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# THE RELIGIOUS LINGUISTIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PRESENCE OF THE KINGDOM IN THE LIGHT OF SPEECH ACT THEORY: CHRISTIAN ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS

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## Abstract

*This article presents a novel Biblical ethical hermeneutic approach that emerges from an understanding of the presence of the kingdom of God in the Biblical text. The approach is predicated upon the use of speech act theory (abbreviated as SAT) in relation to 'kingdom language' in the Biblical text. The approach shows how the notion of kingdom language, as God's divine activity, is elicited in the contemporary Christian's life by allowing it to operate beyond the world of the Biblical text. In other words, this approach establishes a Biblical-ethical hermeneutic bridge between the text (and its context) and the context of contemporary readers of the text. The alternative linguistic epistemology in SAT considers the principle of the kingdom of God in the past (locution level), the present (illocutionary level) and the future (perlocutionary level). The dynamic equivalences of the past, present and future of the kingdom of God based on an SAT approach to the Biblical text can inform Christian ethical theory and moral action in the present world. It can also provide a new moral sensibility in relation to God's sovereignty and the responsibility of Christians in contemporary society.*

**Key Words:** Ethics; Kingdom of God; Bible; Hermeneutics; Speech Act Theory; Biblical Ethics

## Introduction

In a general sense, the phrase the 'kingdom of God'<sup>1</sup> refers to God's reign. It points directly

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<sup>1</sup> The scope of this project does not allow us to situate fully the evolution of the concept of the kingdom of God within the broader developments, history and contours of the theological discourse. This study does not aim to engage fully with the complexity of the kingdom of God in the Bible or in the Christian life as a whole. However, our aim is to illustrate a Biblical ethical hermeneutic principle. The focus of this research posits that the kingdom referred to in various approaches to the kingdom of God in the Biblical text, is linked to God's performative action in Christian ethical life. This link is in terms of God's total speech act considered through the lens of SAT and how it leads to moral implications in ordinary life. Our interest is in the ethical hermeneutic approach, rather than to study or establish a definition of the kingdom of God. Scholars disagree on what the kingdom of God meant in the Bible. Some scholars have interpreted the kingdom in terms of first-century Judaism while others have internalised or de-temporalised the concept of the kingdom of God and seen it variously from cosmological, spiritual, allegorical, mystical, psychological, philosophical, and sociological perspectives (Buchanan 1970:55). Some other scholars have understood the kingdom as both a future hope and a present reality (Wright 2007:5). This 'both-present-and-future' view has become a predictable feature in contemporary systematic theology (Pannenberg 1998:553). With Gustaf Dalman's classic *Die Worte*

to God's self as revealed in the Bible (cf. France 2007:271). It can be argued that the presence of the kingdom, as God's self, can be related to the 'Word of God',<sup>2</sup> expressed in the utterances, sayings and teachings of Jesus, which is an important basis for Christian ethics (cf. Birch 2011:27-33). In this line of reasoning, the message of the kingdom proclaimed by Jesus should be the pattern for Christian action or the norm for Christian living. Jesus' identity, person and teaching, should inform the content of the ethics of God's kingdom (cf. Burrige 2007:19-22; 33-78). In general, Christian Biblical ethical content has tended to concentrate primarily on moral disciplines, or features of Christian belief and practice, that are extrapolated from the Biblical text, rather than on the linguistic nature of the kingdom in the Biblical text. These trends have failed to account for the dynamic and powerful character of kingdom language in the Scriptures, and the value that they may hold for contemporary Christian living.

The kingdom of God has a recognisable pattern – the so-called Augustinian pattern of creation, falling into sin, salvation and ultimately, consummation (Boeve 2004:307). It is suggested that God came to us in the past, is living with us in the present, and leads us towards the consummation and realisation of the kingdom of God in the fullness of time. How then do we explain the relationship between the presence of the kingdom, which is God's sovereignty, and Christian ethics, in a way that would resolve the tension between the past, present and future in the message of the kingdom as it is ascribed to Jesus?<sup>3</sup> How do we bridge the gap between the meaning and force of what the message of the kingdom communicates in the Bible, and tangible, contemporary, ethical concerns?

These questions can be engaged through a hermeneutic approach that employs SAT to reinterpret the notion of God's kingdom in terms of its religious meaning and linguistic characteristics for Christian moral living. Hence, Christian ethical theory could engage the message of the kingdom in the utterances of Jesus as God's speech act. Moreover, this

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*Jesu*, the attention of scholars was drawn to the fact that 'basileia' in the similar phrases "kingdom of God" and "kingdom of Heaven" was a rendering of the Aramaic word 'malkuth (מלכות)'. This Aramaic word usually means 'kingdom' in the sense of a territory ruled by a king. But as Dalman points out, it can also have an abstract force signifying 'reign' or 'kingship.' Dodd accepts Dalman's perspective in his work, "*The Parables of the Kingdom*" (1935:34-44). While Ladd (1974:91) argues the kingdom, God's sovereignty as redemptive rule and work, now present in the person, deeds, and words of Jesus; the kingdom and its blessings are present and vigorously active among men. In addition, Hauerwas (1983:72-91) explains the concept of the kingdom of God from the perspective of Christian ethics: it shows Jesus as the presence of the peaceable kingdom; that is what he identifies as the core of Christian ethics. Hence, Christian ethics is the overriding significance of Jesus' life and person in relation to both Christology and eschatology. This is because Jesus comes into our communities as God becoming human in order to proclaim and prove the kingdom of God as a present and future reality. In this article, in order to explain the relevance of the kingdom of God and Christian ethics, we have followed the contributions of various scholars, including those mentioned above.

<sup>2</sup> In a general sense, Christians accord special significance to the Bible as containing, or presenting, the Word of God. However, this needs to be considered with a measure of nuance and even critique. There are clearly utterances in Scripture which describe violent and shocking events. For example, in Judges 19-21, we read horrible stories of rape, murder, war, and conspiracy (Lawrie 2015:37). In such cases, how can we consider the Bible as the Word of God? Are these really kingdom utterances? This is a crucial question that goes beyond the scope of this paper. It has been engaged by other scholars such as Lawrie and Birch (cited above). An aim of this article is to show how an understanding of Biblical language is adequate for informing the complexity of Christian moral life through SAT. Therefore, this article limits the scope of research in that it does not engage what may be considered problematic utterances or narratives in the Biblical text in illustrating the hermeneutic principle under consideration. This is an important topic and will need to be addressed fully in future research.

<sup>3</sup> The message of the kingdom of God in the New Testament is often related through the sayings and deeds of Jesus. The authors of these texts drew both causal and correlational links between the person, nature, and will of Jesus, and the values, identity, and social constructions of the kingdom of God.

approach can take the illocutionary acts in Scripture such as acts of *blessing*, *promise*, *warning* and so forth, into account in relation to ethics and the moral life. Such an approach is viewed as a continuum of God's reign through which believers encounter ethical content that informs their lives. These do not merely present moral lessons, or doctrines, in the propositional elements of the text, but specific ways of acting and living as a dynamic implication of the pattern of Christian life embedded in the divine force and action of the text. Such a perspective depends on an understanding that accepts that God communicates with humanity and creation. Moreover, that this communication forms part of God's speech act as the presence of the kingdom in the present; i.e., God continues to communicate God's person and will in the present. God's communicative activity could be labelled as God's self-revelation in history. This hermeneutic and ethical consideration will offer new insights for Christian ethical theory that enables an appropriate response from contemporary believers to engage with God's will and God's kingdom in their lives.

### **The Religious Linguistic Characteristic of the Kingdom of God as Performative Biblical Language**

The Bible frequently presents its messages to Bible readers as warnings, commands, invitations, judgements, promises, or pledges of love (Thiselton 2006:86). Such Biblical language bears the attributes of performative utterances, which express a particular divine purpose, for example *promise*, *warning* and *exhortation*. These communicative acts elicit a response from the believer in accordance with God's word, i.e., the Biblical text is believed to communicate aspects of God's will for the lives of those who read it, and the societies in which they live. What is the intention of this communication? Propositional language in the Biblical text indicates not only facts or statements, but at the same time meaning and meaningful acts. More precisely, a text refers to its propositional content as what is 'said' in which the text itself entails a meaningful act – i.e., what the text is doing (the response it requires, or elicits, in the reader), and not merely what it means. In this sense, kingdom language does not simply refer to the meaning of the kingdom (what is the kingdom of God?) but to performative action (what shall I do to live as a citizen of God's kingdom?), which urges us to do something to fulfil God's kingdom in our lives. This is made clear through the inherent linguistic force of the utterances themselves. Accordingly, portions of the Bible relating to the kingdom in Jesus' sayings demonstrate that divine activity is an inherent language force that enables the Christian community to fulfil God's will in the present.

Language creates new realities and possibilities. It can bring into being a new world of reality in relation to what has been spoken. From this perspective, the words of Jesus about the kingdom constitute the content of social and religious identity (Christian identity) for Christians. Hence, these utterances have divine force in relation to the state of affairs within the Christian community under God's rule, and these acts of communication should inform patterns of behaviour in everyday life. Take the following utterance as an example, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 5:3). To say "I bless you" or "I promise you" is to perform a speech-act of implied behaviour, a commitment that would be enacted in accordance to the utterance.

Consequently, biblical language is performative, as it demonstrates not only *what the words meant (the meaning of the ethics of the kingdom)* but also *the process of accomplishing that meaning (the performance of the ethics of the kingdom)*. This performative religious biblical language is a meaningful and intentional divine action. It is closely linked

to eschatology as the language of promise, warning, and exhortation between God and God's people. It is important to make a decision to change one's life in a practical way while hoping for the coming of the kingdom of God. Thus, Christian ethics has an impact on how we live and what we do in ordinary life since it is intended to change our hearts and deeds to conform to God's will. This perspective on Jesus' sayings enables us to distinguish between the *meaning* and the *force of what the message of the kingdom* communicates in the Biblical text. In this way, kingdom passages would imply that the insight from the illocutionary force has informed Christian ethical theory and that it should be used to rethink the notion of divine intention in terms of the illocutionary act for the sake of God's kingdom.

### Speech Act Theory (SAT)

Speech act theory<sup>4</sup> is a theory of language used in relation to speech performance and the effects of speech performance. In the field of the philosophy of language, this theory was initially introduced by JL Austin in "*How to Do Things with Words*" (1962), and his student JR Searle in two volumes, "*Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*" (1969) and "*Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts*" (1979).

All communication takes place in a certain context or community within which certain conditions and conventional expectations (customs, cultures, including non-verbal behaviour) operate in order to understand what the utterance is doing with what it is saying. This encompasses forms of communication not only as having propositional meaning but also as having meaningful action.<sup>5</sup> In short, SAT is based on the premise that to say something is to do something. This suggests that a speaker is not merely uttering sounds, or making statements, but is performing an action (as language itself). A theory of language is part of a theory of action; and speaking a language is performing speech acts (Searle 1969:16-17). Thus, SAT primarily relates to performative language and the original characteristics and operation of language utterances which produce certain effects as responses in accordance with the speaker's communication to the hearer.

### A Critique of Speech Act Theory (SAT)

Before examining SAT in detail, it is worth considering some critiques of this approach. Mey (1998:933) argues that "[o]ne serious weakness with speech act theory has been to pretend that each U [utterance] has only one illocutionary point." This is a valid critique since it points out that in some approaches SAT fails to account for multiple actions in an utterance due to the fact that a single utterance may represent one particular action. Sometimes an utterance requires, or implies, more than one action in a discourse. This is partly true but also partly false. Searle (1976:4-16) did not insist that an utterance has only one illocutionary point. Rather, he implied that an illocutionary point in a single utterance can have more than one point by suggesting the organising categories of the direction of fit. Another weakness that is frequently highlighted in SAT, is the concern that the hearer may not know the speaker's exact intention in relation to the illocutionary force (Allan 1994:4132) and so may not be able to respond appropriately in accordance with the

<sup>4</sup> For more information about the history of SAT, see Briggs 2001.

<sup>5</sup> "Utterances made in a specific context have a specific 'force', not necessarily related to the form of utterance. For instance, the utterance 'It is raining' has that meaning but, *depending on the context*, the 'force' of the utterance could be that the speaker is using it to *inform* or to *warn*" (Botha 1991:280, *his emphasis*).

utterances of the speaker. Again, this is a valid critique of this communicative theory. One needs to be careful, however, not to collapse the descriptive aspects of SAT into a normative frame. Simply because a form of communication cannot be linked to action in a causal sense, does not infer that one cannot analyse and describe the communicative intent; i.e., the lack of normative causality does not invalidate descriptive analysis. Of course, SAT is not without its shortcomings. However, in this instance it can serve to help to illustrate a hermeneutic principle in Biblical ethics, namely, that God's communicative intent in the Bible predicates some ethical response in the lives of contemporary readers.

### **Austin – the Speaking of a Language is a Performative Act**

Let us now move on to consider the relationship between communication as information and communication as performance. While the constative utterance describes some state of affairs, or informative fact, as true or false, the performative utterance constitutes a performative act. Austin (1975:4-5) argues that the 'constative' in language use performs a particular action just as the performative utterance does. This occurs in utterances such as 'I do' (in a marriage ceremony). For example, when one says, 'I do' in the marriage ceremony, one is not reporting on the ceremony itself (constative), but participating in it (performative) (Austin 1975:6). This indicates that in some instances statements are intended to *do something* rather than merely *say something*. Austin (1975:94-107) argues that in terms of the performative utterance, three action structures should be distinguished in speech, namely the locutionary, the illocutionary, and the perlocutionary acts:

1. The locutionary act is the performance of the act of saying something which presents itself at the level of utterance, such as vocabulary and grammar, which demonstrates what has been said or written.
2. The illocutionary act is the performance of an act in saying something. It indicates the force of what we do in saying something within a conventional rule or set of rules, such as communicating within a given community (e.g. warning, promise, command etc.).
3. The perlocutionary act is "what we bring about or achieve by saying something" (Austin 1975:109). This refers to the speaker's utterance in accordance with the illocutionary act, i.e., the intended effect of what has been said to the hearer (e.g. persuading, convincing, surprising etc.).

From this perspective, we can distinguish between the meaning of what we say and its force as an illocutionary force within the perlocutionary act (Austin 1975:108). The distinction can create a particular ethical sensitivity in relation to the message of the kingdom proclaimed by Jesus. For example, when Jesus said, 'Listen!' and "Let anyone with ears to hear, listen!" (Mt. 13:18) Jesus did not just mean, 'listen' in the plain sense of the word. Rather, the utterance indicates the command to hear, and therefore to obey, which would constitute a proper response to Jesus' words (Hooker 2000:89). The utterance does not simply mean that the hearers should hear him. Rather, it aims to warn false believers, or those who do not rightly follow God's will with a sincere heart, or those who have a correct understanding of the Word of God but do not have the intention of following it, to do more than just hear, but also to act on what they hear (Snodgrass 2013:286).

The locutionary act does not simply mean, 'Listen!', it also entails the illocutionary action. It has the added meaning of warning – it requires the hearer to respond, to do something. Moreover, if the hearer appreciates the illocutionary act as a message of warning and is then persuaded, frightened, or alarmed, it means that a perlocutionary act has been

performed. In this regard, the performative language meaning and effect go far beyond a locutionary act with only a propositional meaning and recognition, i.e., simply the meaning of “Let anyone with ears to hear listen!” Even though Jesus is no longer present, his utterance as a locutionary action was/is performed as an illocutionary action (a message of warning to both the audience in a past event in the Biblical world, but also the contemporary hearer/reader). It shows that the utterance of Jesus is a past event but its illocutionary force or energy, and its intention, are continuously being echoed in the present world. It is up to the reader (hearer) to respond to the words of Jesus appropriately. Thus, the illocutionary action and force, as a language-dynamic, can form a hermeneutic bridge between the Biblical world and the world of the contemporary reader.

Accordingly, successful communication in SAT involves an agreement on three levels of action between the speaker/author and the hearer/reader. Even though the reader of this text already knew on a locutionary level what ‘listen’ means, it had no influence on the hearer since the locution act refers simply to propositional meanings, it has no power to do something to the hearer or cause a particular effect in the hearer (cf. Searle 1969:31). However, where the language has an effect on the hearer, the hearer should respond not only on the locutionary level, but also on the illocutionary level. Therefore, the illocution act helps us to rethink the meaning of the kingdom and the appropriate ethical response to its illocutionary significance and intention.

### Relating Aspects of an SAT Approach to Biblical Exegesis

In order to reconsider the meaning of the ethics of the kingdom in the Bible in relation to SAT, it is necessary to see how aspects of SAT could relate to Biblical exegesis. In some senses Christian ethics could be described as a form of rule-governed behaviour. In relation to SAT the use of language (including texts) is also explained through certain constitutive rules that govern human behaviour (Searle 1971:40). This is what makes communication possible. Moreover, the ethical conception of the kingdom of God is itself a rule-governed form of behaviour, for it contains certain ‘constitutive rules’ such as the value system of righteousness in Christianity’s social context. Communal confessions and creeds (conventions) are involved in these constitutive rules which relate to all kinds of non-verbal conduct that operate behind the language itself. In this regard, the non-linguistic elements help us to recognise where the illocutionary act operates, and to see that the illocutionary act creates ‘new realities’. To understand this, the following three questions would help to refine the relationship between SAT and Biblical exegesis.<sup>6</sup> This task will be illustrated in relation to different ethical dimensions that emerge from such an approach to Matthew 25:1-13, the Parable of the Ten Virgins.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> In these instances we have used, and revised, Duck-Hyun Kim’s hermeneutical questions and insight from the perspectives of SAT and the Bible. See Duck-Hyun Kim, “Reframing the Hermeneutical Question as Part of Its Homiletical Responsibility: Making Extensive Use of the Speech Act Theory” in *The Journal of the Evangelical Homiletics Society* 16, 2016:40.

<sup>7</sup> We have selected the Parable of the Ten Virgins because it serves as a good illustration of the main argument of this article. The parable has embedded ethical implications that can be engaged to illustrate the religious linguistic characteristics of the kingdom of God in the light of SAT. However, it is important to note that our aim is not to suggest solutions to specific ethical problems by using SAT in relation to this text. Rather, we aim to show a certain possibility for an approach to Biblical ethics. While we will not deal with specific ethical issues in this article please refer to Anna Cho’s PhD Thesis for some examples of how such a task could be approached, *q.v.* “*Christian Ethical Implications of the Presence of the Kingdom as God’s Performative Action in the Light of Speech Act Theory*”. Stellenbosch University PhD Thesis, forthcoming:221-230.

### *Which Constitutive Rules and Institutional Facts Govern the Biblical Passage?*

The Parable of the Ten Virgins in Matthew 25:1-13 shows the difference in cultural forms between an ancient and a modern wedding ceremony. In the ancient world, the betrothal ceremony typically took place in the house of the bride's father, after which the young woman remained in her father's house for several years. When the wedding day came, the bride was adorned and then taken in a festive procession to the groom's house at night, escorted with lanterns. The groom would then go out to receive the bride and bring her into his home for a celebration that could last as long as seven days. It was understood that the groom would bring his bride back to his house after participating in a banquet at the home of the bride; therefore, the virgins waited at the home of the groom.<sup>8</sup>

However, in this text, it is not certain where the feast took place or what exactly is being described, and the text does not talk about the bride and groom in detail even though it is clear that the narrative is structured around a wedding feast. Yet, we know that the communicative intention of the text is not to share information about the cultural practices surrounding wedding feasts in the Matthean community. Rather, there are other reasons for recording and sharing this parable with the intended readers, and also lessons and concepts that are of value for contemporary readers. So, we could ask: what then do the terms virgin, bride and groom mean? What are the qualifications and the duties of the bride and groom? What should the virgin do at the wedding ceremony? These constitutive rules and institutional facts would help Christian ethicists to appreciate the identity and essence of the illocutionary act in the passage in order to find its embedded communicative meaning without collapsing the world of the Bible into the contemporary worldview. The outcome of such an exercise could provide hermeneutic clues to the contemporary reader to build a bridge between the constitutive rules of the author and the intended readers, and the ethical implications for contemporary readers of the text.

### *What Kind of Illocutionary Force (F(p)) does this Biblical Passage perform?*

In this parable, while the foolish virgins went to buy oil, the bridegroom came and the wise virgins went with him into the wedding feast, the others did not return until the door was already shut, and so they were excluded from the feast. This situation can be signified in SAT terms as  $F(p)$ , and is as follows: Every locutionary act (as a literary structure or literary discourse ' $p$ '), is a part of the total illocutionary act ' $F(p)$ ' (cf. Searle 1968:405). The communicative act contains a certain force ' $F$ ' that communicates the speaker's particular purpose and communicative intention to the hearer.

The narrative which is relayed above indicates the speaker's situation or identity and the specific intention of the communicative act, which can be represented by the proposition ( $p$ ), constituting an illocutionary force point  $F$  (the day and the hour, that is, Jesus' time) as an *exhortation* ' $E(p)$ ' (e.g., other illocutionary force expressions could be, a warning ' $W(p)$ ', blessing ' $B(p)$ ', or promise ' $Pr(p)$ '). In other words, the proposition of Jesus' time (a certain day and hour), is regarded as an eschatological exhortation ' $E(p)$ ' which also contains links to promissory language ' $Pr(p)$  (Jesus' time)'. The ' $Pr(p)$ ' could offer a clue to the intended message of this narrative. Jesus is the bridegroom (which is not mentioned overtly in the biblical text). In the Bible, the exhortation, or warning, contains a directive word which alludes to a way of speaking about the end of time. This is stated in the phrase 'ἡμέραν' or 'ᾠραν' ('the day or the hour'). The exhortation can be related to the promissory language

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<sup>8</sup> For further information on this issue, see KR Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008:510.

(ascribed to God by Matthew) as a performative action. Hence an eschatological expectation (E) emerges which necessitates an action of preparing for the end of time in the current time (Campbell 2000:39). In this sense, the 'E(p)' asks the hearer, or believing community, to prepare for the end of time and it represents a Christological injunction to do so, since Jesus is the inferred bridegroom in the Parable of the Ten Virgins under the implied condition of 'Pr(p)' in this text (cf. France 2000:181).

*(How does the Illocutionary Force F(p) in the Text determine the Kind of Direction of Fit that could build up the People of God in, and for, the World to fulfil the Kingdom of God as an Alternative Reality?)*

This parable is about the watchfulness, readiness, and the faithfulness of the believers in relation to the day or the hour of the Lord as a communication of *exhortation* (Gundry 1994:500-502). In terms of SAT, the illocutionary force 'E(p)' (where E is the eschatological horizon) serves as the direction of fit which refers to doing something specific in relation to the communicative intent of the text. In other words, 'E(p)' directs the passage to the hearer/reader between the propositional content and the illocutionary force eliciting a preferred action which has meaning and force within a worldview that matches the communicative content of the words and phrases that are used. In other words, the illocutionary effect, or response in the text, creates the perlocutionary effect. The parable does not just remind us of the need for watchfulness, readiness, and faithfulness in view of the day of the Lord, it also *urges us to do something* to fulfil God's will and live in accordance with the expectations of God's kingdom in daily life (Henry 1961:372). This point implies that the believer should live faithfully as a Christian, as evoked by the use of language of exhortation in the passage, such as 'Keep awake'. Therefore, the illocutionary force F, in the context of an exhortation 'E(p)', highlights the ethical implications of the kingdom of God for contemporary Christian living.

### **The Presence of the Kingdom in the Past, Present and Future and its Moral Intention according to SAT**

Some Biblical texts present God as the primary communicator (speaker). This entails the idea that God is a participant in a divine – human discourse revealing God's self to God's people, or that God speaks in order to fulfil God's will and the expectations and values God's kingdom, among God's people. Vanhoozer (1998:205; 2002:162) suggests that, "[t]he God of the Christian Scriptures is a God who relates to human beings largely through verbal communication," which means "the word is God's-being-in-communicative-action". Thus, the presence of the kingdom, to some measure, can be understood according to linguistic characteristics. It encourages us to think of communication in terms of intentional action.

How, then, do we explain the presence of the kingdom and its moral dimensions in relation to linguistic characteristics? How do we explain the words of God as divine force in the tension between the past, the present and the future in the kingdom? If God's communicative intent is coherent, consistent and unchanging (i.e., the same yesterday, today and forever as the writer of Hebrews 13:8 suggests), then the influence of the Word of God would be same throughout all of history. If this is so, is it reasonable to consider the implications of God's kingdom in the past, the present and the future, and to probe what its impact is on the contemporary believer?



From the SAT perspective, the presence of the kingdom<sup>9</sup> can be seen from the threefold level of locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts in terms of the essence of the totality of the kingdom in the past (locution level), the present (illocutionary level) and the future (perlocutionary level).

- First, the kingdom in the past can be related to the locution level. The locutionary act is the performance of an act of communication which presents itself at the level of saying something as a propositional element. This refers to the content of what has been said or what has been written in relation to the *past*. In other words, the kingdom in the past shows that God has spoken to God's people through Jesus, and this is closely linked to God the Father's locution (Vanhoozer 1997:156). The locutionary act of the kingdom points to the propositional elements and the propositional meaning in what God said or what the text meant.
- Second, the kingdom in the present can be expressed as an illocutionary act. The illocutionary act is what we do in saying something through our inherent linguistic force, which can recognise the true meaning of the text or utterance. It functions as the power of what we do when we say words which relate to our current situation and which can only take place within a conventional rule, or set of rules, related to that situation. To be specific, the illocutionary act relates to what one does in order to remain faithful to the speaker's specific intent to promise, warn or exhort the hearer to act in a certain way. In this sense, *the Kingdom of God in the present demonstrates the force of what Jesus says according to illocutionary actions directed to the believer in his or her daily life*. It is what makes this form of communication elicit a particular response in the present in relation to a promise, exhortation or warning for the future.

Vanhoozer suggests that the Bible shows that God testifies to Jesus in various ways (Vanhoozer 1997:156). Moreover, this testimony has illocutionary force as it continues to operate across time (Pratt 1977:136). This characteristic of illocutionary communication portrays the kingdom in the present as having divine force in contemporary life that is related to Jesus' works and words in the past (locution, which shares information in relation to Jesus' work and words in the past). Jesus' work and words form an illocutionary proposition that requires a response in the present, based on what is learnt from the past, and in anticipation of the future (cf. Vanhoozer 1994:177). According to Searle (1968:148), locutionary and illocutionary acts cannot be separated from each other because no utterance of a sentence and its meaning are completely 'force-neutral.' As we saw earlier, Searle (1969:30-32) suggested that the form of a speech act can be represented as '*F(p)*' where '*F*' is the illocutionary force and '*p*' is the proposition. In this sense, the kingdom is neither simply '*p*' nor simply '*F*' but '*F(p)*' which demonstrates that the expressions of the propositions in the context of the kingdom (*the kingdom in the past as the Word of God*) become a certain action (*the kingdom in the present as the force of what we do with the Word of God*) through the illocutionary force. It is expected to produce meaningful deeds in a hearer/reader in accordance with the Bible's communicative intent. For example, in 1 Corinthians 1:23, the statement, 'We preach (*F*) Christ crucified (*p*),' can be interpreted as "Jesus is Lord" *F(p)* if one accepts the relationship between the propositional statement, and the illocutionary force, as a hermeneutic lens for interpretation (cf. Thiselton 2006:86).

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<sup>9</sup> Dalferth (2006:83-85) argues that the presence of God is not confined merely to its current state, but rather it goes beyond time and place (the past, present and future) as an aspect of the Trinitarian God. This means that the Trinitarian God works in the past, present and future of the kingdom in human history.

Similarly, the statement, “Jesus is my Lord”  $F(p)$ , entails the self-description, “*I am a Christian*”  $F(p)$ , since Christians who see themselves as Christ’s servants are wholly at the disposal of their ‘Lord,’ having an obligation to God and God’s kingdom. In other words, the speaker who preaches Christ crucified  $F(p)$  is also making an ethical claim. The illocutionary act invites trust, devotion and obedience to God. Specifically, it indicates that in saying, “We preach (F) Christ crucified ( $p$ )”, one commits to future conduct, or supposes that one has a particular attitude and intention, according to the illocutionary action contained in that utterance. It implies that *the kingdom in the present refers to the force of what we do in accordance with God’s will and purpose which creates meaningful action as a result of the statement.*

- Third, the kingdom of God in the future can be represented at the perlocutionary level. The perlocutionary act is “what we bring about or achieve by saying something.” It produces the intended effect in relation to what has been said. It responds to the speaker’s utterance according to the illocutionary act which is an effect of what has been said to the hearer. The perlocutionary act produces an effect on the hearer achieved through an illocutionary act; the illocutionary force creates an appropriate response in the hearer/reader. This idea of perlocution can be used to refer to the kingdom in the future as something that happens as a result of speaking to *persuade, frighten, or alarm* the believer. This corresponds to the Holy Spirit’s response as God’s perlocution (cf. Vanhoozer 1997:156). For example, when Jesus says, ‘Listen!’ and “Let anyone who has ears, listen!” (Mt. 13:18), Jesus is not merely directing the people to ‘listen’. He is not simply asking them to hear him, but rather trying to warn those who do not follow God’s will, or obey him, with a sincere heart, by *urging or persuading* them to obey God’s Word. The resultant action comes from the perlocutionary act which refers to the condition and power of responding faithfully and appropriately to Jesus’s utterance. The Christian life, in terms of moral conduct, reflects the Christian confession, “Jesus is my Lord”  $F(p)$  *through the work of the Holy Spirit as God’s perlocution.* This confession pertains to the illocutionary effect or response in the utterance which creates the perlocutionary effect as well as the perlocutionary action on the believer as a form of Christian ethical living. Thus, the kingdom in the future as a perlocutionary act responds to the intended effect of what has been said.

Therefore, the Word of God as divine action is the result of God’s self-communicative action with God’s people. It shows God’s being in a speech act which is not simply speaking words, but engaging in a performative action which is expressed as the kingdom in the past, the present and the future. This overview shows how SAT could function as a hermeneutic approach to Biblical ethics in relation to kingdom language in the Biblical text.

## Conclusion

This article suggested that by means of an SAT approach, the presence of the kingdom can be perceived as God’s divine action, which does not refer to a propositional theme in the text, but rather refers to God’s speech acts as represented in the Biblical text. This speech act is intended to elicit a response in the lives of Christians – this is a form of Biblical ethics. This includes the meaning of what is said (locutionary act), the force of what is said (illocutionary act), and the response expected as a result of saying something (perlocutionary act). More precisely, the kingdom sayings represent the performance of speech acts which produce certain effects, or responses, in the lives of believers in

accordance with aspects of the content and communicative intention of the Biblical narrative. This process occurs in contemporary readings of the Biblical text, and not merely as a testimony, or narrative retelling, of past events recorded in Scripture. Therefore, divine speech acts, based on an understanding of illocutionary force, impacts on the believing community, thereby making room for the performance of the ethics of the kingdom and God's intended perlocutionary effect in the present world.

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