resting place for His feet; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King” (Mt. 5.34-35).

The moment when the Israelite monarchy collapses, following the disrespect of the covenant concluded with God, the people turn their eyes towards the future, considering that God will keep His promise and will live in the middle of His people, restoring the kingdom, as the prophets have foretold. The passage from a visible form of royalty to one whose coming is still expected can be found especially with the prophets in exile. One can note here the eschatological and universal character given to the new aspect of the Kingdom: God is the Sovereign of all the nations and ruling over everybody (Ps. 103.19). He coordinates each and every one according to His aims. In the new Kingdom, the accent falls on the moral-religious life, which shall be totally superior. In those days, there will be no injustice in Israel, says the prophet Jeremiah, and no sin shall be found in Judah (Jer. 50.20). Arms will be turned into agricultural tools and peace will rule on earth (Mic. 4.3-4).

After the Babylonian slavery, the condition of the Jews becomes critical, both in point of their social life (as they go from slavery to slavery) and especially in point of their religious life, as the gift of prophecy ceases beginning with the 5th century B.C. As the place of the prophets is taken by rabbis, who, in their desire

to go deeper into the revealed truth, to a certain extent distort it, one can see that the idea about God's Kingdom acquires a new vision, based more on the letter of the Law and less on its spirit. This is how new conceptions appear, according to which the Jews, following their descent from Abraham, shall be the heirs of the Kingdom, along with those who shall respect in every detail their prescriptions, of which many were invented. At the same time, because of the numerous slaveries they had been through, the Jews began to see in the Messiah an earthly king, meant to guide them in their fight for freedom from slavery.

The hopes concerning the perfection of Yahweh's Kingdom were moved further to the eschatological times, when He is to come victorious as a King and found the Kingdom for good. But this coming was conditioned by the repentance of the Jewish people. This is why some had come to say that: "if the Israelites were to repent for just one day, they would all be saved and the Son of David would come without delay".¹⁶

What is worth mentioning here is the Book of the prophet Daniel, where we can find clear references to God's Kingdom: first of all, in the second chapter of this book, the author, interpreting the dream of Nebuchadnezzar, shows that the stone that shall come, not sent by a man but by God, which shall hit the huge statue, then turning into a huge mountain (Dan. 2,35), represents a kingdom overpowering all the other kingdoms, which shall never be ruled by any other people and shall stand forever (Dan. 2,44). The unanimous opinion of the Biblical exegetes is that this prophecy refers to the Messianic era when the Son of God shall come and establish the eternal Kingdom.

The idea is repeated in Chapter 7, which mentions "the Kingdom of the Son of Man", received by Him from the heavenly

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 51.

Father. In his vision, Daniel makes a direct connection between the Kingdom of the Ancient of Days, namely God:

“In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was One like a Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into His presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshipped Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed” (Dan. 7.13-14).

Just as in the other prophecy from Chapter 2, here as well, the prophet, in order to indicate the qualities of the kingdom, compares its power to that of the other kingdoms. Earthly kingdoms are limited and, although they try to have an absolute power, they will never succeed. Over each one of them, a stronger kingdom shall come, and, over all of them, the divine power shall triumph (Dan. 7.12).

About none of these kingdoms has it ever been said that “all nations and all peoples of every language” shall worship Him (Dan. 7.14), but only about God’s Kingdom, the only truly universal kingdom. Each of these earthly kingdoms is temporary, just like the people that rule over them. Each of them has a beginning and an end, only the dominion of the One that receives the kingdom from the Ancient of Days is endless and shall not be destroyed. All these attributes describing the kingdom show it as being divine, and the One ruling over it can only be God Himself.

Thus, analyzing Chapters 2 and 7 from the Book of Daniel, we can notice that the image of the statue from Chapter 2 is directly connected to that of the beasts from chapter 7, representing the world’s powers with their brilliance and decadence, while the stone not cut by human hand, which comes from heaven and which, after destroying that statue, becomes a mountain and fills the whole earth, is the symbol of God’s kingdom, which shall take the place of all the earthly powers, becoming universal.

Consequently, the author wants to highlight the direct divine action, the only one that can assure the triumph of God's plan in the world. This intervention of God in history shall take place at the end of time, when He shall put an end to lawlessness and shall establish his dominion over the whole creation.

Analyzing the Books of the Old Testament, we can see that God's Kingdom is represented by the faith in the dominion of Yahweh, an idea much more present in the thinking of the chosen people even than the Messianic idea. This shows that Israel has had a living conscience about the existence of the Kingdom: it is far away, it shall come only "on that day", but it exists. Without this conviction, our Savior's sermon would only have been the "voice of the one crying in the wilderness" (Isa. 40.3).

It is under these conditions that the Embodied Son of God began His activity "when the set time had fully come" (Gal. 4.4), namely at the moment when the unquenchable longing for the Messiah and for the coming of His Kingdom had reached maximum heights.

3 The Messiah and the Messianic Kingdom

As we have been able to notice, along the history of the Jewish people, the idea of God's Kingdom covers a road with numerous changes, triggered by the religious-political context, which has left its mark on the relation with the Divine Being and, consequently, including on the vision about God's sovereignty. Doubtlessly, it will reveal itself in its entire greatness at the end of time, yet the moment of its coming cannot be influenced in any way by men, its determination remaining under God's authority.

A moment worth noticing is the period of the great prophets. In their sermons, the teaching about God's kingdom develops both

as extension and as depth.¹⁷ Yahweh shall be not just the king of Israel, but also the king of the other peoples. In the rabbinic conception, the idea of Kingdom was closely related to the respect of the Law, correlating the heavenly goodness and love to the severity and toughness of certain prescriptions. Consequently, what the Kingdom actually represents – “justice and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (according to Rom. 14.17) – cannot be found in the Books of the Old Testament; this truth shall be revealed by the redeeming words of Christ – the Embodied Messiah. For this very reason, we consider that it is necessary to talk about Messiah’s person and about the Messianic Kingdom.

The idea of mankind’s ransom from its condition triggered by the sin of disobedience existed in people’s hope even since the times of those that committed the primordial sin (Gen. 3.15) and it has been preserved generation after generation in the chosen people. Thus, during different historical moments, especially during the patriarchs, God reconfirmed His promise, showing that the Messiah, His Anointed, our Redeemer, shall rise from among the people of Israel, and His word will be a powerful word, as He is a messenger of God that the Jews shall need to listen to (Deut. 18.15).

This Person Who shall reveal himself to the world under the appearance of a Man, being born from “the seed of Israel”, yet having the power of a God, will rule over many nations and over the “foreheads of Moab and over all the people of Seth and shall crush them” (Num. 24.7,17). God promises David, the greatest king of Israel, that one of his descendants shall inherit his throne “forever” (2 Sam. 7.13). The idea that the Messiah shall be born from the seed of David determined the Jews to see in Him a political leader, able to guide them so as to obtain freedom from their slavery to foreigners.

¹⁷ G. I. Ghia, *Împărăția lui Dumnezeu după Noul Testament*, p. 24.

Actually, for most of Jews, Messiah was a term that referred to a human being, not to a divine being, even though He had certain divine gifts or a divine authority. However, the Jewish eschatology, as it appears from the prophetic writings, presents Him as being of divine essence, with a human appearance (Isa. 42.2; 49.2; 7.14; Mic. 5.1). Especially, Isa. 9.6 attributes the Messiah divine prerogatives, calling Him even “Mighty God”, and, consequently, we can believe that Daniel did nothing but to highlight more evidently the godly character of the “Son of Man”, who comes “with the clouds of heaven”.

Psalms 8 and 79 talk about Messiah (even though in Psalm 79 the type of Messiah is Israel), showing that He is standing at the right side of God. Daniel presents the same images, but in the past tense, showing that the psalmist’s prayer (namely that God will come to support the righteous) was listened to and fulfilled by means of the Son of Man.

From all these texts, it appears clearly that the Messiah belongs both to the divine realm and to mankind, yet the most obvious prophecy in this sense can be found in the Book of the prophet Isaiah: “Therefore, the Lord Himself will give you a sign: the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Emmanuel” (7.14). On the one hand, we are told about the birth of a Son from a virgin – which is truly paradoxical and for which an antinomy is used – but with the mention of the baby’s name as well, Emmanuel, “which means *God is with us*”, according to the translation made by the evangelist Matthew (1.23).

While the antinomy “virgin-Son” belongs to the domain of mystery, the name Immanuel is extremely explicit and defines God’s entry in the human plan. Yet, in order to avoid the confusions with different theories of the Antiquity on the temporary appearance of the deities in a body, here, it is clearly mentioned that Emmanuel (לְאֵמָנוּעַל), will be born in the purest and most sinless way by means of a birth from a virgin. The two natures of God’s Anointed show that the Kingdom represented by Him is of a heavenly, divine origin, and it is meant for man, as a fulfillment of man’s initial calling.

A few features of the Messianic Kingdom have been highlighted before Christ's coming, through the prophets. For instance, we find in Isaiah, also called the "evangelist of the Old Testament", that the Messiah's Kingdom will be one of peace and justice. It will restore the moral values on Earth, which shall happen when "the day of the Lord" is to come (יום יהוה), when all the evil people are to be punished and the godly kingdom is to be founded, which is to replace any visible kingdom (according to Dan. 2.44).¹⁸

As a king and as a "ruler of peace" (Isa. 9.5), the Messiah will set the foundations of justice, peace and equality (according to Isa. 2.4; Mic. 4.3-5; Jer. 23.5). He will "judge the needy with righteousness and decide with equity for those who suffer in the land. He will strike the violent with the rod of His mouth; by the breath of His lips He will kill the wicked" (Isa. 11.4), as "He will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be discouraged till He has established justice everywhere on Earth and people far away will put hope in His teachings" (Isa. 42.3-4). The Messiah shall come to comfort those who have suffered injustice (Isa. 61.3), and peace shall be established not only among people but also among all the creatures of the Earth (Hos. 2.18).

The Messiah's Kingdom shall be different from all the other kingdoms by the fact that the peace and happiness in it shall have no boundaries, and the Messiah's dominion shall have "no end" (Isa. 9.7), and His Kingdom will comprise all the peoples that shall gather around it (Isa. 11.10). During the time of the Messiah's dominion, God will pour the Holy Spirit over all people, indiscriminately: "I will pour out My Spirit over all people; your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions" (Joel 3.1-2). The Messianic texts foresee the inauguration of a new moral order according to the Messianic demands, in which life is

¹⁸ E. Cornițescu, *Mesia – Domn al păcii și al dreptății*, in: Studii Teologice, nr. 2 (1990), p. 6.

penetrated by the spirit of holiness and by happiness, following the lack of sins.¹⁹

Evidently, in the eyes of an expert in commentaries on the Old Testament, or rather on the Torah and the Prophets, in those times, both the entrance of God in the world, through embodiment, and the birth from a virgin could have seemed infringements of the divine (revelation-related) logics, and also of the human anthropocentric logics. The birth, for such an expert, could have been considered as an event and a fact specifically human and totally outside the scope of his discourse on the divine. It was unconceivable for God to descend in the human being, and similarly for the human being to ascend towards God.

It was considered that between the divine realm and mankind there has to be a relation of dominion and respectively subordination consecrated by the Covenant.²⁰ Or, it is here that the novelty appears, because Jesus, the Son of God, the Anointed of God - the Messiah, is the Son of the eternal Father and God, consubstantial with the Father and the Spirit, and also a perfect man, like us in all aspects, except for sin. He is just one Person, the divine-human Person of the embodied Son of God.

The embodiment is preceded by the eternal birth of the Son from the Father, yet the filiation of God-the-Word to the Father – and only to the Father remains an unexplainable mystery, as it goes beyond any human power of insight and understanding. In the state of filiation to the Father, the Son is ὁμοούσιος with the Father and with the Spirit as the divine οὐσία (essence or substance) is not variable according to the Persons. Consequently, having the same being, the divine Person does not grow smaller in front of another divine Person, and at the

¹⁹ Ibidem.

²⁰ A. Stan, *Fiul lui Dumnezeu – Fiul Omului*, in: Ep. Eftimie (ed.), “Îndrumător bisericesc misionar și patriotic” (Missionary and Patriotic Church Guide), (București: Arhiepiscopia Bucureștilor Publishing House, 1985), p. 36.

same time does not suffer any diminution in relation to the creation. On the one hand, the divine ὁμοούσία is different from the human concept of ὁμοούσία, as the human ὁμοούσία cannot exist in an absolute state – given the birth out of a father and mother with a human body – and on the other hand the divine ὁμοούσία is imperceptible from a human perspective.²¹

To know the ὁμοούσία becomes possible only through divine revelation. Or, the divine revelation shown in the Old Testament does not reveal the ὁμοούσία, but only God's existence, as cause of the existence of nature and implicitly of man. This explains the somewhat erroneous way in which the Jews perceived the Messiah. The Jewish expectations and aspirations concerning the Messiah were, during the respective period, closely connected to their desire to be set free from the dominion of other peoples, to see justice triumph in the Jewish society and consequently to see the instauration of the Kingdom of God, Whose representative on Earth the Jewish people was.

The fact that Jesus was not regarded as a Messiah can be noticed from the scornful tone in the words addressed to Him by the witnesses of the crucifixion: "Let this Messiah, the king of Israel, come down now from the cross, so we may see and believe" (Mk. 15.32). However, the Apostles, especially after the Resurrection, reached the full conviction that the Messiah had been present among them and talked to them and consequently they forcefully preached this Jesus, Who had been crucified: "God has made this Jesus (...) both Lord and Messiah" (Acts 2.36). Actually, the Resurrection meant the accomplishment of the promise made by God to David (Acts 2.30) and implicitly the restoration of the Messianic kingdom.

²¹ Ibidem, p. 38.

4 Instead of Conclusions, a few Philological Considerations

In the Holy Scripture, the Kingdom of God has several names: *kingdom of heavens* (Mat. 3.2), *kingdom* (Mat. 25.34; Lk. 12.32), *eternal life* (Jn. 3.15, Lk. 18.18) or simply *life* (Mat. 18.8; Mk. 9.43), but which synthesize the same meaning: of all-presence of God's power and love. The sense of the expression "God's Kingdom" can be found in the New Testament 112 times²².

In the Synoptic Evangelists (written in Greek), one can note that only Mark and Luke use mainly the formula "God's Kingdom" (ἡ βασιλεία του Θεού), while the Evangelist Matthew prefers to use the expression "the kingdom of heavens" (ἡ βασιλεία του ούρανου). But, although they are two different expressions, they have, nevertheless, the same meaning.

The difference of formulation is due to the fact that the holy Apostle Matthew, being a Jew and writing for the Jews, respects their habit not to utter God's name, out of a profound feeling of veneration, and not out of other reasons. This is why we find, even in the Old Scripture, but mainly in the rabbinic literature, names given to the Divine Being, such as: "the Ancient of Days" (Dan. 7.9,13), "the Holy One and Israel's Creator" (Isa. 43.15), "our Father and our Savior" (Isa. 63.16), "the Almighty" (Num. 24.4), "the Most High" (Num. 24.16) etc.

Another explanation would be that the evangelist Matthew, through the expression "the Kingdom of Heaven", wanted to suggest that God's Kingdom was not some earthly kingdom, but

²² The Holy Evangelist Mark uses the expression βασιλεία του Θεού 14 times (except for 3.24; 6.23; 11.10; 13.8), while Saint Luke uses it 39 times (except for 1.33; 11.2; 11.17,18; 12.32; 21.10; 22.29, 30; 23.42). Except for 4.23; 6.10,13; 8.12; 9.35; 12.25; 13.19,38,41,43; 16.28; 20.21; 24.7,14; 25.34; 26.29, where one can find ἡ βασιλεία with other features, the Holy Evangelist Matthew prefers to use βασιλεία του ούρανου (32 times) and βασιλεία του Θεού only five times (6.33; 12.28; 19.24; 21.31,43).

a transcendent one, coming down from heaven²³, an idea that we find in the apocalyptic prophecy of Daniel, where we are told that the “God of heavens will rise an eternal *kingdom*, which shall never be destroyed” (Dan. 2.44).

The Greek word ἡ βασιλεία, corresponds to the Hebrew “*malkuth*” (מַלְכוּת), words that don’t define the kingdom as extension and dominion.²⁴ The Septuagint, translating the word “מַלְכוּת” by “ἡ βασιλεία”, didn’t manage to render the exact meaning of the term, that of Kingdom, as a state in which God rules through love and those who live in it share in this love.

An important feature of this kingdom is its divine origin. The attributes του Θεού and τον οὐρανὸν reflect this very aspect. They show that the “initiative and power to realize such a kingdom does not belong to man and it does not result from the natural interplay of the conditions of life here and now. God’s Kingdom is from above, it is an act of the godly power.”²⁵

From an etymological perspective, it is believed that “*βασιλεία*” defines the basis or the fundament, having the same root as “*βασίς*”²⁶ and, in a broader sens, it can be considered with the meaning of support of the creation, God-the-King being the One that holds everything together – heaven and earth. This origin is preferable, in order to eliminate the confusion with the monarchy. God has never revealed Himself as a monarch and

²³ D. Slusanschi (ed.), *Dicționar Enciclopedic al Bibliei*, (*Encyclopedic Dictionary of Bible*), (București: Humanitas, 1999), p. 346.

²⁴ The difference between “royalty”, “reign” and “kingdom” is expressed in Hebrew by means of three terms: *malukah*, *malkut* and *mamlakah*. Yet, in Greek they are all expressed by just one term: ἡ βασιλεία (*basileia*).

²⁵ D. Belu, *Împărăția lui Dumnezeu și Biserica*, in: *Studii Teologice*, nr. 9-10/1956, p. 543.

²⁶ See F. Marcu, C. Maneca (eds.), *Dictionar de neologisme*, (*Dictionary of neologisms*), (București: Academia Republicii Socialiste România, 1978), the word *basis* comes from the Greek word *basis*, meaning support.

one cannot talk about a succession to the throne of the Kingdom, God being the same yesterday, today and forever.

Translating ἡ βασιλεία του Θεού as “God’s Kingdom”, one can have the impression that God’s Kingdom has a physical appearance, with geographic boundaries, which can be located on a map. It is with this conception that the Jews lived for over 700 years (from the deliverance from the Egyptian slavery until they were taken slaves by the Babylonians)²⁷, and after the exile, they gave this expression an eschatological meaning, in the sense that the Messiah, when he comes, shall rule in the promised kingdom.

A lot of Neo-Protestant cults have taken over this teaching, adopting a political-eschatological vision of God’s Kingdom²⁸ and opting for a physical kingdom of Christ on Earth, after His second coming. They often highlight the importance of the restoration of Israel as a Kingdom.²⁹ Supporting these errant views, one forgets our Savior’s word, who says: “My kingdom is not from this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders” (Jn. 18.36), and the fact that it manifests itself in spiritual ways, because the kingdom of God “is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14.17).

It might be useful to discuss another problem as well, related to a certain way of seeing the relation between Jesus Christ and the coming of God’s Kingdom. When this connection between Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God is made, we encounter formulations such as: “The Kingdom was inaugurated by the

²⁷ It is known that Moses led the people of Israel out of Egypt around 1300 BC, while the first deportation of the Jews in the Babylonian slavery began in the year 597 B.C.

²⁸ Here, the reference is about the “millennialism” or the “1000 years kingdom”.

²⁹ P. I. David, *Călăuză creștină. Sectologie*, (Curtea de Argeș: Episcopia Argeșului Publishing House, 1994), p. 51: Jehovah’s Witnesses is about a state of all states - Jehovah’s Kingdom.

coming of Christ”³⁰, from where one can understand that God’s Kingdom was opened with our Savior’s embodiment and the coming of the godly grace in the world. But Christ the Lord has not just “inaugurated” the Kingdom, but He has also revealed it, in the sense that He has reminded man about the Kingdom’s beauties, awakening in him the desire to have them and at the same time, He has shown the way that needs to be followed to get to them. Through His passions and His sacrifice, Jesus Christ opened the gates of Heaven, locked after Adam and Eve were chased away from Heaven. Saint Apostle Paul’s words are eloquent:

“We joyfully thank the Father, Who has made us worthy to take part to the heritage of the saints, in the light. He has taken us out of the dominion of darkness and has moved us into the Kingdom of the Son He loves, in Whom we have our redemption through His blood, namely the forgiveness of sins” (Col. 1.13).

Therefore, the kingdom of heaven, “the kingdom prepared since the world’s creation” for the man who will fulfill the will of God, is the same as the one preached by Jesus Christ and which He has received from the Father (according to Dan. 7.13-14), to share it with all those who believe in Him.

So, we understand that, using the verb “to inaugurate”, the intention is not that of indicating the appearance of a new reality, inexistent until then, but to show its novelty in opposition to the world hardened in sin. God’s Kingdom had been before the embodiment of the Son as well, yet its manifestation was not perceptible. Saint Augustine highlights this meaning as follows: “Although the light is present everywhere, it is not obvious for the blind and for those who close their eyes; similarly, the dominion of God, although a

³⁰ The verb *to inaugurate* might have the meaning of “solemnly opening the activity of a settlement, of an exhibition etc., and marking the beginning of an activity in a domain”, see I. Coteanu (ed.), *Dicționarul explicativ al limbii române*, p. 481.

reality on earth, is missing (is not evident, our note) for those who ignore it.”³¹

For these considerations, in my work I have avoided the use of the expression “Christ inaugurated God’s Kingdom”, considering that it is more accurate to say that he “has revealed” or he “has shown” this Kingdom. Even more inadequate seems to me the use of the expression: “Jesus Christ *has founded/established* God’s Kingdom on Earth”, as if God’s dominion hadn’t comprised the earth before our Savior’s embodiment and, consequently, as if the Kingdom had existed only in the heavenly spheres.³²

³¹ Augustinus, *De Sermone Domini in monte*, II, 6, 20, apud. V. Vlad, *Comentariile patristice la Tatăl nostru*, (Deva: EMIA Publishing House, 2005), p. 280.

³² One can use the verb “to found”, to establish, to set up, only with the meaning of “to consolidate”. Therefore we understand that our Savior reinforced what was there already, repaired the existing foundations consolidating them, making them steadfast.