

**Is there a difference: Kingdom of God verse the Kingdom of Heaven?
A series on the Mysterious Nature of God's Kingdom (part 1)**

During the first century, the concept of a king and his kingdom was rooted in the political office, his financial power and geographic area under his governance. Jesus taps into this common understanding in one of His parables about the nobleman and the servants who invested his money (Luke 19:12-15). That kingdoms of human beings are desirable and glorious is seen in Satan's temptation of Jesus (Matt 4:8-9; Luke 4:5-6) as well being subject to the capricious nature of its ruler (Mark 6:22-23).

From the time of the Conquest, all the peoples with whom Israel come in contact had kings; but, Israel would not have a king until two centuries later when the Hebrews elected Saul. By the first century, Israelites were well accustomed to monarchies.

Set against this background is the urgent call to repent from two itinerate evangelists.

Now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, "Repent, for the **kingdom of heaven** is at hand" (Matt 3:1-2).

Now after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the **kingdom of God** is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel (Mark 1:14-15).

Their urgency suggests that the kingdom is near; the good news of the rule of God is at hand which implies a challenge to the current government. For the Jews, they wonder if the "kingdom God" is the fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant (2 Sam 7:12-16) as prophesized by the prophet Nathan, and if this branch of David will bring a new era of righteousness and peace (Isa 9:2-7; 11:1-9). Did this mean that Israel will be free of Roman rule?

But what is the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven? Are these different kingdoms?

The phrase "kingdom of God" is found in 70 instances in ten books of the New Testament. In contrast, the phrase "kingdom of heaven" occurs 33 times and only in the book of Matthew.

The book of Matthew also has four instances of the phrase "kingdom of God" (Matt 12:28; 19:34; 21:31, 43).

When comparing parallel passages within the gospels, the phrase "the kingdom of God" appears to be used interchangeably with "the kingdom of heaven."

Sermon on the Mount of Beatitudes: Matthew 5:3 (heaven) verses Luke 6:20 (God).

Reclining at the table: Matthew 8:11 (heaven) verses Luke 13:29 (God).

No one greater than John the Baptist: Matthew 11:11 (heaven) verses Luke 7:28 (God).

Parable of the Sower: Matthew 13:11 (heaven) verses Mark 4:11 (God).

Parable of the seed: Matthew 13:24 (heaven) verses Mark 4:26 (God).

Parable of the mustard seed: Matthew 13:31 (heaven) verses Mark 4:30 (God) and Luke 13:18 (God).

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Parable of the leaven: Matthew 13:33 (heaven) verses Luke 13:20-21 (God).

Jesus blesses little children: Matthew 18:3 (heaven) verses Mark 10:14 (God) and Luke 18:16 (God).

In this example, Jesus mentions both kingdoms interchangeably: Matthew 19:23-25 (heaven and God).

Because the book of Mark is believed to be older than Matthew, Biblical scholars believe that the older form "kingdom of God" was likely used by Jesus Himself. This is seen in the parallel passages noted above and the fact that Matthew had four instances of "kingdom of God."

Some scholars believe that Matthew used "kingdom of heaven" out of sensitivity to his Jewish audience to avoid the familiarization of the Sacred Name. The substitution of "heaven" for "God" was common practice among orthodox Jews and had equivalent meaning. However, criticisms of this view include the question of why Matthew had four instances of "kingdom of God" and mentions "God" in over fifty instances within his book.

While the phrase "kingdom of heaven" is equivalent in meaning to "kingdom of God," it remains a concept that is difficult to understand. Adding to this perception is Jesus' comment about the "mysteries of the kingdom."

Jesus answered them, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted" (Matt 13:11).

And He said, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is in parables, so that SEEING THEY MAY NOT SEE, AND HEARING THEY MAY NOT UNDERSTAND" (Luke 8:10).

It is worthwhile noting that when Jesus begins to explain what the kingdom of God was, he begins to teach in parables. And in speaking of secrets and mysteries, Jesus reveals to the twelve disciples previously unknown but now revealed truth about the kingdom of God.

Matthew records seven parables about the kingdom of God: The Sower and the Soils (13:1-23), The Wheat and the Tares (13:24-30, 36-43), The Mustard Seed (13:31-32), The Yeast (13:33-35), The Hidden Treasure (13:44), The Pearl (13:45-46) and The Net (13:47-52).

Mark records four parables about the kingdom of God: The Sower and the Soils (4:3-20), The Lamp (4:21-25), The Seed (4:26-29) and The Mustard Seed (4:30-32).

Luke records two parables about the kingdom of God: The Sower and the Soils (8:4-15) and The Lamp (8:16-18).

The mystery, as the twelve disciples begin to see, while yet not understanding, is that the kingdom of God is not what the first century Jew thought...

References:

1. Brown C, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 3, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, (1979).
2. Mounce MD, ed., *Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, (2006)