

Faith Pulpit

God's Kingdom Program in the Old Testament: A Biblical Theological Overview Part 1

Introduction

The kingdom of God is a prominent and multi-faceted biblical theme. Kingdom concepts can be found in virtually every biblical book, and it touches on a wide range of biblical ideas. While it is debatable whether the kingdom of God is *the* over-arching theme of the Bible, it certainly is a theme that transcends several eras of biblical history and binds together several strands of biblical revelation.

The goal of this article is to give a brief biblical/theological overview of the kingdom theme in the Old Testament. This will be followed by a companion article on the kingdom program in the New Testament. The basic method of this precursory survey will be to highlight various features of the kingdom concept as it is worked out in human history and to state conclusions about the nature and scope of God's kingdom program.

In this biblical, theological overview of the Old Testament we will consider precursors to the kingdom concept, the foundation of the kingdom concept in the Davidic Covenant, and selected predictions of the coming kingdom in the Prophetic books. The Old Testament information creates a very important expectation for how the kingdom theme will be fulfilled in the first and second advents of Jesus Christ.¹

The Precursors to the Kingdom

Several precursors prepare one for the formal promise of a Messianic kingdom. While these precursors build into the kingdom theme, I believe they are best seen as preliminary and insufficient to describe the essence of the Messianic rule on their own.

An important preliminary concept in discussing the kingdom of God is the concept of the sovereign rule of God. Because God is the Creator of all, in a sense He is the rightful King or Ruler over all creation from the beginning of time. I believe that this is the sense in which the concept of the kingdom is used in passages like Psalm 145:13: “Your kingdom *is* an everlasting kingdom, And Your dominion *endures* throughout all generations.”² However, this is not the same as the promise of a kingdom and an eternal King that was promised to David in the course of human history. God’s sovereign rule began at creation and, thus, existed long before God’s covenant with David that a descendant of his would rule forever. Thus, the two should be distinguished at this point in biblical revelation.³ While God’s sovereign rule has existed since creation, the rule of the Messiah over Israel is a concept that has a definite starting point within human history (cf. 2 Sam 7:16).

Another preliminary concept related to the kingdom theme is mankind’s stewardship over the earth. While God is sovereign over all creation, He has given mankind stewardship over the created order. This is often referred to as the Dominion Mandate stated in Genesis 1:28. “Then God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth’” (Gen 1:28). In this Dominion Mandate, mankind is given the responsibility to manage creation. Nevertheless, while this stewardship involves “rule” over creation, it still is not quite the same as “the kingdom of God” spoken about in later revelation, which involves a rule over people and a specific realm.

In the history of national Israel several other precursors pave the way for God’s explicit kingdom promises. These include the establishment of the nation of Israel, the instructions for a future king in the law, and the establishment of the historical monarchy.

The establishment of the nation of Israel was an important preparatory step toward the kingdom promises. After the LORD delivered the nation of Israel from Egypt (Exod 5–14), the nation of Israel became a distinct and recognizable entity. Furthermore, with the nation of Israel camped at Mount Sinai, the LORD revealed the law to Moses (initially in Exodus 19–24). This was an important step in establishing the identity of Israel as a nation chosen by the LORD. If Israel would obey the LORD, they would be a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod 19:6). Sadly, Israel did not do well in living up to this holy calling (cf. Exod 32). Nonetheless, the national identity of Israel was taking shape as God delivered them from Egypt and revealed His law to them.

Interestingly, with the establishment of the nation, God also gave instructions for a king (Deut 17:14–20). While Israel did not originally have a king, the very fact that God gave regulations for the king indicates that a king and a kingdom were to be a part of God’s plan for Israel from the very beginning. Again, this represents a precursor to God’s kingdom program.

Eventually, God did give the nation of Israel a king. Unfortunately, Israel wanted a king at the wrong time and for the wrong reasons (1 Sam 8:1-22, esp. vv. 5, 7, 19-22). Nevertheless, through this act of disobedience, the kingdom began taking shape. This paved the way for the promise of an ideal King who will rule eternally over God's kingdom. Saul served as Israel's first king, but because of his disobedience, the LORD rejected him from being king over his people (1 Sam 13:13-14; 15:22-23, 26, 28). God then chose David, who was a man after God's own heart (cf. 1 Sam 13:14; 16:7), and he became the one to whom the LORD made formal kingdom promises.

The Foundation of the Kingdom

I believe that the Davidic Covenant is the explicit foundation upon which the concept of the kingdom of God is built. This is more than God's sovereign rule over all things. The kingdom promises to David involve an earthly kingdom mediated by God's appointed ruler.

In response to David's desire to build a "house" (i.e., a "temple"; 2 Sam 7:5) for the LORD, the LORD promised to build a "house" (i.e., a "dynasty" for David; 2 Sam 7:16). The provisions of the Davidic Covenant are outlined in 2 Samuel 7:12-17. Some of those promises pertain to Solomon and the construction of the temple in Jerusalem (2 Sam 7:12-15). However, the promises of 2 Samuel 7:16 look beyond Solomon to the ultimate and eternal Davidic ruler, the Messiah. The LORD promised David: "And your house and your kingdom shall be established forever before you. Your throne shall be established forever" (2 Sam 7:16). Here the LORD guaranteed David an eternal dynasty and eternal kingdom. These are critical elements to the concept of the kingdom of God moving forward in biblical revelation.

As indicated in 2 Samuel 7:16, the rule of the ultimate Davidic Ruler (i.e., the Messiah) would be both earthly and eternal. Using the specific descriptions "your house," "your kingdom," and "your throne" stresses the continuity of the type of rule that David exercised with that which the Messiah will establish. David was a physical king over a physical nation, and he would have understood this promise to involve no less than an earthly rule over the people of Israel.

The Davidic Covenant also guaranteed that the rule of the Messiah would be eternal: "And your house and your kingdom shall be established forever before you. Your throne shall be established forever" (2 Sam 7:16). It would have no end. Thus, the Davidic Covenant requires a physical descendant of David ruling over an earthly realm for eternity. This promise could not be exhausted in the historical kingdom, which came to an end and whose rulers governed for a limited period of time.

Since the historical Judean monarchy came to an end, this raises the question whether the promises were conditional and, thus, forfeited. In answer to this question, the Old Testament writers affirmed the eternal nature of the Davidic Covenant, even in the face of chastisement from the LORD. The Scriptures affirm that the promise to David would not be broken. The promise would endure even if

David's descendants strayed from the LORD (cf. Ps 89:30-37). In fact, God's covenant with David was declared to be as certain as the day-night cycle (cf. Jer 33:19-26). Furthermore, no stipulations are placed on David as the Prophet Nathan communicates the Davidic Covenant. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that the overarching elements of the Davidic Covenant were unconditional.

While the promise of an eternal, earthly ruler from David's line is unconditional, conditions did exist for specific generations to participate in the blessings of God's covenant (1 Kgs 3:14; 11:1-13; cf. Ps 89:30-32). Thus, even application of aspects of the covenant to Solomon were conditional (2 Sam 7:12-15; 1 Kgs 9:4-5). Sin and rebellion could lead to a forfeiture of God's blessing upon the king and upon the nation. Unfortunately, Israel disobeyed and temporarily forfeited their participation in the promises to David. This, however, did not derail the eternal aspects of God's kingdom program. Rather, these promises look forward to a future fulfillment in the ultimate Seed of David, the Messiah. This is the consistent hope that the Old Testament prophets foresee, even when they warn the people about God's immediate judgment.

The Predictions of the Kingdom

As they offered hope to the nation of Israel, the Old Testament prophets (communicating divine revelation) developed the kingdom theme. Several general expectations of the kingdom emerge in the prophetic literature, including the concepts of a Davidic King (e.g., the Messiah), an earthly kingdom, the King's eternal reign, and unsurpassed blessing.

Several prophets give important details that develop the kingdom theme more fully. For instance, Isaiah prophesied about diverse Messianic themes, like the eternal reign of the Child (Isa 9:6-7), the righteous rule of the Branch (Isa 11:1-5), and the atoning work of the Servant (Isa 52:13-53:12). Isaiah also highlighted diverse features of the kingdom, including the physical blessing of the kingdom (Isa 11:6-9; 35:1-10; 65:2-25) and the fact that Gentiles will worship in Jerusalem (Isa 11:10; 49:6; 60:1-3). Isaiah, thus, envisions a direct, eternal rule of the Messiah over Israel and the nations in perfect peace and physical blessing. The prophecies of Isaiah confirm the essential, eternal core of the Davidic Covenant (2 Sam 7:16) and add further detail to those expectations.

The prophecies of Daniel further supplemented the expectation of the Davidic Covenant. In particular, Daniel affirmed that the kingdom of God will be earthly (i.e., its sphere) and eternal (i.e., its duration). Daniel 2:44 states: "And in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever." Daniel 7:27 states: "Then the kingdom and dominion, And the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven, Shall be given to the people, the saints of the Most High. His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, And all dominions shall serve and obey Him." These concepts are consistent with God's promise to David and confirm the expectation of a physical kingdom of God over the nations of the earth.

Other prophets added more detail to the concept of the Messiah. For instance, Zechariah 6:12-13 interestingly affirms both the kingly (cf. Zech 14:9) and the priestly aspects of the ministry of the Messiah (cf. Ps 110:4; Heb 10:11-12). Concepts like this enhance the core of the Davidic Covenant without altering its essential core. Thus, the Old Testament Prophets developed the kingdom theme, adding breadth to the concept but affirming the foundational aspects promised in the Davidic Covenant.

Conclusion

The Old Testament develops a very specific expectation of a kingdom and of a Messianic King. While some precursors pave the way for the idea of the kingdom of God, the concept of the kingdom of God really begins to take shape with the Davidic Covenant. As promised to David, the rule of the ultimate Davidic King, the Messiah, would be earthly and eternal. These features were confirmed in the Prophetic Books and were enhanced as God gave further revelation about His kingdom program in human history.

The Old Testament has much to say about the kingdom concept, and it lays a critical foundation for understanding this concept. The New Testament anticipates the fulfillment of this concept and discusses the kingdom concept in relationship to both the first and the second advent of Jesus Christ. In the following companion article, we will consider New Testament evidence, specifically highlighting the presentation of the kingdom, the postponement of the kingdom, the inauguration of the kingdom, the fulfillment of the kingdom, and the continuance of the kingdom.

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Works Cited

1. My understanding of the Kingdom theme is highly influenced by Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom: An Inductive Study of the Kingdom of God* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1959). See also Stanley D. Toussaint, *What's All This Talk about a Kingdom* (Hurst, TX: Tyndale Seminary Press, 2013) and Michael J. Vlach, *He Will Reign Forever: A Biblical Theology of the Kingdom of God* (Silverton, OR: Lampion, 2017).
2. Scripture taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
3. I believe that in the eternal state God's sovereign rule and the Messianic rule will be merged into one kingdom program.

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