

THE KINGDOM OF GOD: A BIBLICAL SURVEY

Summary: God is king of the universe—Israel's king was a delegate of the heavenly King—Israel's kings pointed to divine sovereignty in an age to come—Israel looked forward to a Kingdom that would endure forever—the "Kingdom of heaven " and the "Kingdom of God" same meaning—"the Gospel of the Kingdom" is good news about a spiritual sovereignty—the kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, fully revealed in "the age to come"—the kingdom is both a present reality and a future hope—the preaching of the good news of the kingdom—the millennial reign a limited phase of the Kingdom—living in the kingdom the life of the age to come—the kingdom of the world will become the kingdom of our God.

Prof. F.F. Bruce

This outline of the Biblical teaching about the Kingdom of God is by no means intended to be exhaustive, but rather to stimulate readers to further study the subject and its application to the practical issues of modern life.

From the earliest days of Israel's history, God was worshipped as King. As Creator of the universe, His kingly rule is universal: "The Lord hath established His throne in the heavens; and His Kingdom ruleth over all" (Psalm 103:19). To Abraham He was "the Judge of all the earth" (Genesis 18:25). Yet on earth there was one community which was peculiarly subject to His rule.

He was in a particular sense King of the nation of Israel. Among them specially He manifested His sovereignty. In the wilderness the nation was constituted as a theocracy, the special possession of God (Deuteronomy 32:9; 33:5). Even when the kingdom was established under Saul and David, the king was no absolute monarch; he was "the Lord's anointed." Israel's king derived his sovereignty from the heavenly King, whose vicegerent he was, and to whom he was responsible for the manner in which he exercised this delegated rule.

The kingly rule of God, however, is marked by righteousness, in Old Testament as well as the New Testament times it stands true that "the unrighteous shall not inherit the Kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 6:9). By unrighteousness the royal line of David proved itself unworthy of the honour of representing the divine rule on earth, and therefore the kingdom was over-thrown, and the sovereignty over Israel passed to Gentile rulers.

The Babylonian captivity brought new problems. The throne of David was vacant. The crown of Judah, according to Ezekiel 21:27, was to remain without a wearer "until He come whose right it is"—a

greater David of the future, who should restore and surpass the vanished glories of the past (Ezekiel 34:23f; 37:24f).

The sovereignty exercised by the kings of Israel was seen to have been but a faint picture of the ideal exercise of the divine sovereignty in an age to come. In the visions of Daniel, the promise is given that the dominion of the Gentiles will not endure for ever; their empires will pass away, and “the God of heaven shall set up a Kingdom, which shall never be destroyed ... and it shall stand for ever” (Daniel 2:44).

True, God has not abdicated His present sovereignty; the Gentile kings are reminded that they, too, hold their power by the permission of God: “the Most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever He will” (Daniel 4:17). But the Kingdom of God in its full manifestation is future. When it comes it is to endure for ever, when the Ancient of Days will confer it on “one like unto a son of man ” (Daniel 7:13), and its authority will be exercised by “the saints of the Most High” (Daniel 7:18).

The idea of this coming Kingdom took a strong hold on the imagination of the Jewish people in the closing centuries before the coming of Christ. We can trace their interest in the Kingdom in various writings, especially in the (Apocryphal) Book of Enoch, where Daniel’s “one like unto a son of man” appears as “the Son of man,” in the full exercise of His Messianic dignity.

In Israel, about the time of our Lord, many were “looking for the Kingdom of God” (Luke 23:51; cf. Luke 2:25, 38); the time was ripe, therefore, for the appearance of John the Baptist with his prophetic message, “Repent ye, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand!” (Matthew 3:2). (The “Kingdom of heaven ” and the “Kingdom of God” are not two different kingdoms, but two different ways of translating the Aramaic phrase that Jesus used to denote the one Kingdom. In Aramaic idiom “heaven” is commonly used in the sense of “God”; thus “the Kingdom of heaven” is a literal rendering of the Aramaic, whereas “the Kingdom of God” represents a freer translation into idiomatic Greek. We may compare in the Aramaic of Daniel 4:25f. the synonymous expressions “the Most High ruleth” and “the heavens do rule.”)

The message of John was taken up by our Lord (Matthew 4:17) and by His apostles (Matthew 10:7). The Kingdom was certainly “at hand,” for it had drawn nigh in the person of the King. He declared Himself to be the Son of man, to whom in Daniel’s vision the Kingdom was to be given; the “saints of the Most High” who were to receive the Kingdom He identified with His followers, to whom He said at the Last Supper, “I appoint unto you a kingdom, even as my Father appointed unto me” (Luke 22:29). But the popular ideas about the Kingdom of God were quite out of harmony with the

purpose of His coming into the world. "They all were looking for a King to slay their foes and set them high;" and the measure of their optimistic enthusiasm while they cherished this false hope was the measure of their angry disillusionment when they found out their mistake.

Even His disciples were not immune from it; they "hoped that it was He which should redeem Israel" (Luke 24:21), and even after His resurrection they continued to hope that He might fulfil the hopes which they had cherished before His passion: "Lord, dost thou at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). But from Pentecost onwards they knew that "the Gospel of the Kingdom" which they had to announce was good news about a spiritual sovereignty; those who believed in Christ there and then entered His Kingdom. The divine rule knew no national bounds; it was received wherever Christ was accepted as Lord and Saviour.

Now they remembered and understood much of His teaching that had puzzled them before. For example, "Except ye turn, and become as little children, ye shall in no wise enter into the Kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3). The new birth was a necessity for seeing the Kingdom (John 3:3). In other words, to enter the Kingdom was to enter into life (see how these two phrases can be interchanged in Mark 9:43,45,47).

The Jews of that day knew that the Kingdom was to be fully revealed in "the age to come," the resurrection age, and that all who were admitted to that Kingdom would have a part in "the life of the age to come" (This life is eternal, because the age to come, like the Kingdom of God, is eternal). Our Lord filled this language with a richer content. While some of His best-known teaching depicts the setting up of the Kingdom in the age to come, "when the Son of man shall come in His glory, and all the angels with Him" (Matthew 25:31), He also taught that the blessings of the Kingdom and the life everlasting might be enjoyed in the present by those who accepted Him.

On the one hand, He told the parable of the pounds to correct the ideas of those who "supposed that the Kingdom of God was immediately to appear" (Luke 19:11). On the other hand, He taught that His activity among them was a sign that the Kingdom of God had come upon them (Luke 11:20). Thus, we must distinguish a twofold strand in His teaching about the Kingdom: the future aspect, as when we are taught to pray, "Thy Kingdom come," and the present aspect, to be appropriated now by faith. Both these aspects can be discerned in the Parables of the Kingdom, the emphasis in some being on the present hidden development of the Kingdom until it is seen in full fruition, in others on its cataclysmic manifestation at the Second Advent.

The principles of the Kingdom proclaimed in the Sermon on the Mount apply to the present rather than to the future aspect; they are intended for a time in which believers still pray “Thy Kingdom come” (Matthew 6:10) and are liable to be persecuted for righteousness’ sake and for Christ’s sake (Matthew 5:10f). The Kingdom in full bloom will not appear until the “Gospel of the Kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a testimony unto all the nations” (Matthew 24:14) and to this end our Lord before His ascension commissioned His disciples to “go ... and make disciples of all the nations” (Matthew 28:19).

The preaching of the good news of God’s Kingdom called for repentance of sin and faith in Christ, with baptism as the “outward and visible sign” of this inward change. It announced to those who thus repented and believed the remission of their sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. It stressed the necessity for a new life worthy of their new confession and taught that those who responded to its call were formed into a new society, the Church, the Israel of God. The Church cannot be identified with the Kingdom absolutely, but it is natural to think of the divine sovereignty in association with the sphere in which it is exercised, and at the present time the sphere in which submission to that sovereignty is most clearly seen (or ought to be) is the Christian Church. The good news of the Kingdom did not cease to be proclaimed after the Resurrection, to be resumed at some date yet future. It continued to be preached by the apostles, first to the Jews, so long as there was hope that they as a nation would accept Jesus as the Messiah (Acts 2:36 and Acts 3:19f.) and then to non-Jews as well (Acts 8:12, etc.).

This passing to non-Jews had been foreshadowed in our Lord’s warning to the Jewish nation: “The Kingdom of God shall be taken away from you and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof” (Matthew 21:43). Paul also claims that he preached the same Gospel as the other apostles (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:2); for his proclamation of the Gospel of the Kingdom we may refer to Acts 19:8; 28:23,31, and especially 20:24f., where a comparison of the two consecutive verses makes it plain that “to testify the Gospel of the grace of God” refers to the same activity as “preaching the Kingdom”

In the apostolic preaching both present and future aspects of the Kingdom had a place. According to the apostles teaching, Christians have already been transferred from the dominion of darkness into the Kingdom of Christ (Colossians 1:13) and receive “a Kingdom that cannot be shaken” (Hebrews 12:28); yet they are heirs of a future Kingdom (James 2:5, etc.) for which they work together (Colossians 4:11) and their present suffering for it makes them worthy of it when it comes (2 Thessalonians 1:5; cf. Romans 8:17; 2 Timothy 2:12).

The millennial reign (Revelation 20:4) is simply a limited phase of this eternal Kingdom. “The saints shall judge the world” (1 Corinthians 6:2), associated with Christ in His juridical and royal glory, when He returns to reign in righteousness and peace, bringing joy to all creation; yet even now they share in that Kingdom of God which is “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost” (Romans 14:17).

The very prospect of glory to come is held out as an incentive to holy living now. The argument is that since we are to be like Christ when He is manifested in glory, we ought to be like Him now. “Everyone that hath this hope set on Him purifieth himself” (1 John 3:3). If this moral effect is not produced in our lives, we shall “be ashamed before Him at His coming” (1 John 2:28, cf. Mark 8:38).

At the first coming of Christ the age to come invaded the present age, so that the two ages now overlap each other, and this overlapping lasts from His first coming to His second coming. This whole overlapping period is, in a sense, “the last hour” (1 John 2:18), which is prolonged only through the patience of God (2 Peter 3:9). It marks both the end of the old age and the beginning of the new age (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:11; Hebrews 9:26).

It is therefore possible for people who live historically in “this age” to belong spiritually to “that age.” These are they who by faith have seen and entered the heavenly Kingdom and enjoy already the life of the age to come. The day is coming when every knee shall bow in Jesus’ name, and every tongue confess that He is Lord (Philippians 2:10), but these people have anticipated that day by here and now acknowledging His Lordship.

When the Kingdom fully comes, God's will shall be done on earth even as it is in heaven, but those who do His will today belong to His Kingdom here and now. They anticipate spiritually the conditions which are to obtain universally when “the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea” (Habakkuk 2:14). That age will be introduced by the resurrection of the just (Luke 14:14). I which Christ's own resurrection was the first fruits (1 Corinthians 15:20, 23); but here and now believers in Christ may know the power of His resurrection (Philippians 3:10) and walk in newness of life (Romans 6:4), that endless life which He shares with His followers because He lives in them (John 14:19; Galatians 2:20).

Thus, in every Christian sphere to-day, be it the Christian individual or the Christian Church, the Christian home or the Christian business, those qualities ought to be seen which are to characterise the golden age for which all creation longs. And the existence of such

qualities in these spheres is a divine guarantee that justice and mercy, peace and truth shall yet reign universally and bring the joy of heaven to every corner of earth, when at last “the kingdom of the world is become the Kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ: and He shall reign for ever and ever” (Revelation 11:15).

F. F. Bruce
University of Leeds