

THE KINGDOM OF GOD IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

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A proper understanding of the kingdom of God involves a correct understanding of both the Old and New Testaments. The Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Revelation together affirm the OT expectation of a physical, future, premillennial fulfillment of the promised Messianic kingdom. This is in line with the fulfillment of the Abrahamic, Davidic and New covenants.

Introduction

The Old Testament (OT) and New Testament (NT) must be the primary sources for our information concerning the kingdom of God. When the evidence is examined carefully, the New Testament presents the overwhelming idea that the “kingdom of God/heaven” refers to the promised Davidic Messianic Kingdom centrally based in the Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 12, 15), the Davidic Covenant (2 Sam 7; Pss 2, 110) as well as its spiritual requirements necessary for its realization in the New Covenant (Jer 31:31–33; Ezek 36:25–27; cp. John 3:1–6). The Gospel infancy narratives (Matt 1–2 and Luke 1–3) are deeply tied to Old Testament prophetic promises regarding the Messiah and Davidic kingdom.¹ Only main themes can be highlighted due to the brevity of this article. Prominent in both Matthew and Luke are fulfillment themes, both direct and indirect, tying Jesus directly into OT predictions, e.g. Matt 1:22 (cp. Isa 7:14; Mic 5:2)—“Now all this took place that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophets might be fulfilled” and Luke 1:32 (cp. 2 Sam 7:16)—“he will be great” . . . called the Son of the Most High, “the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David . . . he will reign over the house of Jacob forever . . . His kingdom will have no end.”

¹ For detailed information, see Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*, New Updated Edition (New York: Doubleday, 1993 [1977]).

The Infancy Narratives Link Jesus' Coming to the Kingdom of God/Heaven

The New Testament period opens with several verbal announcements tied into the coming of John the Baptist and Jesus. In Luke 1:11–17, the angelic announcement to Zacharias is that of the birth of John: “And it is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous; so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” Verse 17 ties John directly into Mal 4:5–6 that announced the coming of Elijah before the “day of the Lord” when the prophetic kingdom would be established.

Similarly, in Luke 1:26–35, the angelic announcement to Mary by the angel Gabriel has strong emphasis on the Davidic Covenant (2 Sam 7). Luke 1:27, 32 ties the engaged couple and their child directly to the Davidic line (“of the descendants of David” and “the Son of the Most High,” “the throne of His Father David”) with Luke 1:33 introducing His kingly reign with: “he shall rule” and “his kingdom”: βασιλεύσει ἐπὶ τὸν οἶκον Ἰακώβ εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας καὶ τῆς βασιλείας αὐτοῦ οὐκ ἔσται τέλος. Mary’s Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55) ties in the birth to God’s judgment on Israel’s enemies through Messiah and the restoration of Israel (Luke 1:51–52). Zacharias, John’s father, in Luke 1:67–69, links John’s coming to the Messiah as “a horn of salvation for us in the house of David” (Luke 1:69), “salvation from enemies” (Luke 1:71; cp. Ps 106:10). And direct linkage is made to the “oath which He swore to Abraham” (Luke 1:73; cp. Gen 22:16–18), who also functions as the forerunner of the Messiah (Luke 1:76; cp. Mal 3:1).

In Luke 2:1–20, the angelic announcement of Jesus to the shepherds ties Him directly to Messianic salvation—vv. 10–11: “But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.’” In Luke 2:25–32, Simeon’s prophesying links Jesus not only to Jewish redemption but also Jesus as “A Light of Revelation to the Gentiles” refers to Isa 42:6 and especially to the whole of Isa 42:1–9 where the Messianic Servant’s characteristics and blessings are detailed. In Luke 2:26, Simeon’s prophesying is linked directly to revelation from the Holy Spirit that he would not die until he saw “the Lord’s Christ.” The identification of the prophetess Anna in the blessing of the baby in Luke 2:36–38 links Jesus’ arrival with “the redemption of Jerusalem” from foreign domination.

In Luke 3, the genealogy, like Matthew 1, links Jesus’ birth to the royal household of David (Luke 3:31). Such genealogies forcefully show proof that Jesus was the offspring of the Davidic king, in line for the Davidic throne and also a descendant of the father of the Jewish people, Abraham.

The gospel of Matthew’s very first words tie Jesus directly to His descent from the royal line in Israel—“The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matt 1:1). The genealogy stresses Jesus’ descent from Abraham through the Davidic line. Matthew 1:16 ties Jesus directly to the title “Messiah,” or Anointed One, who would deliver his people (Dan 9:25). Matthew not only links Jesus to the royal Davidic line but also connects Him directly to the

work of Yahweh in the New Covenant with “it is he who will save His people from their sins” (Matt 1:21). While the Jews expected the Messiah to redeem Israel from Roman tyranny and foreign domination, here Matthew introduces the unexpected link of the Davidic Messiah’s work in giving His life a ransom for many (Matt 20:28—“just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many”).

In Matt 2:1–12, the magi from the East seek to honor the newly born Davidic heir. This is a direct link of Jesus to David’s city of Bethlehem with the prophecy of the Israelite king’s birth in Micah 5:2. Here a great irony is also seen in Matthew; Gentiles honor the Jewish world ruler at His birth, while the nation as a whole in Matthew rejected Him (cp. Matt 27:25).

John’s Teaching on the Kingdom of God

When scholars examine the gospel record of John the Baptist and his teaching, most would admit that John had in mind the Davidic promises of the Old Testament theocratic kingdom, i.e. the prophesied Davidic kingdom. Even an older amillennialist like A. B. Bruce readily admitted that the clarity of John’s preaching spoke of the Old Testament kingdom promises:

We know what John meant when he spoke of the kingdom. He meant the people of Israel converted to righteousness and in consequence blessed with national prosperity. And that being his ideal and aim, he was a gloomy man, and those who were with him became affected with his gloom. For he saw too soon and too well that the conversion of Israel to righteousness was a very improbable event.²

Ladd, who was a historical premillennialist, also affirmed this very same thought in the linkage: “John the Baptist had announced the coming of the Kingdom of God (Matt 3:2) by which he understood the coming of the Kingdom foretold in the Old Testament . . . Some would be baptized with the Holy Spirit and experience the messianic salvation of the kingdom of God, while others would be baptized with the fires of final judgment (Matt 3:11).”³ *The clear logic would be that if John preached the promised prophetic, theocratic kingdom of Messiah and the early, nascent church proclaimed the same hope, then Jesus’ preaching of the kingdom would be understood along the same foundational lines.* Unfortunately, as has been seen, *a priori* traditions of men and philosophy have interfered with that judgment (Col 2:8; 2 Cor 10:5).

In the angelic announcement of John’s birth, the angel Gabriel linked his mission directly to the status of forerunner of the messianic reign:

² A. B. Bruce, *The Kingdom of God* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1904), 54.

³ George Eldon Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Paternoster and Eerdmans, 1959), 14.

For he will be great in the sight of the Lord; and he will drink no wine or liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God. It is he who will go *as a forerunner* before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, **TO TURN THE HEARTS OF THE FATHERS BACK TO THE CHILDREN**, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord (Luke 1:15–17).

Here the angelic pronouncement linked him directly to the mission of Elijah, tying John directly to prophecy of Mal 4:5–6 that announced Elijah's return: "Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD. He will restore the hearts of the fathers to *their* children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse." In addition, his appearance and dress was very much Elijah-like: "Now John himself had a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey" that reflects Elijah in "*He was an hairy man, and girt with a girdle of leather about his loins. And he said, 'It is Elijah the Tishbite'*" (Matt 3:4; cp. 2 Kings 1:8).

All four canonical gospels tie John directly to the OT promises of a prophetic forerunner of Isa 40:3–4 who would prepare the way for the Messiah (Matt 3:2–11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:3–15; John 1:19–34). Luke 3:14 records that because of John's preaching a pronounced messianic fervor was among the people who were wondering "as to whether he [John] might be the Christ." John forcefully points out Jesus and His role in the New Covenant (John 1:29, 36) as the messianic fulfillment of prophecy (Matt 3:11–12; Luke 3:16–17).

In Matt 11:7–10, Jesus tied John directly to the prophetic promises of Malachi 3:1 regarding Elijah, who would prepare the way for Messiah and His kingdom:

Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John, "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? But what did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft *clothing*? Those who wear soft *clothing* are in kings' palaces! But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and one who is more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, 'BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER AHEAD OF YOU, WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY BEFORE YOU.'"

In the Gospel of John, John the Baptist, although denying that he was literally Elijah, tied the significance of his preaching about the kingdom to the promised coming of the Messianic kingdom and deliverance of the Jewish people from captivity as reflected in Isaiah 40:1–3:

They asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" And he said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." Then they said to him, "Who are you, so that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am A VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE

WILDERNESS, 'MAKE STRAIGHT THE WAY OF THE LORD,' as Isaiah the prophet said" (John 1:21–23).

Jesus tied John's ministry directly to Elijah's in Matt 17:10–13:

And His disciples asked Him, "Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" And He answered and said, "Elijah is coming and will restore all things; but I say to you that Elijah already came, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they wished. So also the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands." Then the disciples understood that He had spoken to them about John the Baptist (cp. also Matt 11:10).

When John was imprisoned in Matt 11:2–6, he sent messengers to Jesus to inquire regarding Jesus' messianic mission. Any theories as to whether or not John was despondent about his own mission as well as the divine call misses the thrust of John's questioning. John's problem centered in his puzzlement as to why Jesus was not acting like the Messiah whom he had announced. No baptism of the Spirit had occurred nor judgment of the wicked. John's idea of the kingdom plan had trouble reconciling how Jesus' mission was developing:

Now when John, while imprisoned, heard of the works of Christ, he sent *word* by his disciples and said to Him, "Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?" Jesus answered and said to them, "Go and report to John what you hear and see: *the BLIND RECEIVE SIGHT and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM.* And blessed is he who does not take offense at Me" (Matt 11:2–6).

Jesus' reply focused on the fact that He was the promised Messiah by tying His messianic mission to the prophecies of Isa 61:1–2a, regarding the blessings that Messiah would bring to Israel. Jesus himself preached in the synagogue in Nazareth that this prophecy of Isaiah was fulfilled in Him: "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:18–21).

Jesus' quotational inclusion to John, of "blessed is the man who keeps from stumbling over Me," may also well be a subtle allusion to Isa 8:13–14—"It is the LORD of hosts whom you should regard as holy. And He shall be your fear, And He shall be your dread. Then He shall become a sanctuary; But to both the houses of Israel, a stone to strike and a rock to stumble over, *And* a snare and a trap for the inhabitants of Jerusalem" (cp. Isa 35:4; 61:2). Through this, Jesus gently hinted to John and John's disciples that the blessings of the millennial kingdom were being evidenced in His ministry, although the judgment that John rightly expected had been delayed.⁴ In essence, as Carson noted, "[i]t is therefore an implicit challenge to reexamine one's presuppositions about what the Messiah should be and do in

⁴ Joachim Jeremias, *Jesus' Promise to the Nations*, trans. by John Bowden (London: SCM, 1958), 46.

light of Jesus and his fulfillment of Scripture and to bring one's understanding and faith into line with him."⁵

The essence of John's message recorded in the gospels ties him directly to the messianic kingdom: "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt 3:2). Matthew 3:6 (cp. also Luke 3:3) records that his preaching of the imminent arrival of the messianic kingdom focused on spiritual preparation that was necessary for the promised Messianic kingdom: "And he came into all the district around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt 3:5–6). John's preaching immediately corrected false conceptions in Judaism about entrance into that kingdom in a strategic way: physical lineage to Abraham alone did not automatically qualify someone for entrance. He dashed Jewish expectation that their physical status as a chosen people guaranteed the outcome—God was able to raise children up "children of Abraham" from the stones (cp. Gal 3:7–9, 29—"if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise!"). In Luke, this criticism was directed at the Jewish "multitudes," while Matthew especially focused on the elite classes of Pharisees (legalistic, self-righteous hypocrites; cp. Matt 23) as well as Sadducees (elite wealthy religious clerics) that came up to Jesus. Matthew 3:7–9 (cp. Luke 3:7–18) records, "But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance; and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, "We have Abraham for our father"; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham.'" Instead, John pronounces a winnowing process on the Jewish people through Messiah, i.e. blessing on those who genuinely repent and judgment on those who do not (Matt 3:12 cp. Luke 3:17). John's preaching near the time of Jesus' baptism links Him directly as the object of John's preaching (cp. Matt 3:11–17; Luke 3:16–; Mark 1:8–11).

Jesus' Preaching and Teaching on the Kingdom

Jesus' announcement of the kingdom was the same theme as John's preaching: "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand" (Matt 4:17; Mark 1:14–15). Matthew relates that Jesus' preaching of the kingdom was accompanied by signs evident as to the authority of His message (Matt 4:23–25). As already referenced in the discussion on John, throughout the gospels, Jesus' miracles of healing, cleansing and exorcism are tied directly to OT prophecy regarding the role of Messiah (Isa 61:1–2a; cp. Luke 4:18–21—"Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing"). In Luke 4:43, at Capernaum, Jesus directly declared His purpose for His preaching in the declaration of the Messianic kingdom: "When day came, Jesus left and went to a secluded place; and the crowds were searching for Him, and came to Him and tried to keep Him from going away from them. But He said to them, 'I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, for I was sent for this purpose'" (ὅτι ἐπὶ τοῦτο ἀπεστάλην).

⁵ See D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, EBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 8:262.

Yet, a strategic theme begins developing in the Gospels of growing opposition and rejection to Jesus' proclamation as Messianic King. Immediately after Jesus' declaration of His fulfillment of this prophecy, His own home town of Nazareth sought to kill him (Luke 4:22–30). As this Jewish opposition grew against Him, especially by the Pharisees and the religious leaders, Jesus' ominously announced some startling changes about the composition of the citizens of the kingdom, i.e. it will also include non-Jews:

Now when Jesus heard *this*, He marveled and said to those who were following, “Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel. I say to you that many will come from east and west, and recline *at the table* with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven; but the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt 8:10–12).

This continues the OT prophetic theme of the Messiah being a light to the Gentiles (Isa 9:1–2; cp. Luke 2:10—“good news . . . for all the people;” Luke 2:30–32—“salvation . . . prepared in the presence of all people; a light to the Gentiles”). Matthew 12 evidences this decisive turn with the pronouncement of blasphemy against the Pharisees for attributing Messianic miracles to the power of Satan. Matthew 21–23 reaches a crescendo of rejection by Jesus of the nation. In Matthew 21:41–42, Jesus identifies the involvement of the Jewish nation with the citing of the Passover psalm, regarding the “stone which the builders rejected, this became the chief cornerstone; this came about from the Lord and it is marvelous in our eyes” (Ps 118:22). He then abruptly, decisively announced against the nation His rejection of them due to their responsibility (John 19:11) for rejecting the Jewish Messiah: “Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you, and be given to a nation (ἔθνεϊ) producing the fruit of it” (Matt 21:43; Rom 11:26; cp. LXX Dan 2:44).

The nation here is most likely a reference to the church, and receives support in other New Testament passages (cp. 1 Peter 2:9–10—“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation [ἔθνος ἅγιον (1 Pet 2:9; cp. Exod 19:6)], a people for *God's* own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light”). Romans 10:19 also refers to the church as a nation: “But I say, surely Israel did not know, did they? At the first Moses says, ‘I will make you jealous by that which is not a nation [οὐκ ἔθνεϊ], by a nation [ἔθνεϊ] without understanding will I anger you” (Rom 10:19 NAS). So Toussaint remarked on Matt 21:43: “The logical conclusion is . . . that the church is the nation to whom the kingdom is given in Matthew 21:43.”⁶ Also supporting this is the general principle that the word “people” (λαός) refers to the Jews as distinct from “Gentiles” (ἔθνη) (cp. Matt 1:21—αὐτὸς γὰρ σώσει τὸν λαὸν αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τῶν

⁶ For a dispensational discussion of this verse, see Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1980), 250–51.

ἀμαρτιῶν αὐτῶν).⁷ Scripture indicates that the church enters into the blessing of the kingdom through the promises to Abraham: “in you all of the nations will be blessed” (Gal 3:7–9, 29). Such a conclusion is also indicated by the immediate context of chapter 21, which constitutes a contrast between the national rejection by Israel of its Messiah (as represented by its spiritual and national leaders) and His rejection of their status as Messiah’s people—the proclamation of the kingdom would go to those whose works demonstrate their true understanding of the privilege.

However, Scripture does indicate that such a loss of Jewish privilege is temporary, for Rom 11:1 and vv. 26–27 declare that God is not finished with His purposes for Israel. In Matt 26:64–66 (also Mark 14:62–64), the crescendo of rejection is forcefully portrayed when the high priest directly asked Jesus: “I adjure You by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God.” Jesus responded by quoting Dan 7:13, clearly linking Himself to the “son of man” image of Messiah, which results in pronouncement of blasphemy and a death sentence by the religious authorities.

Further support for the physical nature of the “kingdom of God” as based in the prophetic promises of the OT is found in the persistent arguments of the disciples over privilege in Jesus’ kingdom. Matthew 20:21 (also Mark 10:35–45) indicates that James and John both wanted privileged positions in the messianic kingdom of Jesus, using their mother as their spokesperson: “Command that in Your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right and one on Your left.” Jesus rebuked both of them but did not deny the physical nature of the kingdom in their thoughts but said that such privilege was in the Father’s authority (Matt 21:23). That such thoughts about kingdom privilege persisted among the disciples is seen even to the very end of Jesus’ ministry during the last supper in Luke 22:21–30, when an argument broke out again about which disciples would have special places in the kingdom. Jesus abruptly washed the disciples’ feet to show them that the way of privilege in the kingdom is through service (cp. John 13:3–11). In spite of their rancor with each other, Jesus promised the disciples that they “will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Luke 22:31).

In Luke 24:13–35 two disciples of Jesus, one named Cleopas, were discussing whether Jesus’ death ended their kingdom hopes: “But we were hoping it was He who was going to redeem Israel.” Here the “redemption of Israel (λυτροῦσθαι τὸν Ἰσραήλ) in mind is most likely that of instituting the Jewish expectations of the kingdom of God (cp. Acts 28:20). Jesus then pointed out the necessity of the suffering of Messiah’s spiritual redemption as a prerequisite to physical redemption of His people (Luke 24:25–26; cp. Pss 16, 22; Isa 53). Jesus, in his post-resurrection appearances, began instructing the disciples thoroughly on the entire Old Testament’s messianic passages that related not only to His glory but His suffering prior to glory. Importantly, the various speeches, especially in Acts 2–10 (e.g. Acts 2:17–21 and Joel 2:28–32; Acts 2:25–28 and Ps 16:8–11; Acts 2:34 and

⁷ Alan Hugh M’Neile, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (London: Macmillan, 1961), 8; W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, XIX–XXVIII (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), 3:186–87.

Ps 110:1) where the earliest disciples proclaimed Jesus from the OT, indicate what texts most likely were in view here (e.g. Deut 18:15; Pss 2:7; 16:8–11; 110:1; 118 and Isaiah 53). First-century Jewish understanding did not anticipate a suffering Messiah, only a victorious one. But as Jesus noted, Judaism as a whole had corrupted itself, becoming a people, not of the OT, but of their own oral traditions (Matt 15:1–14).⁸ The gospel, the grace of God regarding the kingdom, would now go to all nations (Matt 28:19–20; cp. Matt 13).

The gospel of John has five references (John 3:3, 4; 18:36 [3x]) to the “the kingdom of God.” Strategically, the fourth gospel adds important information regarding the spiritual qualifications of the kingdom of God that John the Baptist had warned in Matt 3:8–9—“bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance” (3:8) and “do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father’; for I say to you, that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham” (3:9). In John’s gospel, Jesus takes John’s preaching on the spiritual prerequisites for the kingdom of God and ties such qualifications to the necessary prerequisite of the new birth experience with language referring to the New Covenant (Jer 31:31–33), when He responds to Nicodemus with “Truly, Truly, I say to you, unless one is born of the water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:3).

The mention of a Jewish man of the caliber of Nicodemus as a “Pharisee,” “ruler of the Jews” (John 3:1) and as “the teacher of Israel” greatly emphasizes the absolute necessity of the new birth that goes qualitatively beyond physical lineage or religious status as opening entrance into the kingdom. While Jesus’ language of “born of water and of the Spirit” does not occur in the Old Testament verbatim, these pictures of speech tie directly back to concepts involving the New Covenant, especially Ezek 36:25–27, “where water and the spirit come together so forcefully, the first to signify cleansing from impurity, and the second to depict the transformation of heart that will enable people to follow God wholly.”⁹ Here, physical lineage or privilege of position is completely removed as a necessary qualification for entrance. Instead, a radical, spiritual transformation that involves the renewal of the whole nature that goes beyond mere physical birth into the covenanted people. The great irony of this passage is that Nicodemus, as a ruler and established religious authority in Israel, was completely unaware of the spiritual requirements of the new birth for the kingdom of God that Messiah would institute through his substitutionary atonement (John 3:14–18).

John 18:36–37 also adds that the kingdom of God does not come through power of men imposing it, but on God’s power directly intervening in human history. The emphasis here is on the power of God needed to institute Jesus’ kingdom rather than human effort. The phrase ἡ βασιλεία ἡ ἐμὴ οὐκ ἔστιν ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου τούτου may constitute a veiled reference to Daniel 2 and 7, where the

⁸ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1978), 896. See also H. H. Rowley, “The Suffering Servant and the Davidic Messiah,” *Oudetestamentische Studien* 8, (1950): 100–136.

⁹ See the excellent discussion on Jesus’ language to Nicodemus as forcefully picturing the New Birth in D. A. Carson, *The Gospel of John* (Leicester and Grand Rapids: InterVarsity and Eerdmans, 1991), 185–203.

“stone made without hands” intervenes in human history to destroy human kingdoms arrayed against God. Hence, Jesus relates that no human, physical struggle will be involved when His kingdom is established: εἰ ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου τούτου ἦν ἡ βασιλεία ἡ ἐμῆ, οἱ ὑπηρέται οἱ ἐμοὶ ἠγωνίζοντο [ἄν] ἵνα μὴ παραδοθῶ τοῖς Ἰουδαίοις. In John’s theology, Satan is the God or ruler of this world (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11) who holds it in spiritual darkness (John 3:19; 1 John 5:19). Only God’s power could overthrow such territory (Dan 2:34–35; 7:13–14).

The Epistles’ Teaching on the Kingdom

In Acts and the Epistles, the occurrences of references to the “kingdom” are much less prevalent than in the Gospels. The term βασιλεία or “kingdom” appears 121 times in the Synoptic gospels with five references in John’s gospel (John 3:3, 4; 18:36 [3x]). Yet in Acts, the record of the history of the early church’s spread throughout the Roman empire, that also records the church’s transition from a Jewish to a predominately Gentile composition, it occurs only eight times (Acts 1:3, 6; 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31). Other occurrences in the Epistles are plentiful (Rom 14:17; 1 Cor 4:20; 6:9, 10; 15:24, 50; Gal 5:21; Eph 5:5; Col 1:13; 4: 4:11; 1 Thess 2:12; 2 Thess 1:5; 2 Tim 4:1, 18; Heb 1:8; 12:28; Jas 2:5; 2 Pet 1:11; Rev 1:6, 9; 5:10; 11:15 [2x]; 12:10).

Ladd, a historical premillennialist, recognized this was a problem for his “already/not yet” position that the “kingdom of God” was initially inaugurated. If the kingdom was somehow present, why would its mention be so infrequent?

Paul says almost as little about the Kingdom of God as he does about the messiahship of Jesus. . . . the reason is to be sought in the fact that Paul’s letters are addressed to Gentile audiences . . . to proclaim any king other than Caesar made one liable to the charge of sedition (Acts 17:3, 7). In addition, the frequent use of kingdom in the Gospels as well as in Revelation (e.g. Rev 17:14; 19:16) show that the term was not really being avoided. The early church’s usage of “Lord” for Jesus also shows that they did not avoid the implications of Jesus’ kingship.¹⁰

Progressive dispensationalist, Bock, prefers to find the explanation “in the epistolary material, themes tied to deliverance operate as equivalents for the current realization of the promise [i.e., about the kingdom of God].”¹¹ Moreover, “dividing the epistles from the gospels” cannot deter an idea of the presence of the kingdom already operative and “where Kingdom does appear explicitly in Acts and the Epistles” (Acts 14:22; 2; Pet 1:11; Heb 12:22–28; Col 1:13; 1 Cor 15:24–28; Rev 1:6) “it fits the future-present emphases.”¹²

¹⁰ Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 103–04.

¹¹ Darrell L. Bock, “The Kingdom of God in New Testament Theology: The Battle, The Christ, The Spirit-Bearer, and Returning Son of Man,” in *Looking Into the Future: Evangelical Studies in Eschatology*, ed. David W. Baker (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 56.

¹² *Ibid.*, 57–58.

More traditional dispensationalists, such as Ryrie, are not persuaded by such arguments. Ryrie argues, “Our differences with the new progressive dispensationalists include denying that Christ is now reigning in heaven on the throne of David. Revisionists seem to forget that appointment of Christ as the Davidic king does not necessarily mean that His reign as such has begun.”¹³ Moreover, none of the verses mentioned by progressives regarding the present operation of the kingdom necessarily require that the “already/yet” aspect be the only adequate explanation for the meaning of the verse.

An examination of the earliest activities of the post-resurrection church in Acts (Acts continues as the second part of the teaching found in Luke [Luke 24:49–50; cp. Acts 1:1–3]) reveal that much of Jesus’ teaching in His forty days of appearances (Acts 1:3) centered around the subject of the kingdom of God: “To these He also presented Himself alive, after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a *period of forty days*, and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3 NAS). From Luke 24:13–24, the road to Emmaus revealed that they still had hopes of the “redemption of Israel” in terms of political aspirations and Jewish national exclusivism and did not comprehend fully the need for spiritual redemption not only of the Jewish people (Matt 16:21; cp. Luke 24:21), but the universal implications of the gospel for Gentiles to be included in the kingdom centering in the Great Commission to reach all peoples, not Jews only (Rom 1:16–17; Matt 28:19–20; cp. Col 1:13).

In Acts 1:6, the future aspects of the kingdom are clearly evidenced in the disciples’ question again, “Will you at this time Lord restore again the kingdom to Israel?” Such a question shows clearly the disciples expected a literal, earthly kingdom that was grounded in the teaching of Jesus and the Old Testament. Jesus’ reply also constitutes a difficulty if somehow the kingdom was to be considered already present in some way, for Jesus’ reply placed their expectation in the future—“It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority” (Acts 1:7). Instead, they are told to be witnesses of His coming and ministry throughout the world (Acts 1:8). The implication was that kingdom expectations were delayed, if especially one understands the term ἀποκαθιστάνεις as a futuristic present.¹⁴ That Jesus was recasting His kingdom as spiritual and denying a literal physical kingdom is clearly not the case here.¹⁵ He does not negate but delay its realization due to missionary proclamation throughout the world of the gospel message to all peoples.

An important passage is found in Acts 2 that separates more traditional dispensationalists from progressive dispensationalists. First, Acts 2:29–36 has been briefly mentioned previously, where Peter declares that Jesus is exalted “at the right hand of God” through the resurrection, as well as “God has made this Jesus . . . both Lord and Christ.” This great message of Peter is anchored in the messianic psalms 16:8–11 (Acts 2:25–28) and 110:1 (Acts 2:34–35). Progressives interpret the

¹³ Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 213.

¹⁴ Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1974 [1959]), 393.

¹⁵ Contra F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990 [1951]), 102.

language as indicating that the sitting at the right hand of Ps 110:1 indicates that Jesus is already seated on the throne of David. Blaising reasoned:

The promise to raise up a descendant, in 2 Samuel 7:12, is connected with the promise to establish His kingdom or, putting it another way, to establish his throne. Peter argues in Acts 2:22–26 that David predicted in Psalm 16 that this descendant would be raised up from the dead, incorruptible, and in this way, He would be seated upon His throne (Acts 2:30–31). He then argues that this enthronement has taken place upon the entrance of Jesus into heaven in keeping with the language of Psalm 110:1 that describes the seating of David's son at the right hand. Peter declares (Acts 2:36) that Jesus has already been made Lord over Israel (Ps. 110:1 uses the title Lord of the enthroned king) and Christ (the anointed king) by virtue of the fact that He has acted (or been allowed to act) from the heavenly position on behalf of His people to bless them with the gift of the Holy Spirit."¹⁶

For progressives, Christ has inaugurated His Davidic reign at the ascension in an already/not yet sense, i.e. He has already begun His reign as evidenced by the sending of the Spirit.

More traditional dispensationalists, like Ryrie, counter this interpretation by pointing out that (1) the sending of the Holy Spirit is not a part of the Davidic Covenant but the New Covenant; (2) the proleptic idea has a corresponding equivalence in that David himself was designated and anointed king some time before he began to reign actually as king (cp. 1 Sam 16; cp. 2 Sam. 2); and (3) the language of Psalm 110 indicates that the Messiah is still awaiting future conquest and victory, i.e. His position is one of honor in the presence of his enemies who constitute a strategic hindrance to his reign.¹⁷

Another important passage is found in Acts 3:19–21, where both progressives and traditional dispensationalists hold that the phrase “restoration of all things” points to the futurity of the full arrival of the Messianic kingdom as a main focus of the kingdom of God, i.e. its main implementation is still future. Saucy notes that, “The question of the restoration of the kingdom to Israel looks to the future for the arrival of the kingdom (Acts 1:6; cf. 3:21).”¹⁸ In spite of significant differences, both progressives and traditional dispensationalists agree that the primary focus of the New Testament regarding Jesus' reign as messianic king is still future, awaiting the return of Messiah Jesus' at his second coming.

Acts 8:12 reveals that early Christian preaching about “the kingdom of God” was not only offered to Jews after the persecution of Stephen (Acts 7; cp. Matt 28:19–20; Acts 1:8) but also to other ethnic groups like the Samaritans who were once considered excluded by the apostles from such considerations (Luke 9:51–56).

¹⁶ Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, “The Fulfillment of the Biblical Covenants,” in *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Bridgepoint Books, 1993), 177.

¹⁷ For further arguments, see Elliott E. Johnson, “Hermeneutical Principles and the Interpretation of Psalm 110,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149/596 (October–December 1992): 428–37.

¹⁸ Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, 104.

The kingdom was receiving universal proclamation in Acts (cp. Acts 10:34)—“I most certainly understand *now* that God is not one to show partiality” (Acts 10:34 NAS—Cornelius). The earliest Jewish apostles were clearly slow in understanding the universal implications of kingdom preaching.

Acts 14:22 notes that entering the kingdom of God involves much tribulation (“Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God”). Here the emphasis is on “furity” of the kingdom that involves great conflict. Acts 19:8 and 20:25 indicate that Paul’s preaching had the kingdom as a primary focus. Interestingly, Acts started and ended with a focused preaching regarding the “kingdom of God” (Acts 1:6–8; cp. Acts 28:17–30, note esp. v. 23 and v. 31), with a strong emphasis on Jewish rejection but Gentile acceptance in its proclamation.

Outside of Acts, in the epistles, the dominant teaching of the “kingdom of God” centers on a future kingdom and not a present one.¹⁹ In the following, the idea of inheriting is prominent (1 Cor 6:9–10; 15:50; Gal 5:21; Eph 5:5; Col 1:12–13; Jas 2:5; 2 Pet 2:11). Both 1 Thess 2:12 (καλοῦντος) and 2 Thess 1:5 stress the worthy walk as well as suffering that is a necessary component of being called into God’s kingdom (cp. Acts 14:22).²⁰ Second Timothy 2:12 clearly places reigning with Christ in the future after the sufferings of the present world have ceased for His followers.

Some verses have been used to relate the kingdom to the present experience of believers (Rom 14:17; 1 Cor 4:8, 20; Col 1:13). Cranfield noted regarding 14:17 that “it is in the presence and activity of the Lord Jesus Christ, and only so, that the kingdom of God is experienced in the present.”²¹ Hence, the emphasis is on the blessings that Christ’s present work through the Holy Spirit that brings to God’s people (cp. Gal 5:22) rather than on the presence of the kingdom. Similarly, 1 Cor 4:8 and 20 would similarly be used to indicate blessings of the kingdom without necessarily requiring the established presence of it. In 1 Cor 4:8, in a very ironic sense, Paul scolded believers for believing that they had already begun to reign. Instead of reigning, Paul points out the real condition of God’s people at the time was in 4:10–13 (e.g. “fools,” “weak,” “without honor,” “hungry,” “thirsty,” “poorly clothed,” “roughly treated,” “homeless,” “reviled,” “persecuted,” “defamed,” “filth” and “offscouring of the world” hardly speak of any conditions of current reigning of God’s people). In addition, no references exist as to any present reign of believers in some type of kingdom. Importantly, “there is no unambiguous reference in the epistles that uses the word ‘reign’ (βασιλεύω) in relation to the present ministry of Christ.”²² Although Jesus has been exalted to the position of kingly authority (Acts 2–3), any exercise of that kingship remains future.

Others, who follow some sense of realized eschatology, believe that Col 1:12–13 indicates that a spiritual form of the kingdom is present now. For example,

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 104–05.

²⁰ 1 Thessalonians 2:12 has a textual problem, with καλοῦντος being the better attested reading than the aorist καλέσαντος.

²¹ C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 2: Rom. 9–16 (London and New York: T & T Clark, 1979), 718.

²² Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, 106.

O'Brien, commenting on these verses, asserts that the "aorist tenses [ἰκανώσαντι, ἐρρύσατο, μετέστησεν] point to an eschatology that is truly realized."²³ However, these verses may be easily understood as futuristic aorists that emphasize the certainty of the future event, especially since inheritance is in Paul's mind in the immediate context which points to the accompanying blessings of that kingdom (Col 1:12). While believers have been transferred to citizenship in the future kingdom, they also experience spiritual blessings while they await its appearance, as Col 1:14 goes on to stress: "in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."

Such references to citizenship without a kingdom also explain the thematic emphasis of "stranger" and "alien" status of believers in 1 Pet 2:11: "Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul. Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe *them*, glorify God in the day of visitation." The latter term is a prevalent OT theme that refers most likely to the day of the Lord when He returns as Judge (Isa 10:3; Jer 27:22). Often overlooked is the profound theology of Hebrews 11, the Great Roll Call of Faith chapter, which also reinforces this idea. Reviewing Abraham's life as a wanderer in 11:8–14, Hebrews notes:

By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign *land*, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised. Therefore there was born even of one man, and him as good as dead at that, *as many descendants AS THE STARS OF HEAVEN IN NUMBER, AND INNUMERABLE AS THE SAND WHICH IS BY THE SEASHORE.* All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. And indeed if they had been thinking of that *country* from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better *country*, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them.

After mentioning the OT saints not belonging, Hebrews then concludes the chapter with a direct connection between the status of OT saints and that of NT saints in Heb 11:39–40: "And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they would not be made perfect." This latter verse ties the

²³ Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, vol. 44. WBC (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 28.

OT and NT saints together, experiencing concurrently the future blessings of citizenship in the heavenly Jerusalem (cp. Dan 12:2; Luke 14:14; 1 Cor 15:23; 1 Thess 4:13–18; Rev 20:4–6; 1 Cor 6:2; 2 Tim 2:12). Revelation 20:6 puts that reign into the future [“will reign,” βασιλεύσουσιν] marking any type of “reigning” as an action related to the future kingdom when all saints together, OT and NT, participate in that kingdom.

Hebrews 12:28 also mentions the reception of the kingdom—“Therefore, since we receive (aorist participle, παραλαμβάνοντες) a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe.” Although a temporal aorist participle is used, the context places that reception at a future time of judgment and contrasts the temporary nature of earthly kingdoms with the permanence of that future kingdom (Heb 12:26–27).

The last book of the NT, Revelation, relates that reign to the future. Revelation 1:6 states: “and He has made (ἐποίησεν) us *to be* a kingdom, priests to His God and Father; to Him *be* the glory and the dominion forever and ever.” Revelation 5:10 has a closely similar wording: “And Thou hast made (ἐποίησας) them *to be* a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign (βασιλεύσουσιν) upon the earth.” Such a status, though placed in the aorist, is proleptic, for Revelation places Christ’s kingdom as a future event yet to be experienced: Revelation 11:15 places that time as a future event: “And the seventh angel sounded; and there arose loud voices in heaven, saying, ‘The kingdom of the world has become *the kingdom* of our Lord, and of His Christ; and He will reign (βασιλεύσει) forever and ever.’”

Conclusion

The New Testament’s teaching on Christ’s future mediatorial kingdom in fulfillment of the Abrahamic (Gen 12, 15, 22), Davidic (2 Sam 7; Pss 2; 110), and New covenants (Jer 31:31–33; Ezek 36:35–36) may not be quite as obscure in understanding as theologians often express it. Many views on the kingdom evidence captivity to philosophy and traditions of men (1 Cor 2:14; 2 Cor 10:5; Col 2:8) that obscures the perspicuity of the NT teaching on Christ’s future reign as King of kings and Lord of lords. The doctrinal statement of The Master’s Seminary encapsulates its essence:

We teach that, after the tribulation period, Christ will come to earth to occupy the throne of David (Matthew 25:31; Luke 1:31–33; Acts 1:10–11; 2:29–30) and establish His messianic kingdom for a thousand years on the earth (Revelation 20:1–7). During this time the resurrected saints will reign with Him over Israel and all the nations of the earth (Ezekiel 37:21–28; Daniel 7:17–22; Revelation 19:11–16). This reign will be preceded by the overthrow of the Antichrist and the False Prophet, and by the removal of Satan from the world (Daniel 7:17–27; Revelation 20:1–7).

We teach that the kingdom itself will be the fulfillment of God’s promise to Israel (Isaiah 65:17–25; Ezekiel 37:21–28; Zechariah 8:1–17) to restore them to the land which they forfeited through their disobedience (Deuteronomy

28:15–68). The result of their disobedience was that Israel was temporarily set aside (Matthew 21:43; Romans 11:1–26) but will again be awakened through repentance to enter into the land of blessing (Jeremiah 31:31–34; Ezekiel 36:22–32; Romans 11:25–29).

We teach that this time of our Lord's reign will be characterized by harmony, justice, peace, righteousness, and long life (Isaiah 11; 65:17–25; Ezekiel 36:33–38), and will be brought to an end with the release of Satan (Revelation 20:7).²⁴

Both older and more recent dispensationalists all affirm the physical, future, premillennial fulfillment of the promised Messianic kingdom of the Old and New Testaments, even if some assert a present spiritual form of the kingdom in its inceptive state, i.e. already/not yet. Fears of older dispensationalists that progressives have gone off into covenant theology and neglect the Jewish aspects of the kingdom have so far not materialized. Both traditional and progressives affirm futuristic premillennialism, with the latter seeing an inceptive in-breaking of the kingdom.

²⁴ 2010–2012 TMS catalog, 23–24.