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paved the way for the spread of the Christian gospel. It was not just armies and merchants that traveled on the Roman roads, but also ideas and stories. As the story of Jesus Christ spread beyond its Palestinian homeland into the farthest reaches of the empire, Luke saw that the sun was rising on a new kingdom. It was one that exceeded in brilliance the Roman Empire like the sun itself exceeds the light of the moon and stars.

At approximately the same time the Roman power was developing and would burst upon the world in the first century B.C., the Jews had come into an elaborate idea of the significance of kingdom. For nearly a millennium they had dreamed of the return of their own golden age—one in which the unified tribes of Israel would exert impressive foreign influence. The throne of David would be reestablished, but on a much grander scale. In fact, prophets such as Amos had revealed this promise as early as the eighth century B.C.: “In that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old” (Amos 9:11, RSV).

Lesson reference: CUS: Luke 14:15

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Luke's Use of “Kingdom”

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Above:
Remains at
New Testament
Jericho. After
visiting Zacchaeus
in Jericho, Jesus
taught about the
kingdom and
about being a
faithful steward
(Luke 19:11-27).

Right:
The remains of
the *Via Sacra*
(Sacred Way)
in Rome serve
as a symbolic
reminder of the
difference
between God's
kingdom and
those of the
world: one is
today but a
crumbling ruin,
the other is a
vital, eternal
reality.

BY THE SECOND HALF of the first century A.D., when Luke wrote his Gospel, the signs and symbols of empire were all around him. In his travels through Asia to Macedonia and other parts of Europe, he could see the effects of Roman rule and Roman law. He knew that he would find evidence of Roman supremacy as far east as Palestine and beyond. Soon the empire would reach the zenith of its power: the splendor of it had spread throughout the civilized world.

Local rule always had characterized world political geography, and it still did. Occasionally, one political entity would expand far beyond its accustomed sphere of power and even become administratively involved in far-flung regions. Of these empire builders Assyria was the first; it was followed by Babylon, Persia, and Greece. However, never before had anyone flung the mantle of administrative and military power as far and wide as had that city in the Etruscan hills of central Italy. Its laws and its roads had unified the nations of the world like no other empire. From the point of view of realized history, in the minds of first-century people, it was undeniably the most remarkable thing that ever had happened.

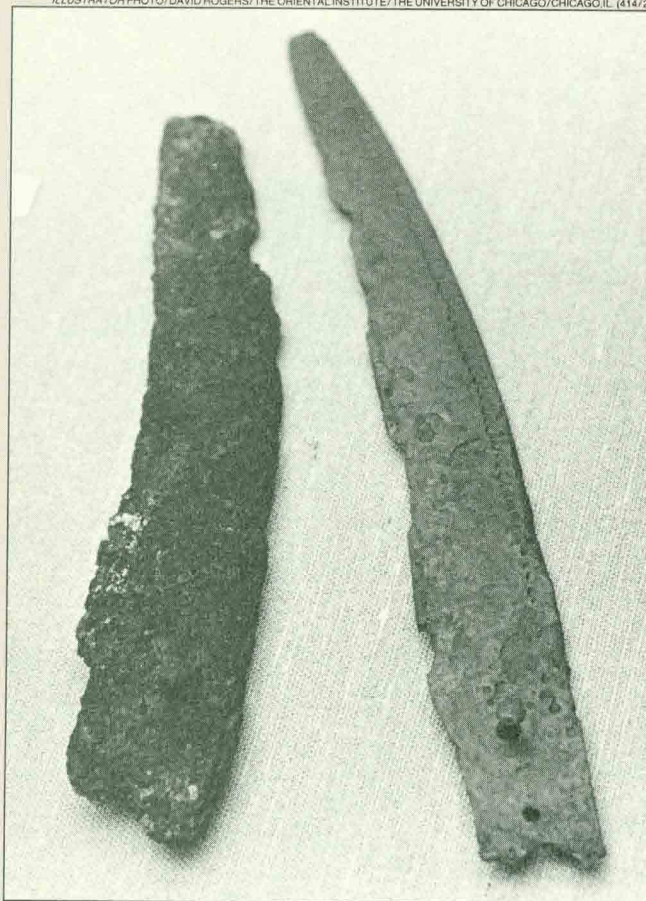
The empire in many ways (and in one way literally)

Further, it became clear that the prophets expected much more than a political kingdom—they expected one that was truly world transforming. This new kingdom would not signal only a new political order, but the redemption of the world through a turning of the Gentile nations to God. Isaiah (and also Micah) prophesied that in the time of this kingdom the nations would turn to it for instruction about every aspect of life. All war would cease and instruments of war would be converted into useful, peacetime objects such as plowshares and pruning hooks (Isa. 2:2-4; see Mic. 4:1-3)

By the time the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) were written, the idea of “kingdom” clearly had grown beyond the ordinary political meaning of the term. In the accounts of the temptation of Jesus found in Matthew and Luke, the Lord rejected the idea of political rule when the devil showed to Him “all the kingdoms of

In painting the picture of God's kingdom, Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies relative to peace. The ancients had spoken of a time when warfare would cease and former instruments of war such as these knife blades would become peacetime products of good. Some interpreters still look for physical, political peace that is yet to come, while others recognize the predictions as referring only to spiritual peace.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS/THE ORIENTAL INSTITUTE/THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO/CHICAGO, IL (4/14/21)



the world in a moment of time,” and offered to Him “all this authority and their glory” (Luke 4:5,6). This rejection of a political kingdom is elaborated further in John’s account as Jesus was questioned before Pilate regarding the charge that He was “King of the Jews.” “My kingship is not of this world,” He answered, “if my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight, that I might not be handed over to the Jews; but my kingship is not from the world” (John 18:36, RSV).

The difference between Luke and the other Synoptic Gospels in the use of kingdom is not, in any sense, a clear distinction. It is more one of emphasis. The emphasis, for Luke, follows from two realities that come into view in his Gospel. The first is that the gospel relates not simply to the Jewish experience and expectation of kingdom, but to the experience of the entire Roman world empire. The second is that, while this gospel announced a kingdom, it was clearly a kingdom of a different order and a different character. So the different emphases that emerge in Luke’s account are these: (1) the kingdom of God, unlike the Roman Empire, is in an important sense timeless and invisible; (2) the kingdom of God, also in contrast to Roman rule, does not rely upon human power, wealth, and prestige; instead, its power draws upon those who are faithful, even if they are impoverished, stricken, alienated, and oppressed.

There is sufficient reason to believe—both from Luke and from the other Synoptic Gospels—that Jesus spoke of the kingdom as a historical reality, an expectation within time. There were those who, for instance, looked for the coming kingdom to arrive within history, such as the old man Simeon (Luke 2:22-35), and the aged prophetess Anna (Luke 2:36-38). That is not even to mention the towering figure of John the Baptist, whose career was both a waiting for and a prophesying of the kingdom.

Jesus’ own words, recorded in Luke, indicate that He was announcing the beginning of something: “*Today* this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21, italics mine). The kingdom, within time, is underlined by the fact that the central thrust of Jesus’ teaching was that something *new* had occurred. It was the fulfillment of old expectations (especially do we see this in Matthew) that now had been confirmed. The New Testament is new because the tense of the message has changed. Even those passages that relate to the very eve of our Lord’s death (for example, Luke 22:18) look toward that future-dawning kingdom and speak quite clearly in the language of time.

To say, however, that Luke emphasized the timelessness of the kingdom of God is not to deny that he also saw it as historical and as a reality that made its appearance within time. Instead, what we find in Luke is that the kingdom is *more* than a historical reality: it appears within

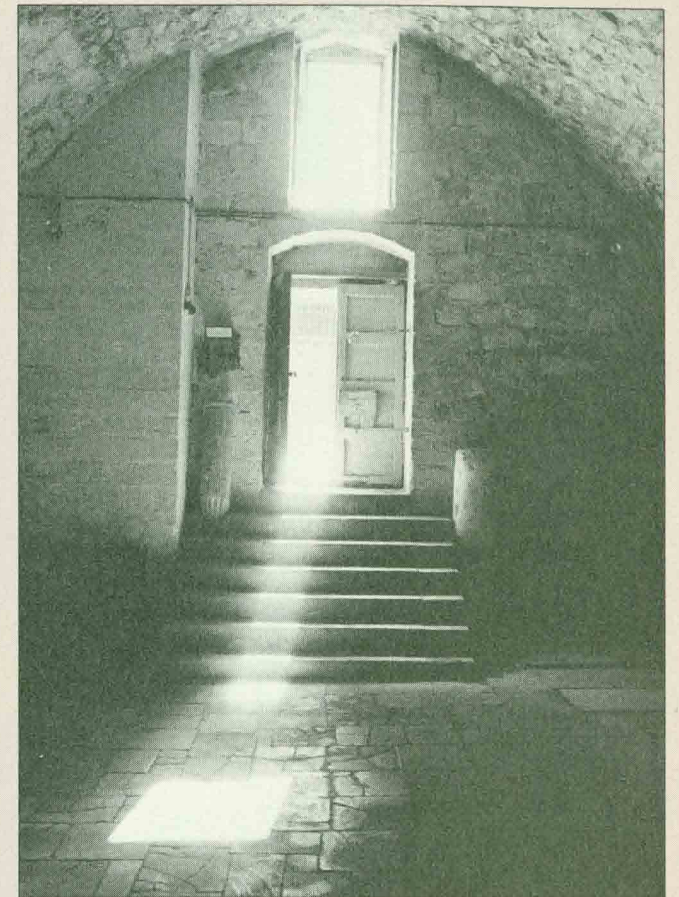
time, but its reality is not confined by time. This was precisely the point when Luke recalled an occasion of Jesus’ encounter with the Pharisees:

Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, he answered them, “The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, ‘Lo, here it is!’ or ‘There!’ for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you” (Luke 17:20-21, RSV).

Much discussion among students of Luke’s writing centers in the Greek phrase *entos humon estin* [en-TOHS hugh-MOAN ESS-ten], with some dispute over the proper sense of translation, whether “in your midst” or “within you.” Grammatically, of course, neither rendering can be faulted. Too, the manner in which one translates these words does not have a crucial bearing on what really is central in the passage. Either way, the words still carry forward the idea that the kingdom is real even though it is not evident and that its reality is not necessarily confined to its historical manifestation.

The ancient Jewish morning prayer contained the thanksgiving, “Lord, I thank Thee that Thou hast not made me a gentile, a slave, or a woman.” Luke’s Gospel, however, shows how God’s kingdom—so vast, and yet so invisible—is a kingdom built among Gentiles, slaves, women, and the poor. In Luke’s account of Jesus’ birth the most prominent figure is Mary. (By contrast, Matthew focuses on Joseph, and Mary is referred to as the mother of the child). The hymn of praise, coming from the lips of Mary (Luke 1:46-55), includes the lines “he has put down the mighty from their thrones, / and exalted those of low degree” (v. 52, RSV). Luke recounted how Jesus announced the arrival of the kingdom when He taught at the synagogue in Nazareth. The people received His words gladly until He reminded them that the prophet Elijah ministered to a foreign woman on the Phoenician coast (4:26) and that Elisha cured the Syrian Naaman (4:27).

In Luke Jesus healed the Roman centurion’s slave (7:1-10), and He preached that it is not the rich but the poor who have an advantage in entering the kingdom of God (6:20,24). It is the child, and one who enters like a child, who finds the way into the kingdom (18:15-17). The normal values of the world are reversed: This kingdom belongs to those who, in the eyes of the world, are most unlikely to gain the power and authority that is the very essence of a political kingdom. The leading lights in this kingdom are not rulers in the ordinary sense but servants. When the disciples disputed among themselves about pre-eminence, Jesus took the occasion to teach to them the secret of greatness within the kingdom: “The kings of the



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According to Luke’s Gospel account it was at the synagogue in Jesus’ hometown of Nazareth that He shocked the worshipers by identifying Himself as the Lord’s anointed. There Jesus shed new light on the messianic prophecies as He read from Isaiah 61, a Servant Song many believed spoke of the messiah. Now, only brilliant sunlight of another kind floods the open doorway of the ancient Jewish meeting house in Nazareth.

Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and those in authority over them shall be called benefactors. But not so with you; rather let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves” (Luke 22:25-26, RSV).

The kingdom that Jesus revealed and of which Luke wrote is the mirror image (reverse) of the Roman Empire. Luke saw that it stood in striking contrast to the political power of Rome, even as it also would exceed Rome in transforming world history. This is the kingdom that Jesus assigned to His disciples—not one of ambition, earthly glory, and personal gain—but one that comes of suffering, service, and love (Luke 22:28-30).

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