

THE KINGDOM OF GOD: AN INTRODUCTION

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One result of America's national, inceptive history (i.e., disdaining the role of Britain's king), is that the scriptural "Kingdom of God" concept has at times been difficult to grasp and explain. An inductive study of this topic in the Bible leads to three macro-conclusions. First, the theme pervades God's Word from Genesis to Revelation. Second, the motif appears quite intricate, presenting at times perspectives which at first glance seem to be contradictory. Third, the "Kingdom of God" represents the core subject of Scripture. As a result, the grand idea of God's kingdom in Scripture has become dominant in the church's hymn history.

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Christians have traditionally had particular difficulty understanding and appreciating the biblical teaching on God's kingship. Generally speaking, many problems arise from differing eschatological views. But especially for Americans, national history adds a cultural hurdle also, in that they successfully rebelled against the British monarch and have never returned to imperial rule as a form of governance.

The Declaration of Independence proved to be clear in its message at the time of ratification (1776) and remains so to this day. A small sample from this landmark document serves to remind the reader of the forefathers' adamant intent and natural bias against kingship in general.

The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world

We, therefore, the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States; that they are Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown

As a result, many treatments of the “Kingdom of God” tend to deliver a liberal, non-biblical, social understanding/explanation,¹ or the theme proves woefully inadequate in its treatment.² However, when one surveys Scripture, the “Kingdom of God” idea comes across as dominating, although at times perplexing.

Thus, this journal issue intends to provide a macro-view of this grand theme, i.e., to see the most basic, clearest, and primary ideas in Scripture as a whole relating to the Kingdom of God. To put it another way, the following discussion purposes to see more of the entire forest than of the individual trees. This *Master's Seminary Journal* issue should therefore be considered a primer, not an exhaustive or unabridged effort.

The Kingdom of God is Captivating

The broad theme “king, kingdom” (human and divine) appears throughout the Bible. With the exceptions of Leviticus, Ruth, and Joel, the OT explicitly includes various mentions in 36 of its 39 books. Except for Philippians, Titus, Philemon, 1, 2, and 3 John, the NT directly mentions the subject in 21 of its 27 books. All in all, 57 of the 66 biblical books (86 percent) include the kingdom theme.

The OT words for “king,” “kingdom,” “reign,” and “throne” appear over 3,000 times and 160 times in the NT. The first OT mention appears in Gen 10:10 and the last in Mal 1:14. The initial appearance in the NT comes at Matt 2:2 and the last in Rev 22:1, 3, 5.

“Kingdom of God” as an exact expression does not appear in the OT. The two NT phrases “Kingdom of Heaven” (used only by Matthew) and “Kingdom of God” are used interchangeably by Matthew (19:23–24) while “Kingdom of God” appears in parallel passages where Matthew used “Kingdom of Heaven” (cf. Matt 13:11 with Luke 8:10).

Interestingly, Jesus never precisely defined “Kingdom of Heaven/God” in the gospels, although He often illustrated it (Matt 13:19, 24, 44, 45, 47, 52). Surprisingly, no one ever asked Christ for a definition. It can only be assumed that

¹ See Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1959), 7–15 for a brief historical survey. Also, George E. Ladd, *Crucial Questions about the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1952), 21–39. Russell D. Moore, “The Kingdom of God in the Social Ethics of Carl F.H. Henry: A Twenty-First Century Evangelical Reappraisal,” *JETS* 55 (June 2012): 377–97 appeals for both social and soteriological/eschatological elements to this theme.

² In preparing this article, I surveyed 17 significant biblically-conservative theologies varying in writing dates from 1679 to 2005. With some exceptions, their treatments of this immensely important biblical theme were disproportionately short by comparison to the vast biblical database.

they at least thought they understood the basic idea from the OT, even if their ideas were mistaken.

Most telling, perhaps, is the plethora of “King” titles given to Christ in the New Testament.

- King of Israel (John 1:49; 12:13)
- King of the Jews (John 18:39; 19:3, 19, 21)
- King of kings (1Tim 6:15; Rev 17:14; 19:16)
- King eternal, immortal, invisible (1 Tim 1:17)
- King of the nations (Rev 15:3)

His reign is said to be forever and ever (Rev 11:15; 22:5).

The Kingdom of God is Complex

A biblical study of God’s kingdom would lead one to conclude that it is variegated, multifaceted, multidimensional, multifocal, multifactorial, and multifarious. It certainly could not be considered as monolithic in character.

To illustrate this point, examine the following contrasts when considering various biblical descriptions of God’s Kingdom.³

1. Certain passages present the kingdom as something which has always existed (Pss 10:16; 145:11–13), yet elsewhere it seems to have a definite historical beginning (Dan 2:44).
2. The kingdom is described as universal in scope (Ps 103:19), but it is also revealed as a local rule on earth (Isa 24:23).
3. Sometimes the kingdom is pictured as the direct rule of God (Pss 22:28; 59:13), at other times, it appears as the rule of God through a mediator (Ps 2:4–6; Dan 4:17, 25).
4. The Bible describes the kingdom as entirely future (Zech 14:9; Matt 6:10), while in other places, the kingdom is portrayed as a current reality (Ps 29:10; Dan 4:3).
5. The Kingdom of God is set forth as God’s sovereign, unconditional rule (Dan 4:3, 34–35), on the other hand, it appears to be based on a covenant between God and man (Ps 89:27–29).
6. God’s kingdom is said to be everlasting (Dan 4:3), but God will bring an end to part of His kingdom (Hos 1:4).
7. The kingdom is not eating and drinking (Rom 14:17), nor can it be inherited by flesh and blood (1 Cor 15:50), yet the kingdom is at times spoken of in earthly, tangible senses (Pss 2:4–6; 89:27–29).
8. The kingdom is said to be among the Jews (Luke 17:21), yet Jesus told his disciples to pray that it would come (Matt 6:11).
9. Paul preached “the Kingdom of God” (Acts 28:31), yet Christians are now in “the church age” (Acts 2).

³ The initial five contrasts were put forth by McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, 19–20.

10. Children of the kingdom can be cast into hell (Matt 8:12), yet only the righteous shall inherit the kingdom (1 Cor 6:8–10).
11. The earthly domain has been temporarily handed over to Satan (Luke 4:6), yet all the earth is the Lord's (Ps 24:1).
12. The kingdom is to be for Israel (2 Sam 7:11–13), yet Christ gave it to the nations (Matt 21:43).

The Kingdom of God is Central

The idea of God's kingdom encompasses every age/stage of biblical revelation. For instance,

1. God is King of Eternity (pre-Gen 1, Rev 21–22, post-Rev 22)
2. God is King of Creation (Gen 1–2)
3. God is King of History (Gen 1–Rev 20)
4. God is King of Redemption (Gen 3–Rev 20)
5. God is King of the Earth (Gen 1–Rev 20)
6. God is King of Heaven (pre-Gen 1, Gen 1–Rev 22, post Rev 22)

All “Kingdom of God” passages can be summarized by recognizing several broad aspects. First, there is the *Universal Kingdom*, which includes the rule of God which has been, is, and forever will be over all that exists in time and space. Second is God's *Mediatorial Kingdom* in which He rules on earth through divinely chosen human representatives. Third is the *spiritual or redemptive aspect of God's kingdom* which uniquely deals with a person's salvation and personal relationship with God through Christ. Anytime “kingdom” referring to God's kingdom appears in Scripture, it could point to any one aspect of the kingdom or several of its parts together. Careful interpretation in context will determine the particulars for a given biblical text.

With these ideas in mind, this writer proposes that the “Kingdom of God” should be seriously considered as the grand, overarching theme of Scripture. A number of noble ideas have been considered in the past, such as redemption, grace, Christ, covenant, and promise, to name a few. In this writer's view, each possibility explains a part of “God's kingdom,” but only “God's kingdom” explains the whole.

From before the beginning until after the end, from the beginning to the end, both in and beyond time and space, God appears as the ultimate King. God is central to and the core of all things eternal and temporal. The “Kingdom of God” convincingly qualifies to be the unifying theme of Scripture.

John Bright succinctly but eloquently stated this as such:

Old Testament and New Testament thus stand together as the two acts of a single drama. Act I points to its conclusion in Act II, and without it the play is an incomplete, unsatisfying thing. But Act II must be read in the light of Act I, else its meaning will be missed. For the play is organically one. The Bible is *one book*. Had we to give that book a title, we might with justice call it “The

Book of the Coming Kingdom of God.” That is, indeed, its central theme everywhere.⁴

The author would only edit Dr. Bright’s brilliant summary slightly by deleting one word, “Coming.” For God’s kingdom has been, is, and forever more shall be.

The Kingdom of God can be explained in this manner: the divine, eternal Triumvirate literally created a kingdom and two kingdom citizens who were to have dominion over it. But an enemy usurped their rightful allegiance to the king and captured the original kingdom citizens. God intervened with consequential curses which exist to this day. Ever since then, He has been redeeming sinful, rebellious people to be restored as qualified kingdom citizens, both now in a spiritual sense and later in a kingdom-on-earth sense. Finally, the enemy is vanquished forever, as is sin. Thus, Revelation 21–22 describes the final and eternal expression of the Kingdom of God where the eternal Triumvirate restores the kingdom to its original purity with the curse having been removed and the new heaven and the new earth becoming the forever abode of God and His people.

Final Thoughts

The articles that follow look at some of the particular trees that make up the forest of God’s kingdom which has briefly been pictured in this introduction. They emphasize the role of Israel, Messianic promises, the church, salvation, the millennial kingdom, and eternity in this most important of all theological themes—the Kingdom of God.

Certainly, hymns should never be the source of our theology. But through the ages, hymns have illustrated and perpetuated the theology of the church. Significantly, no major theme of Scripture is as frequently and beautifully expressed in the hymns of the church as that of God’s kingdom.⁵ What began as proper theology has continued as profound hymnology.

Therefore, one ought ever to pray as our Lord taught His disciples, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” (Matt 6:10).

⁴ John Bright, *The Kingdom of God* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1953), 197. See also pp. 7, 244. Additionally, there is McClain, *Greatness*, 4–5; George N.H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom* (1884; repr., Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1978), 1:29–33; Eric Sauer, *From Eternity to Eternity* (1954; repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1994), 89.

⁵ The writer utilized Kenneth Wilson, *A Concordance to the Worshipping Church* (Carol Stream, IL: Hope, 1991) to conclude that approximately 225 hymns out of over 800 (over 25%) were written with an explicit theme of God’s kingdom.