

Faith Pulpit

God's Kingdom Program in the New Testament: A Biblical Theological Overview Part 2

Introduction

The kingdom of God is a complex biblical theme that spans across the two testaments. This article continues a very brief biblical/theological overview of the kingdom theme. The former article considered precursors to the kingdom theme, the foundation of the kingdom of God theme in the Davidic Covenant, and selected predictions of the kingdom in the Prophetic Books. Specifically, the previous article concluded that the concept of the kingdom of God (which is different than His sovereign rule over all creation), takes on definite shape in the Davidic Covenant, which promises that David will have a descendant who will rule over an earthly and eternal kingdom (2 ?Sam 7:16). These basic features of the Davidic Covenant are confirmed and supplemented by later prophetic revelation in the canonical prophets. This expectation is critical as one approaches the New Testament.

With the advent of the Messiah, the kingdom theme develops significantly. In the lifetime of Jesus, I believe that we have the presentation and the postponement of the kingdom program. However, the kingdom theme is not abandoned. In the future we see the inauguration, fulfillment, and continuance of the kingdom.

The Presentation of the Kingdom

With the incarnation of Christ (John 1:14), the rightful King was present and, thus, the kingdom promises had the potential to be fulfilled. The presentation of the kingdom begins with the forerunner. John the Baptist came on the scene announcing a message of the kingdom. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Matt 3:2).¹

It is important to note here that John did not mean that the kingdom had been inaugurated at that very moment. Jesus had not yet begun His ministry and no manifestations of the Messianic rule were evident. What John does mean is that the kingdom was “drawing near” or “approaching.”² Because of the proximity of the King, who would soon enter the picture, the kingdom was at least potentially close to fulfillment.

When Jesus came on the scene, His message was the same as John’s message (Matt 4:17; Mark 1:14-15).³ Jesus promoted kingdom ethics through His teaching (Matt 5–7, etc.) and manifested kingdom power through His miracles (Matt 11:2-6, esp. vv. 4-5; cf. Heb 2:4); however, this does not constitute the inauguration of the kingdom. In fact, the masses completely misunderstood the nature of the King’s first-advent mission (cf. Matt 1:21; Mark 10:45), and when the crowds tried by force to make Jesus a king, He refused their misguided advances (cf. John 6:15).

The Postponement of the Kingdom

While Jesus offered the prophesied kingdom to the nation of Israel, they did not receive Him as the promised Messiah. In fact, they misattributed His miracles to Satan (Matt 12:22-32). Rather than acknowledge Him as the Son of David (cf. Matt 12:23), the religious leaders attributed His miracles to the powers of demons (v. 24). This act, known as “the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit” or “the unpardonable sin” marks a major turning point in the life and ministry of Jesus. From this point forward, Jesus taught the masses in parables but taught His disciples more directly in private (Matt 13:3a, 10-15). While the King and His kingdom power were still present, the later portion of Jesus’ ministry was focused more on instructing the disciples than presenting the kingdom to the nation as a whole.

The Triumphal Entry was the formal presentation of the King (Matt 21:1-11, esp. vv. 5, 9). However, their Messianic accolades were short-lived. Less than a week later they cried out for His crucifixion, and Jesus was crucified under the charge of being the King of the Jews (Matt 27:37; John 19:15, 19). Of course, these events were all a part of God’s eternal plan to provide redemption (cf. Acts 2:23), but it does mean that the Davidic promises were not fulfilled at this time. These events, however, did not invalidate the kingdom program. The circumstances merely postponed it.

The postponement of the kingdom program is confirmed by the teaching of Jesus to the disciples after His resurrection. Significantly, the disciples asked Jesus about the kingdom program before the ascension. Acts 1:6 states, “Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, ‘Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?’” Jesus did not rebuke their question or their expectation of the kingdom. He did not tell them that the kingdom was already inaugurated or that they had misunderstood the nature of the kingdom. Rather, He declined to answer their question about the timing of the kingdom. “And He said to them, ‘It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority’” (Acts 1:7). Instead, Jesus gave them a mission to fulfill in the

interim. “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). This “divine interim program” is the mission of the church, which is the work that the church should be working to complete in the inter-advent era.

While some difficult passages exist,⁴ the expectation of a future kingdom is consistent with the teaching of the New Testament Epistles (cf. 2 Thess 1:5; 2 Tim 4:1, 18). While the kingdom has been postponed, it has not been annulled. Despite national rejection of the Messiah, God will still fulfill the promises to David elaborated upon in the Prophets.

The Inauguration of the Kingdom

The fulfillment of the Davidic promises and Messianic prophecies will occur at Christ’s second advent. Following the judgments of the tribulation (Rev 6–16; cf. Jer 30:7; Matt 24:15, 21), Christ will return (Rev 19:11-21). Consistent with Old Testament prophecies, He will execute perfect justice and rule the nations “with a rod of iron” (v. 15). At this time, Jesus Christ will be acknowledged as “KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS” (v. 16).

In Revelation 19:11-21, we find very clear ties to the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Rule of the Messiah (e.g., v. 15 with Ps 2:9) and very specific descriptions of regal function (e.g., worldwide judgment). Thus, the Davidic promises and prophetic revelation will become a reality. However, these promises will not be realized until the second advent.

The Fulfillment of the Kingdom

The kingdom rule of Christ in the millennium is the pinnacle of human history. This is described in Revelation 20:1-10. The rule of Christ will involve a literal rule on the earth (Rev 19:1, 4). Satan will be bound (v. 2), and Christ will be acknowledged by the nations (v. 3). The nature of Christ’s rule is clearly consistent with the expectation of the Old Testament prophecies. Revelation 20 also stresses the duration of this rule, stating six times that Christ will rule for 1000 years (Rev 20:2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7). Revelation 19:11–20:10 is a major step toward the fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant. The Messiah, the Son of David, will be physically ruling over an earthly kingdom.

While the reign of Christ will be glorious, this period of time ends in failure (as other eras of human history). Satan will be released, deceive the nations, and lead one final rebellion against the Messiah (Rev 20:7-9). Unbelievers among the nations will join Satan in this last rebellion. This rebellion will be suppressed supernaturally and definitively.

The Continuance of the Kingdom

While the millennial rule of Christ will end in rebellion, Christ will triumph over evil and will rule forever after sin, death, and evil have been completely defeated. The rebellion of Satan will be crushed, and Satan will be condemned to the lake of fire (Rev 20:9-10). Unbelievers will be judged at the Great White Throne, where they will be sentenced to eternal punishment (Rev 20:11-15).

On the positive side, believers will experience the blessings of the eternal state in the New Heavens and the New Earth (Rev 21:1–22:5). The New Heavens and the New Earth will be characterized by the complete removal of death, sorrow, crying, and pain (Rev 21:4) and will witness the complete removal of the effects of the curse (22:3).

The eternal state will also involve the presence of God among His people ruling over them (21:5) and with them (22:5). In this the rule of the Messiah will extend into eternity. After the defeat of death, Christ will surrender the kingdom to the Father, and it appears that the sovereign rule of God will be merged with the millennial rule of Christ, and God will be all in all (cf. 1 Cor 15:24-28). Believers will experience the eternal blessings that God intended for mankind from creation under the eternal rule of Christ in the New Heavens and the New Earth. In the eternal rule of the Messiah in the New Heavens and the New Earth, the kingdom will find its fullest expression. The promises to David will be fulfilled in an eternal ruler reigning over an earthly kingdom. While beginning in human history, the rule of Jesus Christ will continue throughout all eternity in the New Heavens and the New Earth.

Conclusion

While several precursors lead up to the promise of the kingdom to David, the kingdom theme comes into focus as God clearly promises to David that he will have a descendent who will rule over an eternal kingdom. While the Jews of Jesus' day rejected Jesus as their Messianic King, God's kingdom program has not been abandoned or thwarted. It will be established at the second advent of Christ and will be merged into God's eternal, sovereign rule in the eternal state.

Our brief survey of the kingdom theme highlights at least two important points about the kingdom of God. Firstly, we see the importance of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is found through various sections of biblical revelation. The theme of the kingdom is not an obscure or tangential theme, but it is tied to God's overall plan for humanity. The numerous and diverse references to the kingdom and related concepts demonstrate that the kingdom of God is a crucial theme, which is integral to God's overall plan for human history.

Secondly, we see the continuity of the kingdom theme. I believe that a survey of the kingdom teaching of the Bible validates the conclusion that the kingdom that was promised to David (e.g., the Davidic Covenant) and was elaborated upon in the Prophets is the same kingdom that was offered by Christ and that will be fulfilled in the physical rule of Jesus Christ, beginning in the millennium, and extending into the eternal state.

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Works Cited

1. Scripture taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
2. Cf. Walter Bauer, Frederick W. Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 270.
3. Some interpreters make a distinction between the “kingdom of heaven” used in Matthew and “the kingdom of God” used in the other Gospels. However, it is better to see the terms as synonymous, which is indicated by the use of the two terms in parallel passages like Matt 4:17 and Mark 1:14-15.
4. For instance, Colossians 1:13 speaks about believers being “delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed *us* into the kingdom of the Son of His love.” I would not take this passage as discussing the kingdom of God, but it is speaking about the “realm” of influence. Believers have been transferred from the tyrannical “realm of Satan” to the sphere of Christ’s authority and His control over their lives.

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