

What Does the Old Testament Teach about the Kingdom of God?

By Michael M. Kerns

Introduction

The Old Testament presents three aspects of the kingdom of God: Universal Kingdom, Mediatorial Kingdom, and Messianic Kingdom. “Dominion” or “control” marks out each kingdom, and each kingdom reveals the outworking of God’s relationship with specific men so that He receives the glory. God rules the Universal Kingdom directly, and it endures forever. It rules over all kingdoms. God rules the Mediatorial Kingdom indirectly through men, and it is temporary. God rules the Messianic Kingdom directly through the Messiah, and it lasts for 1000 years (Revelation 20:4). [The Old Testament describes it, and the New Testament reveals the length of Messiah’s rule.] The study of the kingdom contributes to understanding the work of God in the world throughout history and the destination of history as God determines it for His glory.

The Word “Kingdom” as Dominion Over Others

The Hebrew word for “kingdom” (*mamlakam*) appears 2,602 times in the Old Testament, with almost half of those in reference to Israel. It means “dominion” or “reign.” [Strong’s 4467] “*Yours is the dominion, LORD, and You exalt Yourself as head over all*” (1 Chronicles 29:11). “Essential to the meaning of the word *kingdom* is the actual exercise of authority in a realm over which one has the sovereign right to rule.” [J. Dwight Pentecost, “Thy Kingdom Come,” Kregel 1995, p. 14] The Hebrew word for “king” (*melek*) appears 162 times in the Old Testament, with almost half of those in reference to the kings of Israel. [Strong’s 4428] The mysterious Melchizedek, King of Salem, marks out an anomaly because God gave him authority as His representative on earth, although he did not rule over Israel. “*And Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he was priest of God Most High*” (Genesis 14:18).

Universal Kingdom: Direct Dominion Over Everything In the Universe, Including Every Living Being

“*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth*” (Genesis 1:1). Moses began his first book dogmatically. While the book speaks about the beginnings of everything and everyone in the universe, Moses ensured that the reader knows that the Creator God began all the beginnings. “There is nothing belonging to the composition of the universe, either in material or form, which had an existence out of God prior to this divine act in the beginning.” [Franz Delitzsch, “Commentary on Old Testament,” “Genesis,” E-Sword edition, p. 21] This Universal or Heavenly Kingdom endures forever because the Lord God Almighty lives forever and the universe—seen and unseen—comprises His realm. He has dominion over all because He called everything into being. “*Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, And Your dominion endures throughout all generations...*” (Psalm 145:13).

God’s Universal Kingdom permits choices. Angels, like Lucifer, may rebel. “*How you have fallen from heaven, you star of the morning, son of the dawn! You have been cut down to the earth, you who defeated the nations!*” (Isaiah 14:12). Men may rule who do not know Him, such as Cyrus or Nebuchadnezzar, but His kingdom rules over all. “*The LORD has established His throne in the heavens, and His kingdom rules over all*” (Psalm 103:19). Although God permitted men to govern others, this paper will not consider the kingdoms of man.

Mediatorial Kingdom: Dominion Through Men

A mediator acts as a “go-between that assists with communication and negotiation between two or more different parties.” [compellingtruth.org] Angels act as mediators. The Hebrew word for “angel” *malak* (מַלְאָךְ) comes “from an unused root meaning to dispatch as a deputy; a messenger; specifically, of God, i.e., an angel (also a prophet, priest or teacher)—ambassador, angel, king, messenger.” [Strong’s 4397] One Hebrew word can take on the meaning of “mediator.” The Hebrew word *loots* (לֹוֹט) has a variety of meanings: “ambassador, interpreter, to make mouths.” [Strong’s 3887] One verse has both of these Hebrew words. “*If there is an angel as mediator for him, one out of a thousand, to remind a man what is right for him*” (Job 33:23). [ESV] KJV uses “interpreter” for *loots*. NASB translates the word as “interceding.”

Dispensationalists like McClain popularized the term “mediatorial” for this kingdom. [Alva J. McClain, “The Greatness of the Kingdom,” Winona Lake, 1968, p. 41] Ryrie employed the term “theocratic.” [Charles C. Ryrie, “Dispensationalism,” Moody, 1995, p. 155] Fruchtenbaum used either “theocratic” or “mediatorial” for his label. [Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, “The Role of Israel in Dispensational Theology” in “Dispensationalism Tomorrow and Beyond,” Tyndale, 2008, p. 137] The mediator represents God to men as a ‘go-between’ who interprets God’s program to other men. “God’s dominion was presented by a ‘representative.’” [Ross, “Genesis,” “The Bible Knowledge Commentary,” Victor 1983, p. 129] God ruled indirectly through a man to represent God to other men and to deliver God’s message to them. “The concept of dominion is inherent in the image or likeness given to man. God is sovereign, and man was to exercise delegated authority and thus reflect the authority that belongs to the Creator.” [See above. J. Dwight Pentecost, “Thy Kingdom Come,” p. 32]

Adam Received and Lost His Role as the First Mediator

The first man Adam received the mediatorial role directly from God the Creator because God selected him as His authoritative representative on earth. “*God blessed them; and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth’*” (Genesis 1:28).

Adam began to exercise the authority entrusted to him by God, for he not only occupied the garden but worked it and took care of it (Genesis 2:15). Further, he exercised dominion over animal creation by giving names to all cattle, to all fowl of the air, to every beast of the field (v. 20). The naming of Eve again was an exercise of the dominion entrusted to Adam. [See above Dwight Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come*, p. 34]

His role as a mediator would continue if he obeyed. Adam chose to disobey the word of God. Adam had the divine right to rule and a regime over which to rule, but he failed to function as that mediator on earth for God. Adam lost his authority to rule and his realm over which to rule. “*Therefore, the LORD God sent him out of the Garden of Eden, to cultivate the ground from which he was taken*” (Genesis 3:23).

The Patriarchs Receive the Promise of a Mediator and Form the Foundation of the Kingdom of God on Earth

God turned from the world as a whole and selected one family that will eventually birth the Kingdom of God on earth and the Mediator for it, as God had promised to Noah (Genesis 9:25-27). Abraham received the unconditional covenant that contained three promises: “*And I will make of thee a great nation, and bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing” (Genesis 12:2). Through this covenant, Abraham received national, personal, and universal guarantees. While God guaranteed the promises of this covenant, Abraham had to leave his homeland, his kindred, and his father’s house and journey to Canaan, another place of idolatry. “The one condition having been met; no further conditions are laid upon Abraham; the*

covenant having been solemnly established is now dependent upon divine veracity for its fulfillment.” [J. F. Walvoord, “The Abrahamic Covenant and Premillennialism.” “Bibliotheca Sacra,” p. 109, 37]

Abraham settled in Bethel and established a place to worship the true God. God governs all for His glory but permits humans to govern, which also demonstrates His glory. God re-affirmed this covenant at the birth of Isaac. *“I will bless her [Sarah]. Furthermore, I will give you a son from her. I will bless her, so that nations, kings, and people will come from her”* (Genesis 17:16).

God restated the Abrahamic Covenant with all of its promises to Isaac when the Lord appeared to Isaac at Beersheba. *“... ‘I am the God of your father Abraham,’ he told him. ‘Don’t be afraid, because I’m with you. I’m going to bless you and multiply your descendants on account of my servant Abraham’”* (Genesis 26:24). Isaac set up an altar and worshipped the Lord. *“So, he built an altar there and called upon the name of the LORD, and pitched his tent there”* (Genesis 26:25). God did the same for Jacob, the son of Isaac, as Jacob returned from Laban and settled in Canaan. *“Your descendants are going to become like the dust of the earth and spread out to the west, east, north, and south. All the families of the earth will be blessed through you and your descendants”* (Genesis 28:14). Jacob also worshipped and set up an altar in Bethel.

The patriarchs received the covenant and the prophets received the messages of God. Neither patriarchs nor prophets held the positions that Adam or Moses or Joshua or David or Solomon held as mediators.

Moses, Joshua, and Samuel Prepare Israel In Its Role as Kingdom of God on Earth

Moses as mediator delivered the nation from captivity. Moses did not rule as a king, but he had the authority of the Almighty King. *“He [Aaron] is to speak to the people for you as your spokesman and you are to act in the role of God for him”* (Exodus 4:16). Moses also constituted these now-liberated people as a legitimate nation when he imposed only on Israel the Law of God as His kingdom on earth. The sovereign Lord demanded in this Mosaic Covenant that *“You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy”* (Leviticus 19:2). The Abrahamic Covenant promised blessings to the family of Abraham, and now God would give the way to do it. No other nation or people had or would have a covenantal relationship like the Mosaic Covenant, whereby God would govern His people. *“The covenant did not relate to eternal life and was not a basis for grace. Instead, compliance meant that God would bless Israel, much as a father would bless a child who is obedient.”* [John Walvoord, “The New Covenant,” “Integrity of Heart, Skillfulness of Hands,” Baker, 1994, p. 192]

Joshua as mediator conquered Canaan in fulfillment of the Land Covenant, an expansion of the Abrahamic Covenant as given by Moses (Deuteronomy 30:1-10; Numbers 33:53). Joshua, like Moses, reminded the nation that obedience to the Law would keep Israel as God’s holy nation. Disobedience would bring judgment.

Be strong and courageous, for you shall give this people possession of the land which I swore to their fathers to give them. Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may have good success wherever you go (Joshua 1:6, 7).

As mediator and last judge, Samuel would anoint a king for Israel as the Kingdom of God on earth. The Law (Deuteronomy 17) provided for a king. *“The earthly kingdom in Israel was not opposed to the theocracy, i.e., to the rule of Jehovah as king over the people of His possession, provided no one was made king but the person whom Jehovah should choose.”* [Carl F. Keil,

“Commentary on Old Testament,” “1 Samuel,” E-Sword edition] Although Israel had subdued the Philistines, they immediately wanted to choose a king, not just because of the immorality of the sons of Samuel but because they wanted to be *“like all the nations”* (1 Samuel 8:5).

Israel Gained a King But Failed to Become a Mediatorial Kingdom of God on Earth

Samuel opposed the appointment of a king, but the elders desired a new mediator. In spite of his objections, the dominion of Samuel would pass to a king.

“Like all the deeds which they have done since the day that I brought them up from Egypt even to this day—in that they have abandoned Me and served other gods—so they are doing to you as well. Now then, listen to their voice; however, you shall warn them strongly and tell them of the practice of the king who will reign over them” (1 Samuel 8:8-9).

Moses laid out prohibitions that the king should not have too many horses so as to return to Egypt, not many wives, not excessive silver and gold (Deuteronomy 17:16-17). Saul, David, and Solomon had the divine right to rule, a definite realm to rule, and the delegated exercise of His rule. That could imply a kingdom of God on earth. Of the first three kings, God gave only David a covenant that expanded the Abrahamic Covenant to give to the family of David a throne forever. *“Your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever”* (2 Samuel 7:16).

Israel Gains a King for Israel but Loses the Kingdom of God on Earth

The old age of Samuel and the dishonesty of his sons gave the elders of Israel reasons to ask for a king. The nation reached her glory under the reign of the third king Solomon. *“Now Solomon the son of David established himself securely over his kingdom, and the LORD his God was with him and exalted him greatly”* (2 Chronicles 1:1). After only a little over 100 years, the kingdom entered her final decline with the split of the kingdom after Solomon’s death. The descendants of David would eventually lose the kingdom of God and the presence of the Lord. Ezekiel would see the easterly departure of the Lord. *“The glory of the LORD went up from the midst of the city and stood over the mountain which is east of the city”* (Ezekiel 11:23).

What Moses had envisioned in the birth of the nation by Law, in all the glory of Mt. Sinai, collapsed. Only the Southern Kingdom would return after seventy years of captivity, through the leadership of Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah. In spite of their return to the Land and the rebuilding of the Temple, the nation would not regain its glory. Only in the Messianic Kingdom would Israel fulfill its role as the Kingdom of God on earth in all its glory.

Messianic Kingdom: The God-Man Will Come as the Final Mediator

The word “messiah” comes from the Hebrew word *mashach* (מָשַׁח), which means to “smear, anoint.” [Strong’s 4886] Samuel identified men as kings for God when he anointed them. The Almighty Lord will anoint the Messiah. *“The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me because the LORD anointed me to bring good news to the humble; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted to proclaim release to captives and freedom to prisoners”* (Isaiah 61:1).

The Messiah will be human and divine. *“For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace”* (Isaiah 9:6). His kingdom will last forever. *“To him was given ruling authority, honor, and sovereignty. All peoples, nations, and language groups were serving him. His authority is eternal and will not pass away. His kingdom will not be destroyed”* (Daniel 7:14).

No one can avoid the arrival of the Messiah. *“On that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which is in front of Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives will be split in its middle from east to west forming a very large valley. Half of the mountain will move toward the north, and the other half toward the south”* (Zechariah 14:4).

The arrival of the Messiah inaugurates the Messianic Kingdom on earth with provisions according to the New Covenant for Israel and Judah in Jeremiah 31:31-34: “(1) A change of heart, (2) fellowship with God, (3) knowledge of the Lord, and (4) forgiveness of sins.” [Charles C. Ryrie, “The Ryrie Study Bible,” Moody 1978, p. 1992]

The Messiah will sacrifice His life to ratify the New Covenant with Israel and Judah that will bring blessing to the whole world. “If the nation was to experience the blessings of the covenant, they would need forgiveness for sins, a new heart characterized by obedience, and empowerment from outside themselves.” [See above. Pentecost, “Thy Kingdom Come,” p. 169] *“But He was pierced for our offenses, He was crushed for our wrongdoings; The punishment for our well-being was laid upon Him, And by His wounds we are healed”* (Isaiah 53:5). “How much of what God was going to do in the future did the Old Testament believer comprehend? According to both Old and New Testament revelation it is impossible to say that he saw the same promise, the same Savior as we do today.” [Charles C. Ryrie, “Dispensationalism,” Moody 1996, p. 121]

Those of Judah and Israel will return to the Promised Land, live securely in it, and enjoy all the promises of God. *“They shall dwell in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, where your fathers lived. They and their children and their children’s children shall dwell there forever, and David my servant shall be their prince forever”* (Ezekiel 37:25).

Significance

The unfolding of the kingdom in all its forms in the Old Testament interprets best the flow of history. As the kingdom develops, God reveals His promises through one conditional covenant (Mosaic) and four unconditional covenants (Abrahamic, Land, Davidic, and Messianic). In history, the Lord God Almighty moves from a relationship to all men to a few as His mediators and to one nation Israel. God governs all for His glory but permits humans to govern, which also demonstrates His glory. The Universal or Heavenly Kingdom of God will arrive someday on earth through the Messianic Kingdom, when the Messiah as the final Mediator from Heaven comes to rule earth on His throne in Jerusalem.

History has meaning and a destination. For us who know the beginning and recognize the purpose of all history is for God’s glory, according to Scripture, we can look beyond our circumstances because what glorifies Him benefits us. The goings-on of everyday living and the continual decline of the western culture can shake us, but those who lack understanding of God’s revelation about His coming kingdom, or choose to reject it, will find themselves fearful and possibly even unable to witness God’s Heavenly Kingdom on earth.

“And to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him; His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom one that shall not be destroyed” (Daniel 7:14).