



# THE BEREIA PAGE

*“Examining . . . to see if these things are so” ~ Acts 17.11*

## Defining “Kingdom”

David Anguish

In reflecting on the significance of Luke’s references to the “kingdom of God” in Acts for today’s church (see part 1, [here](#)), we should first remember that he is continuing the kingdom theme established by Jesus and reported in the gospels. We are especially concerned with its use in Luke, part one of his “narrative about the events that have been fulfilled among us” (Luke 1.1; cf. Acts 1.1). Recall that the noun βασιλεία (*basileia*), used eight times in Acts, appears 121 times in the Synoptic Gospels; 46 are in Luke.

We must determine, then, what the writers of the gospels mean when they use *basileia*. In his study of the Sermon on the Mount, Glen Stassen shows the importance of this step when he writes, “But what does Matthew mean when he talks about God’s kingdom, God’s reign? It is a phrase so commonly used in Christian circles that it’s taken for granted, a fact that may actually hinder full and accurate understanding of the beatitudes and what they really mean, what they imply for our lives together” (Stassen 2006, 17).

The task is more complex than it may appear. This is so, first, because the modern meaning of “kingdom” differs from its meaning in the biblical world. Dictionary.com, for example, gives six modern meanings of the word:

1. a state or government having a king or queen.
2. anything conceived as constituting a realm or sphere of independent action or control.
3. a realm or province of nature, especially one of the three broad divisions of natural objects.
4. *Biology*. a taxonomic category of the second highest rank, just below domain:...
5. the spiritual sovereignty of God or Christ.
6. the domain over which the spiritual sovereignty of God or Christ extends, whether in heaven or on earth (<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/kingdom>).

Do any of these meanings correspond to the *biblical* meaning? That question points to the second complexity, for determining *basileia*’s meaning in Scripture has proved challenging. In his study of God’s kingdom, for example, George Ladd notes “a bewildering diversity of explanations” (Ladd 1959, 15), and reviews four major views that have been prominent in church history. To those who would respond to this diversity with an appeal to “go directly to the Word of God and find out what it has to say about the Kingdom of God,” Ladd replies, “The perplexing fact is that when we turn to the Scriptures, we find an almost equally bewildering diversity of statements about the Kingdom of God” (Ladd 1959, 16). He then devotes the next few pages to a survey of the biblical evidence (Ladd 1959, 16–18).

Following Everett Ferguson’s direction, we’ll concentrate on the meaning of “kingdom” in the

original languages of the biblical text. He writes, “In Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, the primary meaning of ‘kingdom’ is ‘kingship,’ that is, royal power or kingly rule. The words more often refer to ‘reign’ than to the ‘realm’ in which that rule is exercised, to the dominion rather than the domain” (Ferguson 1996, 19).

Ferguson cites two passages to illustrate. Daniel 4.28–37 reports the loss and restoration of Nebuchadnezzar’s “vast power” (v. 30). Revelation 11.15 says that “the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will *reign* forever and ever.” Ferguson notes that, as is evident from the last clause of verse 15, where the verb βασιλεύω (*basileuō*) appears, “it is the rule, or sovereignty, that passes from the world to the Lord” (Ferguson 1996, 19).

This doesn’t mean that “kingdom” never refers to a territory or political entity, for “kingship does not operate in a void.” A reign must occur somewhere (realm), have subjects (people), and have someone who is ultimately responsible for its well being (king) (cf. 2 Chron 20.30; Dan 1.20; Ezra 1.1). But in biblical use, the features of a “realm” are secondary to the primary meaning of a “reign” (Ferguson 1996, 19).

Jesus’ parable in Luke 19.11–27 illustrates the relative importance of the primary and secondary meanings of *basileia*. In a story many of his hearers would have recognized as being similar to what had occurred ca. 40 BC when Herod the Great went to Rome to secure the Senate’s authority to rule the Jews (cf. Ladd 1959, 21), Jesus told a story in response to those who “thought the kingdom of God was going to appear right away” (v. 11). As the ESV more literally translates verse 12, he began, “A nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom [*basileia*] and then return.” But what he actually went to secure is surely better translated in the CSB: “A nobleman traveled to a far country to receive for himself *authority to be king* and then to return” (cf. NRSV). The realm, people, and territory were important, but only secondarily to the right to *reign*.

### Works Cited

- Ferguson, Everett. 1996. *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.  
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