THE KINGDOM OF THE FATHER IN THE
GOSPEL OF THOMAS

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There is a broad consensus among biblical scholars that the kingdom of God is the most basic and central topic in the message of Jesus in the synoptic gospels. In this article I want to take a look at the meaning of this concept in the Gospel of Thomas, where many of the sayings refer to “the kingdom.” The central position of this term and theme is one of the many facts that give the Gospel of Thomas a closer relationship to the synoptic gospels than any other of the books from Nag Hammadi.

In the Gospel of Thomas, however, we do not find the most common synoptic phrase “kingdom of God.” Most frequently it is referred to simply as “the kingdom.”¹ This kind of language seems to presuppose that the author has received it as a well-known concept that does not need any further explanation to the readers. Three times we find the form “kingdom of heaven,” six times the form “kingdom of the Father” and once “kingdom of my Father.”² I do not want to discuss possible nuances between these phrases and the corresponding expressions in the synoptic gospels, “kingdom of God” and “kingdom of heaven.” I take them to be basically synonymous in their meaning. Neither do I want to enter into a diachronic discussion of the origin of and the possible interdependence between the sayings of Jesus as they are given in the canonical gospels and in the Gospel of Thomas. As far as I make comparisons between the gospels, the purpose is to clarify the meaning and function of “the kingdom” in the Gospel of Thomas on a synchronic level.

² Kingdom of heaven: GTh 20, 54, 114; kingdom of the Father: GTh 57, 76, 96, 97, 98, 113; kingdom of my Father: GTh 99. A couple of these occurrences (GTh 22, 97) are not in the Coptic text but are added by the translators.
It is a pleasure and an honour to dedicate this study to a Norwegian-American scholar, David E. Aune, who has devoted himself to meticulous and ground-breaking studies of the primary sources in the “Umfeld” and made them fruitful for the understanding of the New Testament. Following his call to go *ad fontes*, I write this article for a colleague whose friendship and scholarship I appreciate so much.

1. Scholarly Questions Regarding the Kingdom of God

When a biblical scholar comes from the synoptic gospels to other sources in order to look at the “kingdom of God,” two main questions will be ringing in his or her ears. The first one has made headlines in NT scholarship for more than a century and can be called the temporal question: Is the kingdom in the teaching of Jesus referring to a present or to a future reality, or eventually to both? In general, one can say that the futuristic, eschatological view had its break-through at the previous turn of century, as the “Religionsgeschichtliche Schule” saw the message of Jesus as part of or as influenced by contemporary apocalyptic ideas. For a long time there was a broad consensus that Jesus proclaimed a basically future, eschatological kingdom which was at the same time somehow present in his own ministry. But recently a number of scholars have tried to renew a non-apocalyptic understanding of Jesus and his message of the kingdom. The Gospel of Thomas has played an important role in these attempts. J. D. Crossan has coined the expression sapiental kingdom as alternative to the “eschatological kingdom,” and may be mentioned as a representative of this trend among North American scholars.³

The second question has not made headlines in the same way, but has regularly been raised and should not be declared settled in spite of many declarations to the opposite.⁴ I would call it the semantic question of the meaning of the phrase: Is the βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ a