



The Kingdom Within?

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I received an astute email recently. "Dear Dr. Jones," it began, "you make a big distinction between monism and theism, between understanding God as the divine force within the world over against God as the transcendent Creator above it. But it seems to me," continued the note, "that Jesus was a monist, because he says quite clearly in Luke 17:21, 'the kingdom is inside of you.'"

There are only three texts in the Bible that seem to lend credence to this interpretation-this one, 2 Peter 1:4 and John 10:34.

People use Luke 17:21 as a trump-card against the Gospel. Already in the second century the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas has Jesus declaring that "the kingdom is within you." The Jesus of the Gnostics teaches about "the kingdom" the way a guru would teach about spirituality-as the symbol of inner human potential. In a more radical expression of Gnosticism, the Naassenes, who worshiped the serpent of Genesis (naas is serpent in Hebrew), interpreted this text to mean the presence of innate "serpent power" coiled at the base of the spine, as in Hindu kundalini yoga.

In the Bible, the kingdom is not "within you" as a human possibility-it is uniquely within God! The transcendent Creator sets human beings as vice-kings over the cosmic kingdom He created. Subsequently, God, not fallen humanity, establishes Israel as a "kingdom of priests" (Deuteronomy 19:5-6). It is God who promises a final kingdom that will not fail. The birth of a child whose name will be "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" will usher in a "kingdom of justice (Isaiah 9:6-7),...[that] "shall stand forever" (Daniel 2:44).

If we want to understand what Jesus means by kingdom, it is the Old Testament, not the wisdom of non-Christian religions, that provides a context for Luke 17:21. In the text, the Greek preposition "within" is ambiguous. It can mean "inside," in the sense of something internal, or "in the middle of," like a lake in a forest. The specific meaning must be decided by the context.

In Luke 17, Jesus is arguing about the kingdom against his opponents, the Pharisees. They skeptically demand extravagant signs as proof that Jesus is authentic and that the kingdom has come (verse 20). For demanding such signs, Jesus calls these same Pharisees "an evil and adulterous generation" (Matthew 12:38). Jesus cannot be telling this "evil and adulterous generation" (who have already determined in their hearts to kill him - Mark 3:6), how spiritual they are by possessing the "kingdom within." Far from possessing deep inner spirituality, the Pharisees, by rejecting the validity of Jesus' activity, are demonstrating willful spiritual blindness. In the next verse Jesus says to his disciples that the present time of blindness is like the future time of "not seeing." "The days are coming when you will desire to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it." In the time of Jesus a similar ignorance is over people's eyes.

For those with eyes to see, Jesus is revealing the mystery of the presence of the long-

expected kingdom (Mark 4:11). Though the Jewish leaders fail to see it, the kingdom has come and is present among them, right under their noses, because Jesus, the King, God in the flesh, is present among them.

In the light of this context, the phrase should be translated: "the kingdom is in your midst," as Jesus says without ambiguity elsewhere: "But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matthew 12:25). We do not find the kingdom within us. It comes upon us by God's action through Jesus.

"I have come to realize," my e-mail correspondent admitted, having heard my arguments about the passage, "that I prefer being a pagan monist." Though raised in "a traditional family," he found monism more to his liking. For him, the Bible was not decisive. But for those who wish to base their lives on Scripture and on God's gracious saving work, the meaning of this phrase is decisive. Though superficially suggesting a monistic notion of spirituality, this teaching of Jesus actually teaches the very opposite. "Going within" will not bring the kingdom but spiritual blindness, for our hearts are "desperately wicked" (Jeremiah 17:9). The kingdom is among us only because God in love and condescension came to seek us out in the person of his Son. Jesus the king, by his life and death on our behalf, provides an entrance into God's kingdom. This truth Jesus clearly states in John 14:6, "No man comes to the Father [and enters the kingdom] except through me."