

### 3. KINGDOM MEANS KINGSHIP

*After this, Jesus traveled from one town or village to another, preaching and proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God (Lk 8:1).*

#### **The meaning of the phrase ‘kingdom of God’**

‘The kingdom of God’ or ‘kingdom of heaven’ is mentioned 58 times in Matthew’s Gospel alone. It was Jesus’s main message. Wherever he traveled, he proclaimed the kingdom of God. Even at the end of the book of Acts, the apostle Paul spoke about the kingdom of God. Jesus said we should seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. It must be an important topic. So, why do so few people understand it? Please take a minute to think about it. How would you explain it to someone? Who is the king in the kingdom of God? Is the kingdom present, past, or future? Is it on Earth or in heaven? What is our role in it as Christians? What does it mean to enter the kingdom of God? How can you inherit it? How can a kingdom come? Don’t we often pray ‘thy kingdom come’? What are we praying for? Over the past 100 years, an estimated 10,000 papers and books have been written on the kingdom of God, and answer these questions in a variety of ways. I hope this chapter will clarify things for you.

I believe that all the OT messianic prophecies and all the kingdom of God passages in the NT refer primarily to the Messiah and his coming reign on this Earth, not to God’s sovereignty. Everything is from God, but this kingdom is not about God’s sovereignty over the universe.

#### **Nebuchadnezzar’s dream**

In Daniel 2, Daniel explains the meaning of a dream that Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, had. He dreamt of a statue representing four great empires, generally interpreted as Babylonia, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome. These were large empires, four powerful kingdoms from antiquity.

In the dream, a rock is cut out, but not by human hands. It strikes the statue on the feet and smashes it to pieces, and then the rock becomes

a great mountain that fills the whole Earth. The rock is a fifth kingdom, the kingdom of God that will endure forever. Daniel said that God will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people (Dan 2:44). That is the kingdom of God we are studying. Note carefully that it is a kingdom from God, an earthly kingdom, not a heavenly one. Daniel told Nebuchadnezzar that the great God was showing the king what would happen in the future. Daniel told the king that the dream was true, and his interpretation was trustworthy (Dan 2:45b).

The fulfillment of this prophecy will occur ‘in the days of those kings’ (the ten toes of the statue) at the end of this present age, when a rock (the Messiah) cut out from a mountain (Zion) comes and destroys all those kingdoms, or the remnants of them. When the seventh angel blows his trumpet, loud voices in heaven will proclaim that the world’s kingdom has become the kingdom of the Lord and of his Messiah, and he’ll rule forever (Rev 11:15).

When John the Baptist and Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God, they proclaimed the coming of the Messiah. They couldn’t be too explicit about it because they were under the domination of the Roman Empire, so they spoke about the kingdom rather than the king. The clearest prophecy about the Messiah’s kingdom in the OT is from Daniel 7:13-14, the passage from where John and Jesus took their terminology. While Daniel was observing the vision, he saw someone like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and a *kingdom*, so that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will never pass away, and his *kinship* will never be destroyed. Daniel asked the angel to interpret the vision, and he was told that the four beasts were four kings who would rise to power from the Earth but eventually the *saints* of the high places will receive the *kingdom* and possess it forever (Dan 7:17-18).

Jesus referred to himself as the Son of Man, a title for the Messiah, but one that was not obvious to the uninitiated. In the same way, the kingdom of God is an expression that can be interpreted as the Messiah himself, the monarchy, or his future reign. It was used by both John the Baptist and Jesus to refer to the Messiah without being explicit as

to who he was, which was a necessary precaution in the political situation in which they lived. Jesus did not travel around broadcasting the fact that he was the Messiah. He spoke about the Son of Man, and then he spoke about him in the third person.

The kingdom is given to the Messiah by God, so the most appropriate way of translating βασιλεία του θεού is ‘the kingdom from God,’ the title of this book. It is not an expression that speaks of God’s rule in action or of God’s rule over the universe or in our hearts. This kingdom is kingship or sovereignty given by the Ancient of Days to ‘the Son of Man,’ who is none other than Jesus the Messiah.

Later, Daniel had a vision about four great animals or beasts that came up out of the sea, and they are generally interpreted as being the same empires represented by the statue in chapter two. The fierce fourth beast has similarities with the beast described in Revelation 13. Then comes the climax: The kingdom, authority, and magnificence of all nations of the Earth are given to the saints. The Messiah’s kingdom endures forever, and all authorities serve and obey him (Dan 7:27).

## **The kingdom is not a territory**

We are used to hearing about the kingdoms of Israel and Judah in the Bible, and in modern times, there is the United Kingdom (UK) and the kingdoms of Jordan, Saudi Arabia, etc. In English, we instinctively feel that kingdom means territory. Many commentaries and English translations add to the confusion.

In Hebrew and Greek, the primary meaning of the word ‘kingdom’ is the abstract meaning of kingship, dominion, or sovereignty, the supreme authority a king possesses, not his realm or territory. When translating the Bible for the Boko people of West Africa, we had no problem finding a word for kingdom in this abstract sense. It is a common word meaning a position of authority or rule. Whether you are head of the household, chairman of the committee, chief of the village, or king over a region, the authority you possess is your ‘kpala.’ For a king, that means his kingship or reign but not his land. When a new king sits on the throne, he inherits that kingship.

Many who preach about the kingdom of God today don’t understand the expression. They talk about building, extending, or benefiting the

kingdom, expressions that are foreign to Scripture. Those verbs relate to the territorial idea of kingdom rather than the abstract idea of kingship or reign. If 'kingdom' means kingship or rule, how can you build or benefit it? Looking at some modern paraphrases, we find 'the kingdom of God' translated as "God's present reign in the lives of his people" or "that dynamic new life in Christ" or "God's new society." These interpretations not only miss the point; they take us away from the subject under discussion. While "putting faith in Jesus", "living in heaven together with God", "obtaining eternal life", and "living God's new way" are valid Christian concepts, they do not correlate with the meaning underlying the word 'kingdom' or 'the kingdom of God.' Salvation and all that pertains to it is a blessing found in the kingdom of God, but the basic meaning of 'kingdom' differs from salvation and should not be conceived of in that way. It just wasn't what Jesus was talking about!

Even in the epistles, where the growing community of Jesus the Messiah is in focus, the meaning of the expression 'kingdom of God' does not change. The apostles were disciples of Jesus, and they had undergone regular instruction on the kingdom of God.

After Jesus's resurrection, he ascended to heaven where he sat on the throne with the Father. He is building his Church (community) here on Earth, and the powers of hell will not prevail against it. On his return, he will give the conquerors the right to share his earthly throne, just as he conquered and shared his Father's throne in heaven. He will invite the conquerors, saying: Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world (Mt 25:34). The Messianic reign on Earth was always part of God's original plan.

## **The primary meaning of 'kingdom'**

The word 'kingdom' as used in the Bible has a range of meanings that are often confused, and this is one reason why few people understand the true significance of the kingdom of God.

The Brown, Driver and Briggs Hebrew lexicon of the OT gives several translations for the Hebrew word for 'kingdom' which are derived from the Hebrew triconsonantal root MLK 'king'. Depending on the context, they relate to

status: kingship, sovereignty, royal power

action: reign, rule

area: realm, territory, dominion

The BAG (Bauer, Arndt & Gingrich) Greek English Lexicon gives the meanings of βασιλεία ‘kingdom’ as:

1. kingship, royal power, royal rule, kingdom
2. kingdom (territory ruled over by a king)
3. the royal reign or kingdom of God

They define it as a chiefly eschatological concept, beginning to appear in the prophets, elaborated in apocalyptic passages, and taught by Jesus.

Strong’s Bible Dictionary definition of ‘βασιλεία’ is similar:

1. royal power, kingship, dominion, rule (not to be confused with an actual kingdom but rather the right or authority to rule over a kingdom)

2. the royal power of Jesus as the triumphant Messiah

3. the royal power and dignity conferred on Christians in the Messiah's kingdom

4. a kingdom, the territory subject to the rule of a king

5. used in the New Testament to refer to *the reign of the Messiah*

Kingship, royal power, and rule are what we should normally be thinking about when we see the word ‘kingdom’ in the NT, but, for each occurrence of the expression ‘kingdom of God’, we must decide whether the verse is referring to the office of kingship, the person of the king, or the government of the king.

In this book, we are primarily interested in the expression ‘kingdom of God’ and its synonymous expression ‘kingdom of heaven’. However, there are also the following variations:

‘your kingdom come’ (Mt 6:10), referring to the Father.

‘his kingdom’ (Mt 13:41), referring to the Son of Man.

‘their Father’s kingdom’ (Mt 13:43)

‘my Father’s kingdom’ (Mt 26:29). The parallel passage in Mark 14:25 has ‘kingdom of God’.

‘the coming kingdom of our ancestor David’ (Mk 11:10)

‘the kingdom of the Son whom he loves’ (Col 1:13)

‘his (the Lord’s) heavenly kingdom’ (2 Tim 4:18)

‘the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ’ (2 Pet 1:11).

All these expressions refer to the Messiah’s future earthly kingdom, except Colossians 1:13, which refers to the monarchy. As children of God, we are already members of the royal family. None of them relate to God’s sovereignty or an imaginary kingdom in heaven, and none of them should be spiritualized and equated with the Church.

## **Kingdom is a political word**

It is hard to conceive of a word more political than ‘kingdom’. It is on a par with ‘government’ and ‘politics’. Separation of church and state may be desirable, but the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world fall into the same category. If kingdom refers to the office of a king, then it must have political overtones. The Jews were expecting a kingdom that was Jewish, political, and geographical, with their own Jewish Messiah as king over a large area of the Middle East and, ultimately, over the entire world. When they heard the expression on the lips of John the Baptist or Jesus, that is what they envisaged. John and Jesus were Jewish prophets, preaching to a Jewish audience. Let us get out of our heads the idea that they were talking about Christianity. There were no Christians or churches around when John and Jesus preached. The church began at Pentecost when the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit, as described in Acts 2:1-13.

The coming of the Holy Spirit was promised by Jesus. He told his disciples that they knew about the Spirit because he was with them, but one day he would be in them (Jn 14:17). The Holy Spirit was with them while Jesus was around, but he was not in them until he was poured out at Pentecost. Paul defined a Christian as a person in whom the Holy Spirit dwells. He said that if anyone doesn’t have the Spirit of Christ, he doesn’t belong to Christ (Rom 8:9). That’s what it means to be a born-again Christian. Jesus’s disciples were followers of a Jewish prophet, and they had a growing conviction that he was the Messiah. Even early on when Jesus was gathering his team of disciples, Andrew went and found his brother Peter and told him they had found the Messiah (Jn 1:41). This early conviction took a while to sink in as reality. It wasn’t until just before the transfiguration, when

Peter, James, and John saw Jesus in majestic glory, that Jesus asked his disciples who they thought he was. Peter replied confidently that he was the Messiah (Mk 8:29).

The many pronouncements by the OT prophets of a messianic kingdom have never been fulfilled. They are promises of an earthly kingdom, which John the Baptist and Jesus confirmed in their proclamation. Isaiah said that in the last days, the mountain of the Lord's temple would be established as the highest mountain and would be raised above the hills, and all nations would stream to it, saying, Let's go up to the temple of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways, and we'll walk in his paths. Instruction will proceed from Zion and the Lord's word from Jerusalem. *He'll be the nations judge and resolve disputes for many peoples.* They'll beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nations won't raise swords against each other, they won't even learn warfare anymore (Isa 2:2-4).

Isaiah prophesied again to Israel saying that a child would be born to them, a son would be given and the government would be on his shoulders His name would be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. The growth of his government and peace would have no end. *He'll rule over his kingdom, sitting on the throne of David,* establishing it and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time onward and forevermore (Isa 9:6-7).

Obviously, these prophecies have not yet been fulfilled. Many of the OT messianic prophecies and the kingdom of God that John and Jesus proclaimed will only be fulfilled in the age to come when the righteous are resurrected (Lk 20:35). Amillennialists say that this kingdom should not be interpreted literally, and postmillennialists think that it is either here already or going to occur before the Messiah returns. Is there anything here to suggest that these prophecies should not be taken literally? Is it not logical for God to bring a kingdom into existence before the end of the world, where justice and righteousness will reign, to show man how things could have been without wars and dictatorships and the greed and pride of world government leaders? One day, Jesus will be King of kings and Lord of lords here on Earth. As God, he is always king, but his enemies, whether in heaven or on

Earth, have not yet started to be eliminated. He sits on the Father's throne in heaven ruling the universe, but he's not yet exerting his authority on Earth, ruling it with a rod of iron as he will do.

Can these prophecies be spiritualized or allegorized so that the prophesied earthly kingdom of the Messiah can be done away with? The nation of Israel is a key stakeholder here, and the Middle Eastern geography has a significant role to play.

Some prophecies say unambiguously that the Lord God himself will reign on Earth, which led to the belief that the Messiah is in some sense divine. This was difficult for the Jews to understand, but since the incarnation, when Israel's God took on human flesh as the man Jesus, Christians can understand how the Lord God of Israel can reign as a man from Mount Zion. Isaiah said that on that day the moon will be embarrassed, and the sun ashamed; for *the Lord Almighty will reign in glory on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem* in the presence of his officers (Isa 24:23). He also expressed how beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the one who will bring news of peace and announce good news of salvation and tell the people of Jerusalem that *their God reigns*. Their watchmen will raise their voices and sing for joy because they'll see *the Lord's return to Zion*. The ruins of Jerusalem will break forth into singing, for the Lord will comfort his people and redeem Jerusalem. The Lord will bear his holy arm in the sight of all nations, and all the ends of the Earth will see his salvation (Isa 52:7-10). All of this refers to the second coming of Jesus, not the first.

## **Differentiating the two kingdoms**

You will not have a clear understanding of the kingdom of God if, in the back of your mind, you interpret it as God's kingdom, or the church, or heaven. Those who have spiritualized the kingdom teach that the kingdom of God is God's universal rule, even though Jesus is portrayed as the king. In the Psalms, we read about God's sovereign rule over the universe: The kingdom belongs to the Lord; he rules over the nations (Ps 22:27-28). The Lord has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all (Ps 103:19). These passages refer to God's sovereignty over all things, but that is not the kingdom of God announced by John the Baptist and Jesus in the Gospels. It is true that in a genitive expression like 'kingdom of X', you would

normally expect X to be the king, but when we are talking about God who is the source of all things, we cannot be so dogmatic.

The apostle John saw a vision of God on his throne in heaven. The Lord God Almighty is king. The elders worshiped God saying he was worthy to receive glory and honor and power (Rev 4:11). Then the Lamb of God appears, standing in the middle of the throne and all creation sings, ascribing praise, honor, glory, and power to the one who sits on the throne and to the Lamb (Rev 5:13). What the Father does, the Son does, and vice versa. Even a singular pronoun is used to refer to them both in some passages: The throne of God and the Lamb will be in the city and *his* servants will worship him (Rev 22:3).

We cannot divide the Trinity. We can never talk about the Son to the complete exclusion of the Father. The kingdom of God, although it primarily belongs to the Son, will always have the nuance of coming from the Father and belonging to the Father. But my point here is that the kingdom of God as proclaimed by Jesus and John the Baptist focuses on the earthly kingdom of the Messiah. They are never talking about God's sovereign reign over creation. It can be thought of as God's kingdom, meaning that it was the Father who anointed and appointed the Son as king, a kingdom for which God is responsible. But to appreciate the real meaning of the kingdom of God, it should be thought of as the kingdom of Jesus the Messiah.

Furthermore, it is widely accepted among biblical scholars that the word 'kingdom' in this phrase has as its primary meaning 'kingship', as evidenced in the dictionary definitions above. The basic focus is on the royal rule or authority rather than on the realm or territory over which one rules. If the kingdom of God is interpreted as God's sovereign rule, how can Jesus talk about the kingdom of God coming? God has always been the sovereign ruler over his creation. And if the kingdom of God is God's kingship, how can we hope to possess or inherit it? Jesus said the poor are blessed, because the kingdom of God belongs to them (Lk 6:20).

Only a few NT passages refer to the kingdom that God possesses, that is, his sovereign reign over the universe, while the expression 'the kingdom of God', and its synonym 'the kingdom of heaven', refer exclusively to a kingship *from* God or *from* heaven, a kingship God will establish among men on Earth, a kingship of which the kingships

of David and Solomon were a foreshadowing, a kingship which belongs to Jesus the Messiah.

Herman Ridderbos in 'The Coming of the Kingdom', 1962, says: A twofold distinction should be made. In the first place, the Old Testament speaks of a general and a particular kind of kingship of the Lord. The former concerns the universal power and dominion of God over the universe and all nations and is founded in the creation of heaven and Earth. The latter denotes the special relation between the Lord and Israel.

Confusion arises when people do not differentiate between these two kingdoms of God. It is clearer for us to think in terms of a heavenly kingdom and an earthly kingdom. God's throne is in heaven. He rules from there and is sovereign over the universe. The Messiah's throne will be on Earth and he'll reign over the whole Earth. The Messiah is the man, Jesus, and his authority comes from God the Father. Jesus is the king, and his kingship will be manifested when he returns. God is ultimately reigning through this kingdom too, reflecting the subtle ambiguity of the expression, but that is not the focus. Theological studies about the kingdom of God that Jesus preached often confuse the issue by equating it with God's sovereignty as taught in the OT. They are not the same thing. The OT end-of-age prophecies are not about God's sovereignty; they are messianic and reveal many facts concerning the kingdom that Jesus will establish on his return to Earth. Many of these details are not repeated in the New Testament but they should not be overlooked.

## **The fallacy of 'God's rule in our hearts'**

The NIV Study Bible (1984) gives a common definition of the kingdom of God in its commentary on Matthew 3:2, the first occurrence of the expression in the NT:

The kingdom of heaven/God in the preaching of Jesus as recounted in the Gospels is the reign of God that he brings about through Jesus Christ – i.e., the establishment of God's rule in the hearts and lives of his people, the overcoming of all the forces of evil, the removal from the world of all the consequences of sin – including death and all that diminishes life – and the creation of a new order of righteousness and peace.

That definition is vaguely scriptural, but as NIV commentary on eschatological events is predominantly amillennial, the focus is wrong. It is not the rule of God that Jesus brings about in the hearts and lives of his people; it is about the future rule of Christ over this world. No verse of Scripture ties the kingdom of God to the idea of God ruling in our hearts and lives. Also, saying that ‘the kingdom of God is the *reign of God* that he brings about through Jesus Christ’ does not bring out the true focus of the expression, such as Jesus Christ being the king, his reign over the Earth with the saints ruling with him. Jesus confers a kingdom on the saints, and it is their rule over the world as part of their glorification that is in focus, not their submission to God.

God ruling in the hearts and lives of his people is not so relevant to eschatology. The saints willingly submit to their Lord as he rewards, exalts, and glorifies his redeemed people, overcoming all the forces of evil, removing all the consequences of sin from the world, and creating a new order of righteousness and peace.

What was John Calvin’s understanding of the kingdom of God? He says: By proclaiming the kingdom of God, he (the Lord) was calling them to faith, for by the kingdom of God, which he taught was at hand, he meant the forgiveness of sins, salvation, life, and utterly everything that we obtain in Christ. (Book 3, chapter 3, section 19.) He makes it clear in his Institutes that his understanding of Christ’s kingship is that it is spiritual. He did not make a break from Augustine’s platonic thinking, and he has disassociated the expression from its Jewish messianic roots.

The expression ‘the kingdom of God/heaven’ is the kingdom from God/heaven that God will establish among men on Earth. The kingdom is from God, and a man, Jesus Christ, the descendant of David, will be the king. It is a kingdom that we his followers can inherit, and we can’t inherit God’s universal reign.

Since his ascension to heaven, Jesus is often depicted as sitting at the right hand of God on his throne. He is there because he is God. Wherever the Father is, the Son of God is, and also, the Spirit of God. But this is not the kingdom of God of which Jesus often spoke. We are never told that Jesus is ruling from heaven. After his return, Jesus will rule on Earth, on the throne of his ancestor David. This is the kingdom of God, a kingdom that comes from God or heaven, ‘the kingdom of

the Son he loves.’ Since the time that Jesus stepped into history, there has been salvation in no other name under heaven, and after Jesus returns as king, the kingdom that he will set up will be the only kingdom.

## **The nature of the kingdom of God**

The kingdom of God has been variously described as universal, particular, political, spiritual, manifested, and hidden. How do we make sense of these sometimes contradictory statements? Jesus taught his disciples through the parables that the kingdom is worldwide as well as Jewish, and spiritual as well as political. In the present time, the kingdom is only a prophecy; in the future it will be manifested at the King's return. Only in the coming age of the millennium can it be regarded as geographical when the center of authority will be at Jerusalem.

The kingdom of God is Jewish in the sense that the king, the Messiah, is a Jew, his throne will be at Jerusalem, and the historical background and prophecies relating to it are to be found in the Jewish Scriptures, the OT.

The kingdom is political because the Messiah will be a king and will demand total allegiance. He'll rule from East to West and function as lawgiver and judge. The kingdom is spiritual in the sense that many of the parables of the kingdom of God involve the sowing of seed, the word of God, *at the present time*. It is by hearing the word of God, believing it, and being born again by God's Spirit that people of all nations become children of God and enter the royal family as God's heirs. There is no kingdom before the Messiah returns, but believers are already assured of a place in the monarchy.

It is instructive to compare the kingdom of God and the Islamic state that classical Islam aspires to. Many Muslims are known to put Allah and the Muslim state first before their non-Muslim country. Many Christians would also feel that their allegiance to God is primary. Christianity and Islam are both religions whose followers believe that God is supreme, their king. The significant difference is that many Muslims are trying to conquer the kingdoms of this world through jihad, whereas Christians believe that Jesus is the one who wins the victory for us when he returns and ushers in the kingdom.

Pilate asked Jesus if he was the king of the Jews. Jesus replied that his kingship was not from this world, his authority came from God. He wasn't saying his kingdom didn't belong to this world. If it did, his servants would fight to keep him from being handed over to the Jews. But *for now*, he said, as the situation stood, his kingship was not *from here*. So, you are a king? Pilate asked. Jesus answered: You say that I'm a king. I was born for this and I came into the world to testify to the truth (Jn 18:36-37).

Jesus's kingdom will be established on this Earth, but it is not in the same league as earthly kingdoms which have armies for conquest and defense. His kingship is from God, who will at Jesus's return, replace the world's kingdom with his own.

The kingdom is like a treasure hidden in a field (Mt 13:44). Hidden, because it is not here yet, it is future. The church is visible and it is a religious institution, not a political one. The church's job is to make disciples of all nations. It is the saints, the true believers, who will inherit the kingship in Messiah's kingdom. When Jesus returns, all will be manifested. Jesus and his people will then rule the world. His glorious throne will be visible in Jerusalem, and it'll become clear that the world is his domain. These are the concrete manifestations of his kingdom. But in this present age, what do we have? There is no king, throne, monarchy, or reign. Jesus is seated on the Father's throne, *waiting* (Heb 10:13) for the day when the Father will make his enemies a footstool for his feet.

People like to compare the kingdom of God with the Church. That is difficult because 'kingdom' is an abstract word meaning 'kingship' or 'reign'. As for people, we need to think of the king or his government, the monarchy. Kingdom never refers to the subjects of a realm. 'The sons of the kingdom' is a biblical expression that refers to the monarchy, not the subjects. Jesus said the meek will inherit the Earth, meaning those people who submit to God. The saints, the true church made up of those born again of the Spirit of God from every time and place, will govern in the coming kingdom. They are the 'sons of the kingdom', the princes or the monarchy, those who will rule with Christ. More about that below. Unfortunately, many in the worldwide church today will not be part of the kingdom tomorrow. Jesus said not

everyone who says to him: Lord, Lord, will get into the kingdom from heaven, but only those who do the will of his Father (Mt 7:21).

Many Scriptures tell us that the Messiah's kingdom belongs to this world. He'll sit on the throne of David, and the Father told the Son to ask him, and he would give him the nations as his heritage, the ends of the Earth as his possession. He will break them with an iron rod and shatter them like pottery (Ps 2:8). This doesn't sound like a spiritual kingdom!

## **The Jewish background to the kingdom**

The kingdom of God is sometimes contrasted with the Law and the Prophets (Lk 16:16). The latter expression speaks of God's covenant with Israel while the kingdom of God speaks of his new covenant with all nations, including believing Jews. What is a covenant? BAG defines the Greek word as meaning "a declaration of one person's will, not the result of an agreement between two parties, like a compact or a contract." So, a covenant is a decree, where God alone sets the conditions. In God's covenants, he promises blessings that are dependent on the recipients' obedience. In my African languages it was hard to translate this concept, but we finally settled on a word that means concern or commitment. The new covenant is a *decree of divine commitment* toward Christians, ratified by the shed blood of Christ, and dependent on their continuing faith and obedience. However, God's gifts and calling never change (Rom 11:29), so born-again Christians will remain secure in their faith. But their daily experience of God's blessings will vary according to their willingness to serve him.

The Jewish kingdoms of Judah and Israel foreshadowed Messiah's kingdom, but in Matthew 21:43, Jesus said the kingdom of God would be taken away from the Jews and given to a people who would produce fruit for it. One kingdom parable (Mt 22:2-10) compares the kingdom to a king who prepares a wedding banquet for his son (the Messiah). The initial list of guests (Israel) made excuses, and they were disqualified. After that, everyone was invited. Israel as a nation never really possessed the kingdom; they only had a conditional promise. The mystery revealed to the apostle Paul is that the Gentiles are now

co-heirs with believing Jews, members of the same body (of Christ), and partakers of what was originally promised to Abraham (Eph 3:6).

Dining at the king's table was an important part of kingdom culture. The king did not rule alone; his ministers, often members of his family and trusted friends, ruled with him, and the royal table symbolized their camaraderie. Jesus told his disciples that he wouldn't drink wine again *until* the day when he drank it again in the kingdom of God (Mk 14:25). Other verses are scattered throughout Scripture that refer to eating and drinking in the kingdom of God, and it is exciting to think of that possibility. Many will come from East and West and take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven (Mt 8:11). Jesus promised his disciples that they would eat and drink at his table in his kingdom (Lk 22:30). The Jewish tradition was strong on there being a banquet in the kingdom of God (Isa 25:6, Lk 14:15). Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb is a benediction given in Revelation 19:9.

Jesus's ministry was primarily to the Jews of his day. He was born as their king and was their promised Messiah, but he did not come to reign immediately; God had a plan to include the Gentiles in the ruling hierarchy. Under domination by Rome, Jesus had to use suitably veiled language to talk about himself and his future kingdom. We should never lose sight of the fact that Jesus was the promised Messiah, and that the kingdom of God he spoke of so frequently was his future reign on Earth. That is why he told us to pray that God's kingdom would come, when his will would be done on Earth as it is in heaven (Mt 6:10).

A true understanding of the parables reveals how Jesus's gospel message would be preached in the world and would be embraced by those who believed in him. Through faith, they would be saved and inherit the kingdom that the apostle John prefers to describe as eternal life. Salvation is all about sharing God's nature and becoming perfect, about being resurrected as immortal beings, about being free from suffering, sadness, sickness and death, and about ruling with Christ over the Earth. All that is a part of eternal life.

The kingdom that Jesus proclaimed is both heavenly and earthly. Heavenly, because after the resurrection, New Jerusalem would be their heavenly home. The kingdom of God is also earthly because it is

involves ruling the world, Man was created by God to rule the world. This was his original plan for them (Gen 1:26, 9:2, Ps 8:6-8, 115:16) and continues to be God's plan for the redeemed.

Some commentators don't understand the abstract concept of kingdom as kingship and interpret it as a domain or a people. Consequently, they can't give a good explanation of what it means to enter or inherit the kingdom or for the kingdom to be spoken of as coming. They spend time discussing God's sovereignty in the OT. Although the kingdom was foreshadowed in prophecy, the expression 'kingdom of God' does not exist there. They make much of Jesus's statement that 'the kingdom of God is within you' which is a mistranslation. Jesus was talking to unbelieving Pharisees. How could the kingdom of God be within them? He was referring to himself; it was he who was among them.

Believers are often spoken about as being citizens in the kingdom of God, which is not taught in the Bible. That teaching ignores one of the greatest blessings of our salvation: our glorification as rulers in Christ's kingdom. In the NT, Christians are twice called citizens (Eph 2:19, Php 3:20). Paul calls the Christians fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, and says that their citizenship is in heaven. Fellow-citizens here is figurative, meaning that the Gentiles had become 'natives' or 'insiders' together with the Jewish saints. They were now members of God's household, just as foreigners in the OT who converted to Judaism and were circumcised became members of the Israel nation. Their citizenship is in heaven, not Rome, for which many aspired. The context does not imply that Christians are subjects or citizens in Messiah's kingdom. Royalty are never referred to as subjects.

## **The earthly kingdom of God predicted by Paul**

Luke tells us in Acts 19:8 that at Ephesus, Paul went into a synagogue and held discussions for three months, persuading people about the kingdom of God (Acts 19:8). Then, when Paul finally arrived in Rome near the end of his ministry, he taught Jews in Rome, and his message still centered around the kingdom of God. He explained the kingdom of God to them, trying to convince them about Jesus from the law of Moses and the Prophets (Acts 28:23). Some were convinced but others

would not believe, and he told them that this message about God's salvation had been sent to the nations. They would listen. Then Luke says that he continued to preach about the kingdom of God and to teach boldly and freely about the Lord Jesus the Messiah.

There are only ten references to the kingdom of God in Paul's epistles, so his general emphasis and vocabulary have moved away from the Messiah's future reign, as he understandably concentrated more on its present significance. He taught that the kingdom of God is not about food and drink, but of righteousness, peace, and joy produced by the Holy Spirit (Rom 14:17), and that it isn't just talk, but has real power (1 Cor 4:20). Neither of these statements prove that the kingdom has been realized. They are timeless truths. Inheriting the kingdom was a future event for him (1 Cor 6:9). When interpreting verses like this we need to ask what the precise meaning of 'kingdom' is in the context. As we have seen, 'kingdom' may refer to the reign, the kingship, the domain, or the royal household. In Romans 14, Paul is talking about weak and strong Christians and the danger of judging one another. What connection does that have with the kingdom of God? Just this. Messiah's future rule will be characterized by righteousness, peace, joy, and power, and Christians, who have been made righteous by faith in the Messiah, who have peace with God, and who experience the joy of the Spirit, are the ones who will constitute the government in the Messiah's kingdom. So, they need to learn kingdom values here and now and not be fighting over irrelevant matters like what a person should eat or drink.

When Paul declares that God has rescued us from the power of darkness and brought us into the kingship of the Son he loves (Col 1:13), he is talking about our status. We are already part of Messiah's kingdom, albeit as heirs, because we haven't come into possession of it yet. Paul makes this clear to the Corinthians, some of whom thought they were reigning already (1 Cor 4:8). John taught that being born again guaranteed entry into the kingdom of God (Jn 3:3), the messianic kingship. That is our present status as God's children but it will not be realized until the resurrection when we are glorified and welcomed into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Pe 1:11). The reign in glory is our hope, not our present experience.

Paul's clearest messianic kingdom statement is in 1 Cor 15:24-25. After the Messiah has reigned over the Earth and put every ruler, authority, and power in submission to him, then comes the end (of the world), when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father. Seated on his Father's throne in heaven, Jesus is not presently doing away with these evil powers. He will only do that here when he rules from Zion (Ps 2:6-12).

Paul argues that as we are God's children, we are his heirs, and co-heirs with Christ. That is our status, nothing is inherited until the kingdom is established. The meek will inherit the Earth (Mt 5:5), but the time has not yet come. If we prove our faithfulness by sharing in his sufferings, we'll also share in his glory (Rom 8:17). Paul said he endured everything for the elect's sake, so that they, too, may receive salvation through the Messiah Jesus, along with eternal glory. If they endure, they will reign with him (2 Tim 2:10, 12a). This salvation includes eternal glory that we will receive when we reign with the Messiah. Paul urges the believers to live in a manner worthy of God, who calls them into his kingdom and glory (1 Th 2:12). 'His kingdom' is the messianic reign, not God's universal reign, and his glory is the glory of participating in the messianic government. The tense here is present (calls), or rather habitual; it is what God habitually does, he calls people to participate in his own kingship and glory. His own in the sense of origin; this kingship and its associated glory come from God. It is the kingship of his beloved Son.

Paul places his charge Timothy in solemn eschatological perspective when he says:

I charge you before God and Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and dead, and in view of his coming to reign (2 Ti 4:1).

It is Christ Jesus who will judge the living and the dead. He will certainly return (his appearing), and his kingdom is the ultimate reality (2 Tim 4:1). This solemn warning is in harmony with the future events described in Rev 19-20: the second coming of Christ, the millennium, and the white throne judgment. Paul also tells Timothy that the Lord will rescue him from every attack and take him safely to his heavenly kingdom (2 Tim 4:18). The kingdom is future for Paul and *heavenly*. The NIV commentary suggests heaven itself, because in verse six Paul says, 'the time of my departure has come' (4:6) but is heaven ever

described in Scripture as a ‘heavenly kingdom’? Paul mentioned the Messiah’s kingdom in verse one, and he referred to the Messiah’s appearing in verse eight. The BAG Greek Lexicon defines the adjective ‘heavenly’ as ‘something that is there in heaven with God, *or* that belongs there by nature, *or* something that *comes from there*’. Just as the kingdom of God is better translated the kingdom from God, so here, the heavenly kingdom is the kingdom that comes down from heaven. That is what Paul was looking forward to, not an intermediary state in heaven about which we know very little. Other things described as ‘heavenly’ because of their heavenly origins are:

The heavenly man - Jesus (1 Cor 15:48-49)

A heavenly calling - from God (Heb 3:1)

The heavenly gift - the Holy Spirit (Heb 6:4)

A better country, a heavenly one - the city God has prepared for them (Heb 11:16).

The heavenly Jerusalem (Heb 12:22) – the city that comes down out of heaven from God (Rev 21:2).

This is New Jerusalem, the eternal city where God lives with his angels and the souls of the righteous dead. Not only that, but the throne of God and the Lamb are there; the Messiah and his resurrected saints will rule from there.

## **The kingdom in Hebrews, James, and Peter**

There are another ten references to the kingdom of God in the books of Hebrews to Revelation, and it is instructive to see that all these authors interpret it as an earthly messianic kingdom. At least, many scholars think so.

Quoting Ps 45:6, the writer of Hebrews interprets the king in Ps 45 to be the Messiah, the Son of God. He calls him God and says his throne is forever and ever, and the scepter of his kingdom is a righteous scepter (Heb 1:8).

In Heb 12:28 he makes the important observation that we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken. Receiving the kingdom is equivalent to inheriting it and ruling with the Messiah during his millennial reign.

James, the Lord’s brother, said that God chose the poor in the world to become rich in faith, and to become heirs of the kingdom that he

promised to those who love him (Jas 2:5). With his godly Jewish background, he had a strong faith that we would be heirs of the messianic kingdom.

Peter tells the recipients of his letter that if they confirm their calling and election, they will be generously granted entry into the eternal kingdom of their Lord and Savior Jesus the Messiah. Entry into the eternal kingdom is the logical outcome of entry into the royalty, which occurs when one is born of water and the Spirit (Jn 3:5). This entrance into the earthly kingdom at Jesus's coming follows the resurrection (1 Cor 15:50), as flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom. The saints will rise and meet the Lord in the air at his coming and thereafter they will be always with the Lord. According to my understanding, our abode and throne from the moment of resurrection, will be in the New Jerusalem, from where we will rule the world.

## **Summary teaching on the kingdom of God**

1. The 'kingdom of God' in Jesus's teaching regularly refers to a future, earthly, messianic kingdom and not to God's sovereignty over the universe. Jesus used the title 'Son of Man' from the book of Daniel to speak of himself in the third person and avoid making it explicit that he was the Messiah. In the same way, he used the expression 'kingdom of God' to speak of his coming kingdom and to avoid being regarded as a threat to Rome or the Herodians. He spoke more openly to his inner circle of disciples, but to the crowds, he spoke in parables and used these cryptic expressions. Cryptic here means obscure, secret, or enigmatic.
2. 'Kingdom' is not to be interpreted as a geographical domain. It should normally be understood as meaning 'rule' or 'kingship' or 'government'. However, you can't have a kingdom without a king, and often the expression stands for the king himself (Mt 3:2, 4:17, Lk 11:20, 17:21). When the kingdom of God is spoken about as coming, the focus is on the king; an abstract concept like 'rule' or 'kingship' cannot come by itself.
3. The Greek genitive expression 'of God' often expresses origin rather than possession. This is a kingdom that has its origin in God and contrasts with the kingdoms of this world that have their origin in human politics. It is not to be confused with God's sovereign rule

over his creation; it is Messiah's reign or his government. The expression 'kingdom of God' never occurs in the OT. In the NT, it refers to the messianic kingdom.

4. The kingdom of God is a rule on Earth, not in heaven, and a man, the Messiah, is the king who is worshiped, and through him, the Father. He will rule from Jerusalem over the regathered people of Israel, fulfilling the messianic prophecies made by the prophets. The resurrected and raptured church will be united to him and will rule with him, fulfilling the promise of their glorification. The Messiah will rejuvenate the Earth and human society. The existence of this kingdom will vindicate both Israel as God's chosen nation and the Church as God's chosen people from all the nations.
5. The kingdom of God, as taught by Jesus, is his future reign, which begins when he returns to Earth in glory. Amillennialists teach that as Jesus is now on the throne in heaven at the right hand of the Father, the kingdom of God is already present. It cannot be denied that Jesus is on the throne and that he rules over all, but he simply shares his Father's throne in heaven; it is not the kingdom of God. The Messiah created all things, and he holds all things together (Col 1:17) so his rightful place is on God's throne, but this is not the 'kingdom of God' that Jesus proclaimed. The Messiah's future reign on Earth has not yet begun. There are two divine thrones: the Father's throne in heaven and the Davidic throne on Earth. There are also two resurrections, one of the righteous to life (Lk 14:14, Jn 5:29, 1 Cor 15:23, 1 Thess 4:16, Rev 20:5) and the other of the wicked to condemnation. They are not the same event; they are separated by the millennium. There is only one day of personal judgment, the great white throne judgment of Revelation 20:11-15. However, the Day of the Lord, which is simultaneous with the Messiah's arrival, is also a great time of judgment on the nations who rebel against God. The righteous are not judged (Jn 5:24, Rom 8:1) but are rewarded for their service (Mt 16:27, 1 Cor 3:12-15, 2 Cor 5:10, Rev 22:12).
6. I see no need or evidence for a theology of a realized kingdom of God. When Paul says that the Father has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son whom he loves (Col 1:13), he is thinking about our *position* in

Christ; *we are delivered* from the dominion of darkness, we are saved, our sins are forgiven, we are children of God, we are seated with Christ in the heavenly places, but we are only *heirs of the kingdom*, as is the Messiah. This may be realized theology, but it is not realized eschatology. We are not yet reigning with Christ over his earthly kingdom. Paul does not write much about the kingdom of God; his focus is on evangelism, church planting, and pastoral affairs but he believed that the kingdom of God was a future event (1 Cor 6:9, 15:50, 2 Thess 1:5), as did Luke (Lk 22:18, Acts 14:22) and Peter (2 Pet 1:11). Paul said we must endure many hardships to get into the kingdom of God. We are not reigning yet, but Paul said, if we endure, we will reign with him (2 Tim 2:12). And the risen Jesus promised to give the conquerors authority over the nations (Rev 2:26). John saw the elders and the living creatures singing praises to the Lamb, declaring that he had redeemed people and made them a kingdom and priests for God and that they would reign over the Earth (Rev 5:10).

7. A kingdom does not exist on Earth without a visible king. Only when Jesus returns will the kingdom from God be made manifest. According to Jesus's parables, the fulfillment of the Great Commission results in a harvest of souls from every tribe and nation, and it is this multitude who will reign together with Christ on Earth. The church age is sometimes referred to as the not-yet-fully inaugurated kingdom of God, but without Christ's physical presence on Earth, the kingdom cannot in any way be described as inaugurated. The saints will reign with Christ over the Earth, and the kingdom won't be inaugurated until the full number of the believers has come in (Rom 11:25) and that after they have been resurrected.
8. Entering the kingdom from God is not entering a geographical area as a citizen or subject; it is entering Messiah's government. Believers are called God's children; they are sons of the kingdom, which means they are princes. The many millions of God's people from every nation will make up one great royal family or monarchy. This is why the mother of James and John asked Jesus if her sons could sit on his right and left in his kingdom. The greatest in the royal family is the one who humbles himself. Jesus told his disciples that the king's sons don't pay taxes; so they are exempt

from the temple tax (Mt 17:26). The inference is that the disciples belong to the royal household.

9. Inheriting the kingdom is winning a place in Messiah's government. The kingdom is given to believers and conferred on them. They are not subjects. They aren't inheriting God the Father's kingdom; the kingdom they are inheriting is here on Earth.

10. The great chapter on the resurrection teaches us that the Messiah was resurrected first, and at his coming, those who belong to him will be resurrected. Then in the end, after he has ruled and destroyed every ruler and power, he'll deliver the kingdom to God the Father (1 Cor 15:24-25). There we have it; the Messiah must reign on Earth. It is the kingdom from God that John the Baptist and Jesus proclaimed, the kingdom described by John in Revelation 20 as a 1000-year reign. After this reign on Earth during which Christ subdues all opposition, he'll surrender his Messianic kingship to his Father, so that God may be all in all.

11. In Rev 19-20 John lists the events of Jesus's return and reign in chronological order up to the end of this world.

19:11-14 Jesus returns with the armies of heaven, wearing fine linen, white and pure (cf. 19:8). These are the chosen, called, and faithful (cf. 17:14), the Christian dead who have just been resurrected.

19:15-16 The battle of Armageddon in the vicinity of Jerusalem.

19:17-18 A call to carrion birds to enjoy God's great supper; the slaughter of the nations who came to oppose God.

19:19-21 The Antichrist and the false prophet are captured and thrown into hell.

20:1-3 Satan is bound for 1000 years.

20:4-6 John saw thrones and those who sat on them. They are faithful martyrs who were killed during the Antichrist's persecution, resurrected at Christ's return, and now ruling with Christ for 1000 years

20:7-10 The release of Satan after the 1000 years, his final rebellion and doom.

20:11-15 The resurrection of the wicked, the white throne judgment, and the end of this present creation.

The central thesis of this book is that the kingdom of God is Messiah's future reign on Earth. Jesus will be king. He is the Son of God, the second person of the holy trinity, God himself and as such, he is always sovereign, and as we are told many times, he is seated at God's right hand. But to the Jewish prophets, he was a son of God, God's regent who would reign on Earth in God's place. The 'kingdom of God' phrase is deliberately ambiguous. If we think of Jesus as God, then it is the kingdom of God, but if we think of Jesus as a human Messiah, appointed by God, as the Jews understood him, then it is the kingdom from God. His kingdom does not have its origin in human politics like the great kingdoms of this world, it is a kingdom established by God.