

# “The Meaning of “the Life”

by John Sweigart

One of the more aggravating events for a student of the New Testament is to discover that the English translations have omitted a word that can be of interpretive value in understanding the text of the New Testament. Such an event is the translators' fairly consistent practice of eliminating the definite article used with the Greek word *zwh* = life. Often when this is discussed some one will raise the rule that abstract nouns often appear with the definite article in the New Testament. However, I want to argue in this brief article that when the word *Zwh* has the definite article, the article should be translated into English and that the noun *zwh* then becomes a synonym for “the kingdom.”

My plan of attack is simple. I want to cite several examples where this thesis is provable in the NT writings based on contextual clues. Then I want to show that there are passages that have not been traditionally understood to be referring to the kingdom but make a great deal of sense when understood in that way. Thirdly I want to make mention of several other usages where the proposed thesis does not apply. When referring to the kingdom, the Scripture, except for the end of the Book of Revelation does not make a great deal of distinction between the Messianic kingdom to be established by the Lord when He returns and the eternal kingdom of the Father. Even in the OT prophets the themes seem to flow together. So I will leave each of these passages to be interpreted contextually as to which kingdom is being discussed. It appears however, that most of the passages in the NT refer to the millennial kingdom to be established at the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

## Clear Passages

One of the strongest passages where one can clearly see that *zwh* plus the definite article is synonymous to “the kingdom” is found in Mark 9:42-45. In the preceding context (9:38-41) the issue of discipleship and reward is being discussed. But as we move into the section of interest, Jesus raises the issue of stumbling blocks to discipleship. The potential of sin causing a stumbling block to little ones (new believers?) is to be treated with the greatest severity entailing the hyperbolic loss of key limbs or organs of the body. Then three reasons or motivations are given for the severity of the action. Mark 9:43 says: “It is better for you (pl.) to enter the life...” Secondly, in Mark 9:45 we again find: “It is better to enter the life...” Finally in Mark 9:47 the parallelism shows: “It is better to enter the kingdom of God...” It is easy to see with these parallel verses that “the life = the kingdom.” Matthew's parallel in Matthew 18:8,9 shows the same effect even though he omits the third member of the parallelism.

The second occurrence where *zwh* plus the definite article clearly is synonymous to “the kingdom” is found in the very familiar story of the rich young ruler. The question is framed in Matthew 19:16: “What good thing must I do that I may have

(subjunctive) eternal life (age lasting life/life of the age to come/a share in the messianic kingdom)? The answer that follows is quite clear: "if (1<sup>st</sup> class condition) you want to enter into the life, (then) keep the commandments. Cf. Rev. 22:14 (Majority text). As the discussion in the passage continues, and we must understand that the same subject is under discussion until 20:16 where we see the word "good" in the sense of generous, Jesus and the disciples use a plethora of synonyms. In verse Matthew 19:16 we note "eternal life." In 19:17 we see our term "the life". In 19:23 Jesus uses the synonym "the kingdom of heaven." He immediately repeats the idea for emphasis in 19:24 using the term "the kingdom of God." In 19:25 the disciples chime in, but they used the word "saved" apparently in an eschatological sense. Lastly Jesus uses the term "the regeneration" and defines it clearly as "when the Son of Man sits on His throne." Again it is clear in this passage that when *zwh* is used with the definite article it can be used as a synonym for "the kingdom."

### Ambiguous Passages

Book of Revelation. The above-discussed principle of *zwh* plus the definite article being synonymous with the kingdom can be very useful in understanding the Book of Revelation. For example, *zwh* with the article appears three times in the so-called letters to the churches. I use the term so-called because the letters are structured more in life with OT oracles and covenant lawsuits in genre. In Revelation 2:7 we find that the "one who overcomes" is granted (the right) to eat from the tree of the life. If we substitute "the kingdom" for "the life" we clearly see that the promise is not fulfilled until 22:14 where the subjects are promised "their authority will be over the tree of the kingdom." In Revelation 2:7, "the one who overcomes and is faithful until death" is promised "the crown of the life = the kingdom". Lastly we have that notorious, enigmatic "book of the life" found in Rev. 3:5. Normally this should not cause us concern but there is a subtle implication that believers can be erased from the book of the life. Of course the verse is promising exactly the opposite using the figure of speech called litotes. The one who overcomes (present continuous tense) is promised that "he will absolutely not (ou mh) be blotted out of the book of the life." Now if life = kingdom then a new idea suggests itself. To be blotted out may mean that a non-overcoming believers may lose his inheritance or kingship rights.

In Rev. 13:8 and 17:8 we have almost parallel passages. In Revelation 13:8, because of the natural word order, it seems best to translate "those who dwell upon the earth whose name has not been written in 'the book of the life of the Lamb which was slain from the foundation of the world. Rev. 13:8 is fulfilled or mentioned again in 21:27. Certain character types have been eliminated from the Lamb's book of the kingdom.

Revelation 17:8 seems different. First of all there is a group idea being discussed using "names (pl.)" rather than "name (sg.)" as in 13:8. Secondly, the descriptive phrase "of the Lamb" is missing in 17:8. Thirdly, the preposition *epi* rather than *en* is used. But here above all others our thesis helps our interpretation. The emphasis of this verse is the existence of the kingdom from the foundation of the world not the writing of the names. Now God has always since creation had a kingdom in existence that men could enter based on covenant loyalty. Even as far back as Genesis 4:7, God says to the first murderer: "If you do good, will not you be lifted up?" This seems also to be the reason why Cain went out from the presence of the Lord and built a city. He was in this act of defiance establishing a rival kingdom/city-state.

We find two other occurrences in the Book of Revelation that are of interest. First in Revelation 20:12 there is an awkward construction: "another book was opened which is (the book) of the life. And the dead were judged from what was written in the books, according to their works." If we substitute as before then this passage makes more sense. If the life is equivalent to the kingdom then the books that are being opened are the chronicles of the kingdom. In the Book of Esther, we remember that when the king could not sleep he had the court chronicles read to him. The chronicles showed that Mordecai had once done the king a great service. Not only had his name Mordecai been recorded but also what he had done was there for all to see. The result was that when the king had corrected his previous oversight, Mordecai was awarded high honor.

The other usage of *zwh* plus the definite article is in Revelation 21:6 where the offer is made "to anyone who is thirsty" the resurrected Lord will give/grant "the water of the life" or as we have been arguing "the water of the kingdom."

In these instances in the Book of Revelation our thesis helps us to make more sense of the passages discussed than using the abstract noun "life".

Gospel of John. The usage of the word plus the article in the Gospel of John is problematic. In certain cases the term "the life" is used a proper name or title for the Lord. The most familiar verse with this idea is John 1:4. "The LIFE was the light (source of revelation) to men." In other cases it appears that John is using the term to mean an earthly life lived by the power of the indwelling Spirit of God. An instance of this occurs in John 20:31 "in order that believing you may have life in His name." Much in this verse depends upon how the participle "believing" is understood. Since it is a present participle, I would suggest that living a life of faith is what enables the believer to experience the life promised by the Lord.

But there are significant passages where our suggestion that "the life = the kingdom" opens other possibilities for interpretation. John 3:36 says "...the one who disobeys the Son shall not see the life (the kingdom) but the wrath of God

remains upon Him." John 5:24 is also interesting because it implies that the individual that believes (present continuous) has the life of the age to come as a present possession although there may be a futuristic nuance to the present tense due to the Hebrew thinking behind it. Furthermore, this same individual does not come into judgment but has already been transferred from the death to the life (kingdom). It is interesting to note in this context that the Book of Revelation does not explicitly mention a pre-kingdom judgment for those who participate in the first resurrection but only mentions the books being opened after the thousand years.

John 6:48 can be understood as a usage where Jesus is referring to Himself as the one who brings "the life to the world". Of course his provision is only effective if someone eats the bread, which is an act of faith. But in 6:51 the idea takes a strange turn. What is "the life of the world?" In what sense does "the world have zwh?" In a few cases in Luke, zwh may refer to a life spent of earth. Consider Luke 1:75, 16:25; also Colossians 3:3; James 4:14. But doesn't it make more sense in John 6:51 to suggest that Jesus is actually giving His flesh in exchange for the "kingdom of this world". After all in the whole dialog with Pilate later on in the Book of John, kingship becomes a very real issue.

In John 8:12 there is another instance that lends itself to new interpretation. The issue under consideration is discipleship described as "following Jesus." There is a promise given to the follower that if he follows Jesus then he will not walk in darkness but will receive the light of the life. This reverses the order of John 1:4 where the Life became the Light. Perhaps what we have here is the fact that the followers of Jesus are being promised "future revelation of the kingdom." After all, in John 16:12 the Lord promises subsequent revelation of the coming kingdom to His little band of followers. Then we discover in Acts 1:3 that the content of the post-resurrection revelation was "things pertaining to the kingdom of God."

1st John. The first epistle of John is somewhat ambiguous in the way it uses zwh and the definite article. In 1:1 it would make a great deal of sense to translate "concerning the message of the kingdom." The objection would be that there is strong emphasis on the actual physical aspects of the incarnation which the opponents in the book were denying. In 1:2 we seem to be on safer ground by understanding "the kingdom was manifested (the signs and wonders but especially the events on the Mount of Transfiguration) and we (apostles) have seen and bear witness and proclaim to you the age lasting kingdom... I John 3:14 is parallel to John 5:24.

1 John 5:11,12 becomes much clearer when we substitute the synonym "the kingdom" for "the life". We see there "this is the testimony God has given to us, age-lasting life and this age-lasting life is available in covenant with His Son/ the one who holds fast (covenant loyalty) to the Son obtains the kingdom, the one

who does not hold fast to the Son does not obtain the kingdom." Please note that John White has written a monograph that argues that the word *ein* should in some cases be translated "regard, acknowledge, etc." With his development we basically agree. However, there is a nuance in John 4:11 of the word *ecin* that fits very well in this passage. The Samaritan woman says, "'Lord, You have nothing with which to draw, where then do you (get, obtain = *ecin*) this living water? We adopt this translation in 1 John 5:11,12.

Finally, there is another appearance of the concept in a very familiar passage in James and in Matthew, James 1:12 promises a blessing to a believer that stands up well under testing. He indeed after being approved for reward will receive "the crown of the life." Here the word obviously is talking in futuristic terms about judgment and reward. The Lord will in fact give the one who passes the test "the crown of the kingdom."

This concept also helps us to understand the meaning of death in James 1:15. I have long suspected that death is not always a separation metaphor but is in reality a metaphor meaning "loss of dominion" in a covenantal sense. Many commentators view this as physical death but with our understanding of "the life = the kingdom" we are forced to view it as loss of kingdom dominion. The other passage in Matthew 7:14 then becomes quite easy. Jesus says "How narrow is the gate and constrained the way that leads to "the life=the kingdom." The disciple is encouraged to pursue the difficult constrained path of discipleship that leads to the blessings of the kingdom. The narrow gate means of course that an individual must enter through faith in Christ which only allows entrance for one individual at a time. But there is the warning contained in the passage. There are only a few that will find it. This warning parallels with other warning in Matthew about "many being called/invited" but only few being chosen.

### Exceptions to the Thesis

The occurrences where our rule works are limited to non-Pauline literature. Pauline usage seems to fall in three categories. In the first category, predominantly in the Book of Romans Paul is using *zwh* to mean the indwelling life of Christ mediated by the Holy Spirit. The life of Christ means the activity of the Spirit that exercises dominion over the power of sin that remains in the believer. Examples include 2 Cor. 4:10,11, Romans 5:10,17,18, 1 Tim. 4:8. The second way Paul uses *zwh* (without the article) is with the adjective eternal. Interestingly, Paul never appears to use "age-lasting life" as a gift but only as a reward. Even the most famous passage on the Roman Road evangelistic scheme turns out to be a pothole. Consider the argument of Romans 6:23 in context. Romans 6:22 say "But now having been set free from sin (power of sin) and having become enslaved to God, you are obtaining your fruit resulting in holiness (sanctification) and the outcome (of holiness) eternal life." In this verse alone we see that eternal life is the result of holiness not a free gift. Now also in

6:23 the argument is the same. "For the wages of sin (serving the power of sin) produces (notice that the verb is elided) death, but the grace gift of God (reference to the Holy Spirit 5:5) produces eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." Paul's third usage refers mainly to the time we spend here on earth.

### Conclusion

This article is simply an exploratory essay arguing that many times the word *zwh* with the definite article is a synonym for the kingdom. Most of the occurrences are in on-Pauline literature. This usage predominates in the Johannine and Synoptic Gospels. The word life is an abstraction and each reader must decide what aspect of the word is being discussed in context. Related to this discussion as well is how this usage interacts with the NT usage of eternal life. Our goal is always more clarity in interpretation.

Any comments or interaction is invited and appreciated.