

LIVING
in the
KINGDOM
of GOD

A Biblical Theology for the
Life of the Church

SIGURD GRINDHEIM


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Abbreviations

General and Bibliographic

4Q246	<i>Apocryphon of Daniel</i>	CSB	Christian Standard Bible
BCE	before the Common Era	NIV	New International Version
ca.	<i>circa</i> , about	NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
CE	Common Era	par(r).	and parallel(s)
cf.	<i>confer</i> , compare	REB	Revised English Bible
chap(s).	chapter(s)	v(v).	verse(s)

Old Testament

Gen.	Genesis	Song	Song of Songs
Exod.	Exodus	Isa.	Isaiah
Lev.	Leviticus	Jer.	Jeremiah
Num.	Numbers	Lam.	Lamentations
Deut.	Deuteronomy	Ezek.	Ezekiel
Josh.	Joshua	Dan.	Daniel
Judg.	Judges	Hosea	Hosea
Ruth	Ruth	Joel	Joel
1–2 Sam.	1–2 Samuel	Amos	Amos
1–2 Kings	1–2 Kings	Obad.	Obadiah
1–2 Chron.	1–2 Chronicles	Jon.	Jonah
Ezra	Ezra	Mic.	Micah
Neh.	Nehemiah	Nah.	Nahum
Esther	Esther	Hab.	Habakkuk
Job	Job	Zeph.	Zephaniah
Ps(s).	Psalms	Hag.	Haggai
Prov.	Proverbs	Zech.	Zechariah
Eccles.	Ecclesiastes	Mal.	Malachi

New Testament

Matt.	Matthew	1–2 Thess.	1–2 Thessalonians
Mark	Mark	1–2 Tim.	1–2 Timothy
Luke	Luke	Titus	Titus
John	John	Philem.	Philemon
Acts	Acts	Heb.	Hebrews
Rom.	Romans	James	James
1–2 Cor.	1–2 Corinthians	1–2 Pet.	1–2 Peter
Gal.	Galatians	1–3 John	1–3 John
Eph.	Ephesians	Jude	Jude
Phil.	Philippians	Rev.	Revelation
Col.	Colossians		

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The Dream of Utopia

The Kingly Rule of God in the Old Testament

The most important words in Jesus’s vocabulary are nowhere to be found in the Old Testament. “The kingdom of God” is not mentioned at all, and there are only two references to the “kingdom of the LORD” (1 Chron. 28:5; 2 Chron. 13:8). But these statistics are deceptive. Jesus’s language about the kingdom builds on the idea that God is king, a point that is made explicitly or implicitly on almost every page of the Old Testament.

The psalmist praises God as the perfect king. “The King is mighty, he loves justice—you have established equity; in Jacob you have done what is just and right” (Ps. 99:4). As a ruler, God is always fair; he ensures that his society is a just one. His people live in safety, knowing that their king is able to provide for them. “For the LORD is our judge, the LORD is our lawgiver, the LORD is our king; it is he who will save us” (Isa. 33:22).

This king eliminates the powers of evil. “But God is my King from long ago; he brings salvation on the earth. It was you who split open the seas by your power; you broke the heads of the monster in the waters. It was you who crushed the heads of Leviathan and gave it as food to the creatures of the desert” (Ps. 74:12–14). “The seas” and “Leviathan” probably refer to the spiritual enemy of God and his people, later referred to as the devil. (The book of Revelation draws on the image of Leviathan to portray the dragon, which represents Satan; see Rev. 12:3.)

Where God rules as king, there are no evil powers. I often dream of such a society, a society without evil, a society ruled by God. I imagine what the world would be like if everyone did good all the time, if every individual always did what God wants us to do, if everyone obeyed the golden rule: “Do to others what you would have them do to you” (Matt. 7:12).

First of all, many people would be out of work. Take locksmiths, for example. You would never again need to lock your door. No one would ever steal anything, and people would come to visit only when you really wanted to see them.

In a society like that, all insurance companies would be unnecessary. You simply would not need insurance. If you needed anything at all, your friends and neighbors would provide it for you, free of charge. Those who had to go to the doctor would not need health insurance because the doctor would always give them all the care they needed. If your house were to burn to the ground, your neighbors would rebuild it for you while you were away on vacation, without asking for any compensation.

For the same reason, there would be neither banks in this society nor any form of money. Money would be completely superfluous and therefore utterly worthless. When you wanted something, your fellow citizens would give it to you. If someone from the United States got a hankering for Ethiopian coffee, someone from Ethiopia would travel across the ocean and give it to them. They would not need to be asked, and they would not charge anything.

If you think that no one who lived in such a world would ever want to work, since they could have everything for free, you would be mistaken. People would work harder than ever, not out of a desire to acquire more wealth for themselves but in order to give everything away to those in need. This kind of society would provide a life of luxury for all people. Every individual in the world would have thousands of servants ready to do anything they could imagine.

But there is something else that excites me even more than this imaginary life of wealth and abundance. That is the thought of what kind of relationships you could have with other people. You would be able to trust everyone you met and to confide fully in them without any reservation. They would never do anything to hurt you. Nothing you said would ever be used against you. Your words and your actions would never bring shame on you. The whole concept of shame would not exist. You could share all your most intimate thoughts and feelings with everyone you met without having to fear. Every person you ever knew would show you unconditional acceptance. No one would judge you, despise you, belittle you, or secretly think they are better than you. Every person in your life would be your best friend.

There would be no conflicts with anyone. There would be no competitiveness, no jealousy, no envy. There would be no slander, no ridicule, no humiliation. There would be no falsehood. No one would ever deceive you by telling you something they didn't really mean. We would know a fellowship with other people at a level we can hardly imagine.

In a world like this, no one would ever be treated differently than others because of the color of their skin or because of their country of origin. No one would look at someone else with suspicion because their appearance was different. No one would be denied a job or a house or any other privileges because they came from the wrong country or the wrong side of town. People would extend the same level of kindness to perfect strangers as they would to their own family. They would trust foreigners as unreservedly as they would trust their own parents. They would show the same kind of generosity toward people from different cultures as they would toward their own children. If all people always did the will of God, the world would be a happy place. If God would rule as king and everyone would do as he says, our planet would be a paradise.

God Is King

The Bible insists that God is the king. He is the ruler of both heaven and earth. With the lofty words of Psalm 103, we are told, "The LORD has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all" (103:19). The Psalms return to this point again and again as they praise the Lord: "For the LORD Most High is awesome, the great King over all the earth" (47:2). "For God is the King of all the earth; sing to him a psalm of praise. God reigns over the nations; God is seated on his holy throne" (47:7-8).

These psalms are beautiful, but do they have any connection with the world in which we live? In David's time, this language was appropriate for use in worship, and it makes us feel better when we repeat the same language in church. But does it say anything meaningful about our world? Or are these words merely pious, wishful thinking? If we watch the news, we see little evidence that God reigns over the nations. The opposite seems to be the case. When we receive the latest updates from our extended family, it would not appear that God's dominion endures through all generations.

It may be comforting to take refuge in the words of the Bible when I am faced with the misery in this world, but are the words of Psalms true, in the sense that they correspond to anything I can experience around me? Or do they just help me dream of a better world, a world that is not real but that

nevertheless enables me to live my life without losing all hope? To modern Christians, it has become more and more challenging to see what the God of the Bible has to do with the life we live every day. From biblical times until a couple hundred years ago, things were very different. If you were sick, you prayed to God and turned to a Spirit-filled healer to help you. We may do the same today, but only as an afterthought, after we have gone to the doctor and exhausted all the resources afforded by modern medicine. In the past, if you were curious to learn about the origin of the earth, you would read about it in the Bible. We may do the same today, but only in consultation with biblical scholars who could explain how nothing in the Bible contradicts what we know from science. When Israel was at war in Old Testament times, the people would be successful only if God went with them. On occasion, God would send most of their soldiers home, thus showing them that the victory was his alone (Judg. 7:1–25). We may trust that God is with our nation at war today as well, but we can only be sure that he will give us victory if we have the most powerful military in the world.

In more and more areas of life, the Bible is not the first place to which we turn. We still maintain that God is important in our lives, but he has increasingly been relegated to a restricted sphere, the sphere of religion. Our faith has come to occupy a smaller and smaller area of our lives. When the Bible makes its grand claims about God, we experience a form of disconnect. We say and think we believe them, but they no longer determine the way we go about our daily lives. And they no longer seem to make sense as the way we understand the world in which we live.

If it is true that God's kingdom rules over all, how does it apply to the world I inhabit, when I go to work, when I go to school, when I read the news, when I go shopping, when I engage with social media, when I interact with my neighbors and my family, and when I am involved in my community and in the local government? It is my firm conviction that the lofty words of the Psalms speak directly into every aspect of our lives and that we cannot make sense of anything that is happening in this world unless we grasp what the Bible has to say about the kingly rule of God. To understand that, we need to pay attention to the full biblical account. What we see will surprise us.

The Bible—in both the Old and the New Testaments—tells a rich story of the kingdom of God. However, we often misunderstand the words of the Bible because the English translation “kingdom of God” is only partly correct. In English, the word “kingdom” refers to a territory that is ruled by a king, as in the phrase “Kingdom of Denmark,” “Kingdom of Thailand,” or “United Kingdom.” The Greek and Hebrew words that are used in the Bible may have this meaning also, but most frequently they mean something different. These

words refer not to a piece of land or to a territory but to the rule of the king. We might therefore translate them “kingly rule.” This is a dynamic concept. It has to do with the fact that someone rules, that someone issues commands and sees them carried out by their subjects, that someone makes laws and sees them obeyed by the people.

Although the term “kingdom of God” does not occur in the Old Testament, there are countless references to God acting and ruling as king. And when Jesus talks about the kingdom of God, he thinks of the kingly rule of God, as the Old Testament tells us about it. In many cases it would be better if we read “the kingly rule of God” instead of “the kingdom of God.”

Psalm 145 may serve as an illustration. In verse 13, the psalmist proclaims: “Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures through all generations.” The word “dominion” functions here as a synonym for “kingdom,” making clear that the psalmist thinks of God’s rule, not of God’s land. His rule is eternal.

Humans as Vice-Regents

What does God’s rule look like? We might expect that a God who is the ruler of heaven and earth would dispatch an army of angels to ensure conformity to his laws or that he would use his almighty arm to enforce his will and make sure that everyone does his bidding. Occasionally he does so, but the Bible teaches that he prefers to rule in a different way. God chooses to exercise his kingly rule through the people he has created. Humans represent the pinnacle of God’s work, and he wants them to be his coworkers. He created them to enjoy genuine fellowship with him. He created them to participate in his government of creation. That is the amazing value God has placed on humans.

In Psalm 8, the psalmist praises God for his creation:

When I consider your heavens,
 the work of your fingers,
 the moon and the stars,
 which you have set in place,
 what is mankind that you are mindful of them,
 human beings that you care for them?
 You have made them a little lower than the angels
 and crowned them with glory and honor.
 You made them rulers over the works of your hands;
 you put everything under their feet:

all flocks and herds,
 and the animals of the wild,
 the birds in the sky,
 and the fish in the sea,
 all that swim the paths of the seas. (vv. 3–8)

This psalm is a commentary on the creation account. It explains what it means that humans are created in the image of God, as we learn in Genesis 1:27: “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”

In antiquity, kings and potentates typically erected statues of themselves at strategic places in their kingdom so that all their subjects would be reminded of who their ruler was. To take a modern example, recall Saddam Hussein. He made sure to have a gigantic statue of himself right in the middle of Baghdad so that the people would always remember that he was their ruler. The image of Hussein was constantly hovering over the Iraqi people. As soon as Hussein was deposed, the first thing the Iraqis did was to start tearing down his statue. When his power was gone, his image was gone too; the image represented his power.

As God’s image, we are such representatives—not of an evil ruler but of the creator of heaven and earth, the only true God. To be a bearer of God’s image means to be God’s vice-regent; it means to govern on God’s behalf. That is why the mandate follows immediately after the declaration that we are created in the image of God. Genesis 1:28 tells us: “God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.’”

The Fallout

God’s plan was for his kingly rule to be executed by humans. He left his creation in the hands of the people he had created, and he entrusted to them the task of carrying out his dominion. It was a risky plan. It was a plan that shows us the magnitude of God’s investment in the people he had formed. He had no interest in making robots with no will of their own, robots who blindly did what he had programmed them to do. God wanted his people to be his coworkers, and he loved them so much that he was willing to risk everything on one grand gesture of love. He left his entire creation in their care.

The potential for disaster was great, and therefore so was the fall. Humans did not prove themselves to be worthy vice-regents; they turned and rebelled against the one they were intended to serve. They did not want God as their king.

God had placed Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. God gave them all the fruit of the trees in the garden; they never lacked anything. Only the tree that was in the middle of the garden was off-limits; they were not allowed to eat from it. This simple commandment would allow Adam and Eve to show that they would obey God and submit to his rule. But the serpent tempted them to doubt God's good purposes. He enticed them to think that God was depriving them of something good when he commanded them not to eat from the tree (Gen. 3:4–5). When Adam and Eve no longer trusted God's good designs, they had already turned away from him in their hearts. Eating the forbidden fruit was the inevitable consequence of their internal rebellion (3:6).

They had enjoyed life under God's rule and had seen his good gifts in abundant supply, but through their revolt, they forfeited these blessings. Because of their sin, they were banished from the garden. Humans have rebelled against the kingly rule of God, but their rebellion does not change the fact that God is king. He has never been deposed, and the rebellion of humans does not represent a threat against God and who he is. The psalmist paints a vivid picture:

Why do the nations conspire
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth rise up
and the rulers band together
against the LORD and against his anointed, saying,
“Let us break their chains
and throw off their shackles.”
The One enthroned in heaven laughs;
the Lord scoffs at them.
He rebukes them in his anger
and terrifies them in his wrath, saying,
“I have installed my king
on Zion, my holy mountain.” (Ps. 2:1–6)

God is still king, but the human rebellion causes dissonance in creation. His kingly rule is no longer respected by his subjects. The world has become like a territory that wants to assert its independence from the country to which it belongs. We might compare this world to the Somali region in Ethiopia. According to international law, the territory toward the east of Ethiopia, which is populated mainly by ethnic Somalis, belongs to the country of Ethiopia.

Whether this is a just law is a question for another day, but legally this territory is subject to the Ethiopian government and accountable to Ethiopian law. Yet the people of the Somali region do not always accept the fact that they belong to Ethiopia. They do not feel that they are a part of this country, and they tend to live according to their own customs and not according to whatever the government in Addis Ababa decides. Ethiopian money, for example, has no value in the Somali region. The authority of Ethiopia is not acknowledged, and nobody wants their currency. If there are local conflicts in this area, the Ethiopian court system is powerless to restore order. Nobody respects the verdicts passed by Ethiopian judges. Instead, the locals live by their own justice system. Conflicts are handled internally in the family and clan. The real power is that which is exercised by people with social authority, those recognized as leaders by the community. Legally, the Somali region is ruled by Ethiopia, but in practice it is often very different. In the same way, humans have disrespected God's authority and turned our world into God's Somali region. By right, he is the ruler, but his rule is routinely ignored.

God at War

God is not sitting idly by. He restores his kingly rule, and in order to do that, he goes to war against the powers that have revolted against him. The first time we see God reestablishing his kingly rule is when he delivers Israel from slavery in Egypt. Pharaoh stands as the archetype of earthly powers that buck God's rule and refuse to submit to his will. He mistreated the Israelites, who had come to Egypt as economic refugees, fleeing from the famine in Canaan. Initially, things went very well for them in Egypt: "The Israelites were exceedingly fruitful; they multiplied greatly, increased in numbers and became so numerous that the land was filled with them" (Exod. 1:7).

The Egyptians did not look kindly on the growth and success of their new neighbors. Like so many other demagogues after him, Pharaoh knew to take advantage of the people's fear and stoked their hostility toward the foreigners. "'Look,' he said to his people, 'the Israelites have become far too numerous for us. Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country'" (Exod. 1:9–10). With this pretext, he smeared the Israelites as a danger to society and began his economic oppression. The Israelites were forced into slave labor. When Moses confronted Pharaoh and asked for lenience, Pharaoh answered by tightening the screws. He told his slave drivers: "You are no longer to supply the people with straw for making

bricks; let them go and gather their own straw. But require them to make the same number of bricks as before; don't reduce the quota. They are lazy; that is why they are crying out, 'Let us go and sacrifice to our God.' Make the work harder for the people so that they keep working and pay no attention to lies" (Exod. 5:7–9).

Like oppressed people tend to do, the Israelites cried out to God (Exod. 2:23), seemingly to no avail. Even Moses lost patience; he held God responsible for Israel's misfortune and accused him of not caring: "Why, Lord, why have you brought trouble on this people? Is this why you sent me? Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has brought trouble on this people, and you have not rescued your people at all" (5:22–23).

God allowed Pharaoh's obstinacy to play out for a long time, but in the end God made an example of him. The ruler who thinks he will not have to answer to God has another thing coming. The story of Pharaoh is the story of the world's superpower at the time, and it is the story of its crushing defeat by the far superior power of God, the king of heaven and earth. God showed his power by splitting the sea and leading the Israelites dry-shod across the ocean floor, while the waters were standing as a wall on each side. When the Egyptians were trying to follow them, the waters rushed back and swallowed them all. When God says, "Let my people go," you ignore God at your peril.

God had emerged as the king, and the world was on notice. When the people were brought to safety, Moses wrote a song of praise to the Lord, and concluded: "The LORD reigns for ever and ever" (Exod. 15:18). The exodus had showed that God was not a lame-duck ruler. He would not accept opposition to his rule. God had showed himself as a mighty military king, a theme that is essential to the idea of God's kingship in both the Old and New Testaments.

The LORD is a warrior;
 the LORD is his name.
 Pharaoh's chariots and his army
 he has hurled into the sea.
 The best of Pharaoh's officers
 are drowned in the Red Sea.
 The deep waters have covered them;
 they sank to the depths like a stone.
 Your right hand, LORD,
 was majestic in power.
 Your right hand, LORD,
 shattered the enemy. (15:3–6)

God is king, and he will use his military might to restore his kingly rule.

The Good Society

When God had showed himself as king at the Red Sea, he once again decided to outsource his government to humans. God entered into a contract with the Israelites and announced: “Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod. 19:5–6). The translation of these verses is difficult, but there are good reasons to read them as saying that Israel was called to be priests and to rule as kings. To be a priest means to be someone who serves as the intermediary between God and humans. The people of Israel are especially chosen by God, and they have a unique relationship with him. God doesn’t deal directly with the other nations, but he deals directly with Israel. As his people, they have the role of priests, and they are given the task to rule as kings on his behalf.

God did not leave the government to the people’s own devices, however; he gave them a set of laws to ensure that their society was ruled in the way he wanted. Unlike the legal codes of other nations, the laws of Israel did not give unbridled authority to the privileged and the powerful. Even the king was subject to the rule of law, to prevent excessive use of his power (Deut. 17:14–20). The laws of Israel guaranteed equity among its citizens. Land could not be permanently transferred out of the family, precluding the concentration of wealth in a few hands (Lev. 25:23–28). There were provisions for the poor so that they should not need to go hungry (19:9–10). Food could not be sold for profit, and loans had to be interest free (25:36–37). Punishment for crimes should not be excessive (Exod. 21:18–22:15).

Those familiar with the story of the Bible know that the utopia outlined in the laws of Moses never materialized. The people failed at their responsibility. Israel rejected the laws of God as soon as he had given them. While Moses was still on the mountain, receiving the laws from God, the people violated the first of his commandments; they made a graven image of a calf and bowed down to worship it (Exod. 32:1–8). After Moses had interceded for them, God did not reject his people, but his continued presence among them served as a reminder that their relationship was not as intimate as it could have been. God’s dwelling was in the tabernacle’s holy of holies, but only the high priest could enter, only once a year, and only when he brought the right gifts.

The Epistle to the Hebrews explains: “But only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance. The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not

yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle was still functioning. . . . Those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins” (Heb. 9:7–8; 10:3). The institutions of Israel demonstrated the distance that still existed between the people and their God. The laws reminded them of what could have been: a perfect society ruled by God. But reality taught the people that they were far from this.

After they had entered the promised land, the failure of the people was magnified by the failure of their rulers. The kings in Israel did not accept the God-ordained limits to their power. They used their position to take advantage of those less privileged and to enrich themselves at their expense. Israel’s kings were supposed to be instruments of God’s rule, but they sought other counsel and followed the ways of their pagan neighbors.

By the sixth century BCE, Israel had definitively turned away from God and given their allegiance to idols and political alliances with ungodly nations. As they had rebelled against the kingship of God, they also lost the good land that he had given to them. In 586 BCE, Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians, and the people were led into exile.

The Messiah

God responded to Israel’s downfall by preparing them for the arrival of a new king, a just king who would rule with the mercy of God. The prophet Isaiah offers an impressive panegyric:

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
 from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.
 The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—
 the spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
 the spirit of counsel and of might,
 the spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD—
 and he will delight in the fear of the LORD.
 He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,
 or decide by what he hears with his ears;
 but with righteousness he will judge the needy,
 with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.
 He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;
 with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.
 Righteousness will be his belt
 and faithfulness the sash around his waist.
 The wolf will live with the lamb,
 the leopard will lie down with the goat,

the calf and the lion and the yearling together;
 and a little child will lead them.
 The cow will feed with the bear,
 their young will lie down together,
 and the lion will eat straw like the ox.
 The infant will play near the cobra's den,
 and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest.
 They will neither harm nor destroy
 on all my holy mountain,
 for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD
 as the waters cover the sea. (11:1–9)

Out of the ruin that is David's dynasty, a new day will dawn. The prophet uses the image of a tree that has been cut down so that only a stump is left. He associates the tree with Jesse, the father of David, the great king of Israel. Out of this seemingly fruitless tree, a new branch will sprout; a new glorious king will emerge. This king will be different from the worthless kings in Israel. He will not be partial to the rich and the privileged, but he will ensure that the poor and the needy get their rights. He will not be duped by appearances and smooth-talking lobbyists. His counsel will be the Spirit of the Lord. He will rule with wisdom.

This king will show mercy to the weak and unprivileged, and he will strike down all opposition against God's kingly rule. As God did with Pharaoh, so will he punish the wicked, those who rebel against God. When he appears, the kingly rule of God will be established once again.

Under such a rule, it will be wonderful to live on earth. What the prophet envisions is so magnificent that we see the contours of an entirely new world order. Enemies will be reconciled, and peace will rule, not only between humans but also throughout all creation. Even "the wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them." When God's rule is reestablished, it will be a new world. It will be a world without evil of any kind. Humans and animals will be kind to each other. People will be able to live without fear because their reasons for fear have ceased to exist. We will no longer see news reports about wars, conflicts, natural disasters, floods, hurricanes, climate change, and destruction of the environment.

Isaiah's prophecy shows that God will intervene decisively in this world and change the very conditions under which this universe exists. The reestablishment of his rule entails not only a better way for humans to live in peace and harmony with each other but also a realignment of the forces of nature. God's benevolent rule will be executed throughout creation.

New Creation

The prophet Isaiah gives us his most detailed picture of this great new future in chapters 24–27. Isaiah looks forward to a day when God once again will show his awesome might:

In that day the LORD will punish
the powers in the heavens above
and the kings on the earth below.
They will be herded together
like prisoners bound in a dungeon;
they will be shut up in prison
and be punished after many days.
The moon will be dismayed,
the sun ashamed;
for the LORD Almighty will reign
on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem,
and before its elders—with great glory. (24:21–23)

As was the case when God intervened to deliver the Israelites from Egypt, so does this ultimate and final reestablishment of his rule begin with the defeat of his enemies. We now understand, however, that there are not only humans among God’s adversaries. They also include “the powers in the heavens above.” There are heavenly entities, angels and spiritual beings that have risen up against God and caused the misery that we experience in this world every day. These spiritual powers present themselves in a number of different forms: the power of addiction, the degenerative influence of peer pressure, the violent proclivities of mob mentality, the debilitating inefficiency of bureaucratic institutions, the corrupting influence of power held by political entities, the curse that is passed on from one generation to the next in dysfunctional families. These powers, however impressive they may seem now, will meet their doom. Even the moon will be dismayed and the sun ashamed, proclaims the prophet. These are metaphorical expressions, designating the most powerful entities in our universe. The day will come when they will fade in comparison with the one and only power, the power of God, who will force every opposing might into complete submission. On that day, the Lord Almighty will rule as king on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem. God’s kingly rule will be a reality with great glory.

That day is not only a day of punishment. More than anything else, it is a day of joy and celebration. It is the day when the Lord will throw a great party:

On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare
 a feast of rich food for all peoples,
 a banquet of aged wine—
 the best of meats and the finest of wines.
 On this mountain he will destroy
 the shroud that enfolds all peoples,
 the sheet that covers all nations;
 he will swallow up death forever.
 The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears
 from all faces;
 he will remove his people's disgrace
 from all the earth.
 The LORD has spoken.

In that day they will say,
 “Surely this is our God;
 we trusted in him, and he saved us.
 This is the LORD, we trusted in him;
 let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.” (Isa. 25:6–9)

The prophet describes something he has seen in order to explain something he has not seen. He has not experienced the joy of God's salvation, but he knows it will be the most joyous event in history, so he paints a picture of the most lavish party known to man, a feast with the most exquisite food and drink. But we soon understand that this event is of a different kind than any party we have ever witnessed before. It is a party to celebrate that God is doing something spectacular, something previously unheard of. He will swallow up death forever. That is what will happen when he deals with the powers that stand against him, not only the human powers but also the spiritual powers. All evil forces that bring pain and suffering and misery will be destroyed. On that day, there will be no more sorrow because all reasons for sorrow will no longer exist. No one will ever lose their loved ones. No one will have their life ruined by poor health. No one will experience heart-wrenching relationship breakups. The prophet looks forward to a day of unbridled happiness, a happiness that will not give way to disappointment, as happens with all our happiness in this world. This is an eternal joy, the joy that our Lord will bring to those who trust in him.

Isaiah was a man of great vision. He lived in an era when injustice and ungodliness were rampant, and he addressed the situation when the Babylonians waged war against Israel. Their military machinery would conquer Jerusalem, take the people captive, and raze the city. Even the holy temple of God would be bulldozed. In the midst of this cruel reality, Isaiah took comfort

in looking forward to a different time, a time when God would rule as king and his kingdom would appear on earth.

God's Kingdom and the Kingdoms of the World

It is easy to identify with the prophet Isaiah. We live in a time when God's good will for humanity is being rejected. In countries such as Rwanda, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar, people groups have sought to eradicate each other because of ethnic differences. In Syria, millions of people have been forced to flee from their homes in fear of violence. In Qatar, thousands of migrant workers have paid with their lives for labor conditions that fail to meet the most basic safety requirements. In places like North Korea, Iraq, Eritrea, and Afghanistan, Christians are killed because of their faith. Warfare in Chechnya, Iraq, South Sudan, and other places has taken the lives of thousands, and most of them have been civilians.

In many other ways, people suffer injustice all over the world. The so-called untouchables in India have been excluded from normal participation in society. In Europe and North America, people with foreign-sounding names and people of color experience discrimination both in the job market and in the housing market, as well as in the way they are treated by law enforcement. Women are victims of unprovoked violence and unwanted sexual advances. Children grow up in fear of violence from the people who should be their most zealous protectors, their own parents. Unborn children have little or no legal protection.

What has become of the dream of God's kingdom? Is it just a dream and nothing more? Is God really "the great King over all the earth"? Does his kingdom rule over all, as the psalms would have it (Pss. 47; 103:19)? If so, why are evil people in control everywhere? Why do those who step on other people rise to the top, while those who care for other people are taken advantage of? Why do bullies succeed and become millionaires, while people who devote their lives to showing compassion need to rely on public aid to get by? Why do ruthless and megalomaniacal people become heads of state? If God is king, what was he thinking when he appointed his cabinet?

The problem was just as painful for the people of Israel, the people God had chosen. They were supposed to experience the benefits of God's benevolent rule. Instead, they experienced being oppressed by Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman rulers. Among the Old Testament writings, the prophet Daniel addressed this paradox most directly.

Daniel had a dream of four great beasts. Biblical scholars agree that these four beasts symbolize four of the major empires in world history, beginning

with the Babylonians of Daniel's own time and continuing with the Medes, the Persians, and the Greeks. All the empires are represented by predatory animals. "The first was like a lion, and it had the wings of an eagle" (Dan. 7:4). The second "looked like a bear" (7:5) and the third "like a leopard" (7:6). The fourth was so terrifying that it didn't resemble anything Daniel had ever seen before. "It had large iron teeth; it crushed and devoured its victims and trampled underfoot whatever was left. It was different from all the former beasts, and it had ten horns" (7:7). These empires were cruel and merciless, oppressing other nations and devouring their resources. They were so drunk on their own power that they did not think they were accountable to anyone but themselves. The law was whatever they said it should be. They did not even respect the authority of God or consider that they had to answer to him for the way they had exercised their rule.

The fourth beast had ten horns on its head, probably symbolizing the ten Greek kingdoms that emerged after the conquests of Alexander the Great. One of these kings would subdue three others, and would "speak against the Most High and oppress his holy people and try to change the set times and the laws" (Dan. 7:25). The king in question is Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who went to unprecedented extremes in his cruelty toward Israel. His army entered Jerusalem in the year 167 BCE, destroyed the city walls, and plundered the temple. In his attempt to eradicate the Jewish religion and turn Jerusalem into a Greek city, he dedicated the Jerusalem temple to the Greek god Zeus. With a flair for the provocatively dramatic, he sacrificed a pig—the most unclean of all the animals—on the temple altar. This is what Daniel refers to as "the abomination that causes desolation" (11:31). Antiochus made observance of the Jewish law illegal, and circumcision became a capital offense.

In the Bible, Antiochus stands as the archetype of human rulers who think they are above God's law and who try to obliterate his people. Jesus uses the language from Daniel's prophecy when he describes the Romans' destruction of the temple as "the abomination that causes desolation" (Mark 13:14). John also alludes to Daniel when he refers to the end-time tribulation as lasting three and a half years (Rev. 11:2, 3; 12:6, 14), which was roughly the duration of Antiochus's rule of terror over Jerusalem.

Throughout history, there have been many rulers like Antiochus, tyrants who are better described as beasts than as humans, dictators who respect no one or nothing except their own ego, not even God. In the twentieth century, Adolf Hitler initiated the most organized attempt at exterminating the Jewish people. In our own time, more Christians are being martyred than at any other time in history. In North Korea, an estimated 50,000 to 70,000 Christians are being tortured in labor camps. The country's supreme leader,

Kim Jong-un, makes his people honor him in a way that looks more like worship than anything else. Saudi Arabia's government, tacitly supported by the United States, violently oppresses the country's Shiite minority. In several cities in the United States, police have systematically ignored the rights of African Americans, have incarcerated people without due process, and in some cases have even been able to get away with murder.

As these beastly forces appear to be able to operate with impunity, the people of God wonder what has become of the kingly rule of God. Will he forever remain passive while these ungodly rulers enrich themselves and bring destruction on the weak and defenseless? The vision of Daniel shows that the time of the beasts is running out. God explained the vision of the fourth beast to Daniel and told him that "the holy people will be delivered into his hands for a time, times and half a time" (Dan. 7:25). The beast was allowed to exercise its power and even to torment the people of God. But God was still in control, even of the terrible fourth beast, even of the rulers who had no respect for God and made a parody of justice. They only had the time that had been allotted to them, and their time was about to be up.

Besides the four beasts, Daniel's dream had shown him a different character, a character that appeared before him as a human: "There before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven" (Dan. 7:13). This character also corresponds to a kingdom, a kingdom of a completely different nature. It is therefore not represented by any kind of animal at all. In contrast to the predatory oppression and destruction of the world's many empires, this kingdom is represented by a human. This is a kingdom in which compassion and justice will rule.

Whereas the beasts only had a very limited rule, the son of man "was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed" (Dan. 7:14). The good news announced by the prophet Daniel is that the evil empires had been given a limited time; they would be replaced by a good kingdom, an eternal kingdom, a kingdom that would have no end. The empires of this world are transitory; the kingdom of the son of man will last forever. God promised Daniel, "Then the sovereignty, power and greatness of all the kingdoms under heaven will be handed over to the holy people of the Most High. His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all rulers will worship and obey him" (7:27).

All the oppressive kingdoms of the world would come to an end, but what or who would appear in their place? The prophecy proclaimed that their sovereignty, power, and greatness "will be handed over to the holy people of the

Most High,” so we may conclude that God would bring his plan to completion. He would establish his rule, and he would exercise his rule through humans, through the people he had chosen, his holy people. But there is more. In the next sentence, the prophet refers to “his kingdom.” The kingdom in question must be the kingdom he just announced, which belonged to the people of God. But if he was talking about the people’s kingdom, why didn’t he say “their kingdom”? Why is this kingdom said to be “his”? Who is the person hiding behind this personal pronoun? The person can be none other than the human that Daniel had seen in his vision, the “one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven” (Dan. 7:13).

In this subtle way, Daniel teaches that the kingdom is simultaneously the kingdom of God’s people and the kingdom of the one like a son of man. In other words, the one like a son of man and the people of God are closely identified, so closely that many scholars have concluded that the one like a son of man is simply a symbol for the people of God. In light of the New Testament, however, we understand that this interpretation is not entirely correct. The son of man is none other than Jesus Christ, who talked about himself as the Son of Man and announced to the high priest that he “will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Mark 14:62). What Daniel’s prophecy shows, therefore, is that the people of the kingdom are closely united with the head of the kingdom. This is not a hierarchical kingdom where the king forces his will on reluctant subjects. This is not an oppressive kingdom that milks the resources from the common people and channels them to the top. This is a kingdom in which the authority belongs to the people. This is a kingdom that may equally well be said to belong to the people as to their ruler.

The king and the people appear to be indistinguishable, not because they are one and the same but because the people are so closely united with the king. The king is one of the people and identifies completely with them. The people define their own identity by their loyalty to their king. If you ask them who they are, they will answer, “We are the people who belong to the king.” They identify with their king much in the same way sports fans identify with their team. Their self-respect, their feeling of worth, and their emotions are determined by the performance of their team. When their side wins, they are proud and happy because they have their identity tied to the team. They refer to the players as “we” and claim the team’s victories as their own. The people of God’s kingdom have their identity tied to their king, and they claim his victory as their own victory. But unlike the average sports fan, this shared identity is a two-way street. Most sports fans will never experience their heroes even knowing who they are. With God’s kingdom, it is different. The king

is one with the people, just as the people are one with him. He knows their names, and they mean just as much (or more) to him as he means to them. He is a king who identifies with his people.

A New Relationship

While Daniel looks forward to the final victory of God, one of the richest pictures of this ultimate triumph is found in the prophet Zechariah. In his fourteenth chapter, the prophet proclaims that “a day of the LORD is coming” (v. 1). “Then the LORD will go out and fight against those nations, as he fights on a day of battle” (v. 3). He will defeat all the nations, and the world as we know it will come to an end. It will be the day when he brings his salvation to earth. As Zechariah states, “On that day living water will flow out from Jerusalem, half of it east to the Dead Sea and half of it west to the Mediterranean Sea, in summer and in winter” (v. 8). God’s good gift of life will flow freely, without interruption. On this day, when God’s enemies are defeated and the gifts of salvation are freely available, “the LORD will be king over the whole earth. On that day there will be one LORD, and his name the only name” (v. 9). There has never been more than one Lord; there has never been any other God than the God who reveals himself in the Bible. However, humans have given their allegiance to other lords; they have obeyed other masters. As long as God’s enemies have been at large, God’s authority has not been acknowledged by all. But that will change when the Lord comes to be king over the whole earth.

On the day when God comes as king, he will once again elevate his people to be coregents with him. The rupture that existed between God and his people will be mended. The best way Zechariah knows to describe it is to use the language of the temple, the dwelling of God: “On that day HOLY TO THE LORD will be inscribed on the bells of the horses, and the cooking pots in the LORD’s house will be like the sacred bowls in front of the altar. Every pot in Jerusalem and Judah will be holy to the LORD Almighty, and all who come to sacrifice will take some of the pots and cook in them” (14:20–21).

The institution of the temple had taught the people that God was a holy God. He was highly exalted above humans, but he was present among the people of Israel. He was present in the inner chamber of the temple, the holy of holies. God’s presence held the potential for great blessings, but it was also fraught with danger. Encountering sinful humans, God was a consuming fire. No one could approach him. God’s dwelling was among the Israelites, but no one except the high priest could enter it, and he had to prepare himself

carefully. He had to sanctify himself so that he could be acceptable in the presence of God. He wore holy vestments with a special turban. It had a plate of pure gold attached to it. This plate bore an engraving: “HOLY TO THE LORD” (Exod. 28:36). No one but the high priest could ever bear this plate. No one but the high priest could ever be endowed with this kind of holiness, the holiness required in the presence of God.

In Zechariah’s vision, this level of holiness is everywhere. It is not restricted to the high priest for a single appearance once a year. Even horses—animals not usually associated with cleanness and holiness—will be as holy as the high priest. Every pot in Jerusalem will be as holy as the pots in the temple. In other words, the holiness of the temple will extend throughout Israel. The holiness that is necessary for God to dwell in the temple will not be limited to the holy of holies. It will be everywhere, so that God’s presence may be everywhere. Not only the high priest may be in God’s presence once a year, but the whole people may be close to him every day. As in the garden of Eden, God and his people may be together without awkwardness. The distance manifested by the temple institution is overcome. People may see God and talk to him as they would talk to their best friend or a close family member. Their relationship has been restored. The kingly rule of God has brought harmony back into creation. People can approach God without shame or fear. They no longer feel unworthy of being in his presence. God’s holiness fills the land. His people are with him. The prophets had a stunningly beautiful vision of God’s kingly rule. What would it take for such a vision to become reality?

Further Reading

The study on the kingdom of God in the Old Testament on which all others depend is found in **Gustaf Dalman**, *The Words of Jesus: Considered in the Light of Post-Biblical Jewish Writings and the Aramaic Language*, trans. D. M. Kay (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1902). Dalman shows that the meaning of the term is “the kingly rule of God.”

In *The Kingdom of God: The Biblical Concept and Its Meaning for the Church* (New York: Abingdon, 1953), **John Bright** famously argues that the idea of God’s kingdom is the center of the Old Testament.

Bright’s thesis has not commanded much consent among other interpreters, but **Stephen Dempster**, in *Dominion and Dynasty: A Biblical Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 15 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), maintains that kingly rule and kingdom constitute the unifying theme of the Old Testament. The biblical story proceeds from creation to exile and restoration.

Based on the connections between Genesis 1–3 and Revelation 20–22, **T. Desmond Alexander** argues in *From Eden to the New Jerusalem: An Introduction to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009) that the biblical story line is framed by accounts of God’s presence in the world and that this concept ties the whole Bible together. Much like **G. K. Beale** in *The Temple and the Church’s Mission*, *New Studies in Biblical Theology* 17 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), Alexander sees the garden of Eden as a temple that is renewed in the new creation.

In *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 29–116, **G. K. Beale** maintains that the story of the Old Testament moves toward God’s establishment of his “new-creational kingdom.”

An overview of the Old Testament teaching on God’s kingship may be found in **Sigurd Grindheim**, *God’s Equal: What Can We Know about Jesus’ Self-Understanding?*, *Library of New Testament Studies* 446 (London: T&T Clark, 2011), as well as in **John P. Meier**, *Mentor, Message, and Miracles*, vol. 2 of *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, *Anchor Bible Reference Library* (New York: Doubleday, 1994).

Important studies of the messianic idea in the Old Testament include **Sigmund Mowinckel**, *He That Cometh*, trans. G. W. Anderson (New York: Abingdon, 1954); **James H. Charlesworth**, ed., *The Messiah: Developments in Earliest Judaism and Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992); **Antti Laato**, *Josiah and David Redivivus: The Historical Josiah and the Messianic Expectations of Exilic and Postexilic Times*, *Coniectanea Biblica: Old Testament Series* (Stockholm: Almqvist, 1992); **Walter C. Kaiser Jr.**, *The Messiah in the Old Testament*, *Studies in Old Testament Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995); **Joseph A. Fitzmyer**, *The One Who Is to Come* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007). A brief account is found in the introductory chapter of **Sigurd Grindheim**, *Christology in the Synoptic Gospels: God or God’s Servant?* (London: T&T Clark, 2012).