

What does the “Kingdom of God” mean in the Old Testament? A Series on the Mysterious Nature of God’s Kingdom: Part 2

The phrase “kingdom of God” is not found in the Old Testament, and the earliest example of the title king being used of God is in the 8th century B.C., “... For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of host” (Isa 6:5).

From its beginnings as a tribal confederacy, the nation of Israel did not seem to have the concept of God as king, and while the nation of Israel placed itself under the rule of God, they preferred a human being as king (Judg 8:22-23; 1 Sam 8:1-9).

It is not until the prophet Nathan pronounces the Davidic Covenant (2 Sam 7:1-17) that the idea of God as King is more fully embraced by the nation. This is evidenced by Psalms and later prophets such as Jeremiah (46:18; 48:15; 51:57).

In contrast to the Egyptian concept of king who is divine in nature, the king of Judah is the adopted son of God. And the right of David’s hereditary successors to the kingdom of Judah is never called into question.

Yet the basis for the idea that the kingdom of God is the consequence of God’s sovereign rule, unlimited jurisdiction and realm can be seen at the very beginning in Genesis. God creates man in His own divine image and gives him command over all creatures (Gen 1:26-30).

Set within Creation, Adam initiates his rule by naming everything created on earth (Gen 2:18-19). This is significant as ancient Near East cultures understood the erection of the king’s statue proclaimed his rule and dominion over that geographic area.

Exemplified by Creation, God’s kingdom is timeless and universal, and His sovereignty is absolute and unlimited in scope. In this context and the creation of man is the understanding that God desires His rule to be acknowledged in a bond of love, loyalty, spirit and trust (Gen 3:8-11).

However, with his fall, Satan initiated an attempt to usurp and challenge the kingdom of God (Matt 4:8-9; Luke 4:4-5). As a consequence of persuading Adam and Eve to join him in rebelling against God, fellowship with God was broken, and sin separated man from God (Rom 5:12).

Despite the Fall, God had a plan to restore sin tainted creation back into the blessings of His kingdom. So while the nation of Israel did not perceive a kingdom of God, God certainly had one in mind, and the mechanism He chose was the Divine Covenants. The Divine Covenants served three purposes:

Redemption: redeeming the lost demonstrates His infinite grace and sacrificial love.

Kingdom rule: reclaiming His kingdom reasserts His sovereign authority and demonstrates that His Kingly authority cannot be challenged.

Judgment: executing judgment to purge earth of the effects of sin demonstrates that sin and rebellion cannot be observed with indifference.

In examining the Divine Covenants, the Old Testament reveals much about the kingdom of God:

Edenic Covenant (Gen 1:20-30; 2:15-25) introduces life, fellowship, and food for man. Blessing Adam and Eve to procreate increases the citizenry of the kingdom of God.

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Adamic Covenant (Gen 3:8-24) introduces the notion of a moral standard in the kingdom of God.

Noahic Covenant (Gen 9:1-17) provides: 1) blessings with food and procreation, 2) a promise not to destroy life by catastrophic flooding and 3) an emphasis on the sanctity of the image of God because of its linkage to capital punishment. God the King is to be revered.

Abrahamic Covenant (Gen 12:1-3, 7; 13:14-17; 15:1-21; 17:1-21; 22:15-18) introduces the term “nation” and implies a political entity defined by culture, ethnicity and / or geography. This unconditional covenant reveals that through only one nation other nations and people are blessed.

Mosaic Covenant (Ex 19-24; Lev 17-26, Deut 1-28; Josh 24) provides an explicit theocracy; through the Mosaic Covenant, God governs human beings, and human beings serve God and His covenant. While not political in nature, the covenant served a priestly function; moral and social laws defined sin and just punishment, and worship laws defined how human beings could maintain a right relationship with God. Suzerainty Treaties, similar with the Mosaic Covenant, were made between kings and their vassals. It defined who were God’s people and who could enter the Promised Land.

Land Covenant (Deut 29:1-29; 30:1-10), unconditional and eternal, establishes that the Promised Land would be one of peace, prosperity and devoid of enemies. The Land would later become God’s chosen center of His divine kingship (1 Kings 11:36; 14:21; Ps 132).

Davidic Covenant (2 Sam 7:8-17; 1 Chron 17:8-15) established a king who sought to bring God’s people (and other nations) under God’s rule as defined by the Mosaic Covenant; the king was the mediator of the covenant and the means of extending God’s kingdom. Unconditional and eternal, the Davidic Covenant expands on the Seed aspect of the Abrahamic Covenant. Abraham was promised that the Messiah will be a descendant of his (Gen 12:2-3); Jacob passed on his inheritance with the indication that Judah would be the receiver of the Seed (Gen 49:8-10), and David was promised that the Seed will come from the House of David.

New Covenant (Jer 31:31-34; 32:40; Isa 59:21; 61:8-9; Ezek 34:25-31; 37:26-28; Zech 13:7-9), made in response to the Mosaic Covenant that was broken, elaborated on the universal blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant. Despite Israel’s efforts of obedience or lack of, the unconditional New Covenant provided a means for salvation and Hebrews refers to Jesus as the “mediator of a new covenant (Heb 9:15, 22). In fulfilling the atonement function of the Mosaic Covenant, it becomes the means of determining who God’s people are and who enters the Promised Land.

Satan’s competing kingdom share attitudes not unlike those found in Genesis 11:1-9 where there is complete confidence and naïve optimism about human achievement and effort. In contrast, Divine Covenants establish a basis for God’s kingdom by introducing His authority, His realm and His subjects. With careful consideration, the Old Testament does indeed reveal a lot about the kingdom of God.

References:

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