

ISRAEL AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

by Andy Woods

Evangelical Confusion

The contemporary evangelical world is engulfed in the idea that the church is presently experiencing the messianic kingdom. Such "kingdom now" theology factors prominently in the writings of various Emergent Church writers. Doug Pagitt proclaims, "And let me tell you 'Kingdom of God' language is really big in the emerging church."¹ Thus, the biblical teaching on the kingdom of God will be surveyed from Genesis to Revelation. Only such an analysis will allow us to capture God's mind on this important subject.

An Important Distinction

At the outset, a distinction must be drawn between the universal kingdom and the theocratic (or mediatorial) kingdom. Such a distinction is justified since some verses present the kingdom as in a state of perpetual existence (Ps 93:1-2) while others indicate that the kingdom will be a future reality (Dan 2:44). Moreover, some verses depict the kingdom as universal in scope (Ps 103:19) while other verses picture the kingdom as earthly (Dan 2:35, 44-45). Furthermore, some verses present the kingdom as being directly ruled by God (Dan 4:17) while other verses depict the kingdom as being indirectly administered by God through a human agent (Ps 2:6-9). Thus, the universal kingdom is eternal, comprehensive, and under God's direct rule. By contrast, the theocratic kingdom is futuristic, earthly, and under God's indirect rule.² Most theological persuasions agree that God's universal kingdom is a timeless reality existing to the

¹ Cited in Roger Oakland, *Faith Undone* (Silverton, OR: Lighthouse Trails, 2007), 163.

² Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1986), 397-98; Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), 19-21; Renald Showers, "Critique of Progressive Dispensationalism," *Friends of Israel National Conference* (June 2003), 9-14.

present hour. However, theological disagreement relates to the alleged present manifestation of the theocratic kingdom. Thus, the focus of this paper will not be upon the generally acknowledged universal kingdom but rather on what the Bible teaches concerning the theocratic kingdom.

Early Genesis

The biblical story of the kingdom begins as early as the Garden of Eden. Here, God placed Adam and Eve in a position of authority over God's creation. Gen 1:26-28 says: "Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.' God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. 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.'" It should be noted that Adam and Eve were given authority over the physical realm (fish, birds, living things that move on the earth). Here, God arranged for humanity's first couple to govern God's creation on God's behalf. The technical term for this hierarchy is the office of Theocratic Administrator. This term simply refers to someone who governs for God. In other words, God ruled the world indirectly through the first Adam.

However, Satan soon took the form of a serpent with the specific goal of perverting and reversing this divinely ordained hierarchy. Instead of governing the physical world for God, Adam and Eve were influenced by creation (the serpent) to rebel against God (Gen 3). Such rebellion represented a top to bottom reversal of God's original intention for the office of Theocratic Administrator. Satan's success in inciting this rebellion effectively removed the office

of Theocratic Administrator from the earth, as Satan became the ruler of the world (Luke 4:5-8; John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; 2 Cor 4:4; Eph 2:2). What then is the story-line of the Bible? It is how this office is restored through the messianic kingdom. Just as God the Father originally intended to indirectly govern the physical world through the first Adam, He will one day govern the world through the Last Adam or God the Son.

The restoration of the physical kingdom or office of Theocratic Administrator as the dominant theme of the Bible has been recognized by numerous theologians. Note Charles Ryrie's explanation:

Why is an earthly kingdom necessary? Did He not receive His inheritance when He was raised and exalted in heaven? Is not His present rule His inheritance? Why does there need to be an earthly kingdom? Because He must be triumphant *in the same arena* where He was seemingly defeated. His rejection by the rulers of this world was on this earth (1 Cor. 2:8). His exaltation must also be on this earth. And so it shall be when He comes again to rule this world in righteousness. He has waited long for His inheritance; soon He shall receive it.³

Biblical Covenants

The next major place in God's Word that speaks to the reality of a future messianic kingdom are those sections that reveal God's covenants with His special nation Israel. It is helpful to understand why God created and entered into a covenant with Israel. According to tradition, Nimrod, the leader of the rebellion at the Tower of Babel (Gen 10:8-9), and his wife Semiramis became the founders of the mystery religion known as the Mother-Child Cult. Their son Tammuz born through an alleged miraculous conception was killed by a wild animal and miraculously raised to life. This event led to the worship of the

³ Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 511.

mother (Semiramis) and the child (Tammuz). When God confounded the languages at Babel consequently ushering in multiple ethnicities (Gen 11:1-9), this Mother-Child Cult was exported into every culture that followed. Although the names of the mother and the child were changed from culture to culture, these religions still epitomized the same idolatrous religious system that began at Babel. In Assyria, the mother was Ishtar and the child was Tammuz. In Phoenicia, it was Astarte and Baal. In Egypt, it was Isis and Osiris or Horus. In Greece, it was Aphrodite and Eros. In Rome, it was Venus and Cupid.⁴ Given the idolatrous origin of these nations, God through Abram began a new nation independent of this universal impact at Babel. This nation, later called Israel (Num 24:17), would become His vehicle of exporting His messianic blessings to the world (Gen 3:15; 12:3).

Thus, the next place in God's Word that speaks to the reality of a future messianic kingdom are those sections that reveal God's covenants with His special nation Israel. A covenant in ancient times is similar to a legal contract today, which binds the parties to the agreement to perform in a specific way. In the biblical covenants, the God of the universe legally obligated Himself to fulfill specific promises directly for Israel and indirectly for the world. Let us

⁴ Alexander Hislop, *The Two Babylons* (reprint, New York: Loizeaux, 1959), 19-90; John Walvoord, "Revelation," in *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. Walvoord and Zuck (CO: Victor, 1983), 970.

briefly explain the content of these covenants and then note their contribution to a promised future earthly kingdom.

Israel's foundational covenant, known as the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12:1-3; 15:18), unconditionally promises three elements to Israel: land extending from modern day Egypt to Iraq (Gen. 15:18-21), seed or innumerable descendants (Gen. 15:4-5; 22:17), and blessing (Gen. 15:1). These three promises are amplified in subsequent covenants (or sub-covenants) that God made with the nation. The land provision is amplified in the land covenant (Deut. 29–30). The blessing component is amplified in the New Covenant (Jer. 31:31-34). Here, God promised to write His laws on the hearts of the Jews.

Regarding the seed promises, from Abraham's many seed would ultimately come a singular seed (Gen. 3:15; Gal. 3:16) or descendant who would procure all of the promises found in the Abrahamic Covenant for Israel consequently ushering in blessing for the nation and world. This seed aspect of the Abrahamic Covenant's promises is later amplified in what is known as the Davidic Covenant. After God rejected Saul, who was the nation's first king, God selected David from among Jesse's sons (1 Sam. 16:1) leading to David's anointing as the nation's second king (1 Sam. 16:13). In time, God entered into a covenant with David, which promised that through David's lineage would come an eternal house, throne, and kingdom (2 Sam. 7:13-16). In other words, God through David's lineage would usher in an eternal dynasty and throne. The Old Testament continually reaffirms that there would eventually arise a Davidic descendant who would usher in all that was unconditionally promised to both Abraham and David (Ps. 89; Amos 9:11; Hosea 3:5; Isa. 7:13-14; 9:6-7; Ezek. 34:23; 37:24).

These covenantal obligations make an enormous impact upon the reality of a future earthly kingdom when it is understood that these promises are *literal, unconditional, and*

unfulfilled. Several reasons make it apparent that these promises should be construed *literally*. The promises are terrestrial or earthly in nature. In fact, Abraham was told by God to walk around the very land that he and his people would one day possess (Gen. 13:17). The promises are made exclusively with national Israel rather than the church, which was not yet in existence (Matt. 16:18). Regarding the seed, they concern David's physical line. There is nothing in the context of 2 Samuel 7 which would lead the reader to the conclusion that these promises are to be understood as anything other than literal and earthly. Since these promises to David are an amplification of the seed component of the Abrahamic Covenant, they share the Abrahamic Covenant's literalness and terrestrial nature.

In addition to being literal, these covenantal obligations are *unconditional*. An unconditional promise is the opposite of a conditional promise, which requires some sort of performance on the part of one of the contracting parties before the other party is obligated to perform. If these promises were conditional, Israel would be obligated to do something before God was obligated to fulfill His covenantal obligations. However, these promises are, in actuality, unconditional. In other words, the ultimate performance in fulfillment of these promises rests solely in what God has obligated Himself to do regardless of the performance of Israel.

The late prophecy scholar Dr. John F. Walvoord identifies four reasons as to why these covenantal promises are unconditional.⁵ First, Walvoord notes the typical ancient Near Eastern, covenant-ratification ceremony, which God used to establish the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen 15). In this ceremony, severed animal carcasses were placed into two rows and the parties to the covenant passed through these rows. Such a solemn occasion testified to the fact that if the parties did not fulfill their obligations under the covenant, then they, too, were to be severed just

⁵ John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Findlay, OH: Dunham, 1959), 149-52.

as the animals had been (Jer. 34:8-10, 18-19). What is unique about the Abrahamic Covenant is that Abraham never passed through the severed animal pieces. After God put Abraham to sleep, He alone, as represented by the oven and the torch, passed through the animal pieces (Gen. 15:12, 17). This signifies that God alone will bring to pass all the promises in the Abrahamic Covenant unilaterally.

Second, there are no stated conditions for Israel's obedience in Genesis 15. If Israel had to do something before God could perform His obligations, such a condition would have been mentioned. Because there are no stated conditions for Israel to perform before God can perform, the covenant must solely rest upon God for performance. Third, the Abrahamic Covenant is called eternal (Gen. 17:7, 13, 19) and unchangeable (Heb. 6:13-18). Thus, the ultimate fulfillment of the covenant cannot rest upon the performance of fickle and sinful men. Because only God is eternal and unchangeable, He alone will bring the covenant promises into fulfillment. Fourth, the covenant is trans-generationally reaffirmed despite Israel's perpetual national disobedience. No matter how wicked each generation became, God kept on perpetually reaffirming the covenant to Israel (Jer. 31:35-37). If the covenant were conditioned upon Israel's performance, it would have been revoked long ago due to Israel's disobedience rather than continually reaffirmed.

In addition to being literal and unconditional, the covenant, even up to the present hour, remains *unfulfilled*. While some might make the argument that some parts of the covenant have achieved a past fulfillment, when construed literally, the bulk of the covenant remains unfulfilled thus awaiting a future realization. Some challenge the covenant's unfulfilled aspects by contending that it was fulfilled either in the days of Joshua (Josh. 11:23; 21:43-45) or during the

prosperous portion of Solomon's reign (1 Kgs. 4:20-21; 8:56).⁶ However, several reasons make this interpretation suspect.⁷ For example, the extended context indicates that the land promises were not completely satisfied in the days of Joshua (13:1-7; Judges 1:19, 21, 27, 29, 30-36). In addition, the land that Israel attained in the conquest was only a fraction of what was found in the Abrahamic Covenant.⁸ Also, the land promises could not have been fulfilled in Joshua's day since Israel had not yet conquered Jerusalem (Josh. 15:63). The conquest of Jerusalem would have to wait another four hundred years until the Davidic reign (2 Sam. 5).

Although Solomon gained a large percentage of the land, his empire only extended to the border of Egypt (1 Kgs. 4:21) rather than to the promised river of Egypt (Gen. 15:18) according to what God initially promised Abraham.⁹ Regarding the notion that the land promises were fulfilled under Solomon's reign, Constable observes:

This does not mean that the Abrahamic Covenant was fulfilled in Solomon's day (Gen. 15:18-20), for not all of this territory was incorporated into the geographic boundaries of Israel; many of the subjected kingdoms retained their identity and territory but paid taxes (tribute) to Solomon. Israel's own geographic limits were "from Dan to Beersheba" (1 Kings 4:25).¹⁰

Moreover, the Abrahamic Covenant promises that Israel would possess the land forever (Gen. 17:7-8, 13, 19). This eternal promise has obviously never been fulfilled due to Israel's subsequent eviction from the land a few centuries after Solomon's reign (2 Kgs. 17; 25). Furthermore, if the land promises were satisfied in Joshua's or Solomon's day, then why do subsequent prophets treat these promises as if they are yet to be fulfilled (Amos 9:11-15)?

⁶ Hank Hanegraaff, *The Apocalypse Code* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 2007), 52-53, 178-79.

⁷ Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology*, rev. ed. (Tustin, CA: Ariel, 1994), 521-22, 631-32; John F. Walvoord, *Major Bible Prophecies* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 82.

⁸ See the helpful map showing what was promised in the Abrahamic Covenant in comparison to what was attained in the conquest in Thomas L. Constable, "Notes on Numbers," online: www.soniclight.com, accessed 13 January 2012, 98.

⁹ Charles C. Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible: New American Standard Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 533.

¹⁰ Thomas L. Constable, "1 Kings," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor, 1985), 497.

Certainly the New Covenant's promise of God writing His laws upon the hearts of Israel has never been fulfilled. Israel's national disobedience is well chronicled in the pages of Scripture. In fact, Israel largely remains a Christ-rejecting nation to the present day.

The bottom line is that if the Abrahamic Covenant and its related sub-covenants are *literal* (interpreted in ordinary, earthly terms), *unconditional* (resting upon God alone for performance rather than Israel), and *unfulfilled* (never fulfilled historically thereby necessitating a future fulfillment), there must be a future time in history in which God will make good on what He has covenantally obligated Himself to do. God must do what He said He would do since it is contrary to His nature to lie, fabricate, or equivocate in any sense (Num. 23:19). Thus, such a future fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant and related sub-covenants heightens the biblical expectation of a future, earthly kingdom.

Mosaic Covenant

The next major place in God's Word that speaks to the reality of a future, messianic kingdom is the revelation of the Mosaic Covenant that God gave exclusively to national Israel (Ps. 147:19-20) at Mount Sinai. Despite four hundred years of bondage in Egypt (Gen. 15:13-16), God graciously redeemed and liberated His people through the Exodus. He then brought His redeemed people to Sinai and entered into a new covenant with them called the "Mosaic Covenant." Note the occurrence of the term "kingdom" as God entered into this new covenant with Israel. "Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a *kingdom* of priests and a holy nation. These are the

words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel” (Exod. 19:5-6; emphasis mine).¹¹ Because this is the first reference to the term “kingdom” in relation to God's kingdom in all of the Bible, it is reasonable to conclude that the office of Theocratic Administrator that was lost in Eden was restored to the earth, at least in a limited sense, at Sinai. Just as God governed indirectly through Adam in Eden, God now began to rule indirectly over Israel through His Theocratic Administrator Moses. This theocratic arrangement covered most of Old Testament history as God, even after the time of Moses, governed Israel indirectly through Joshua, and then various judges, and finally Israel’s kings.¹²

The Mosaic Covenant also introduced a new component to God’s covenantal dealings with Israel. This new element must be understood in order to comprehend the divine blueprint concerning a future, earthly kingdom. As argued previously, the Abrahamic and Davidic Covenants are unconditional. In other words, they rest completely upon God rather than Israel’s performance for their eventual fulfillment. By contrast, the Mosaic Covenant (Exod. 19–24) is conditional. Notice the terms “if” and “then” in Exodus 19:5-6: “Now then, *if* you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, *then* you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (emphasis mine). In other words, if Israel obeys the terms of the Mosaic Covenant, then God will bless the nation physically, materially, and spiritually.

The technical covenantal structure in the ancient Near East for this type of agreement is known as a Suzerain-Vassal Treaty. Here, the suzerain, or a superior, enters into an agreement with an inferior, or a vassal. The vassal promises to come under the protective custody of the suzerain. The suzerain, in turn, promises to bless or curse the vassal depending upon whether the

¹¹ All scriptural citations taken from the NASB.

¹² Stanley D. Toussaint, “The Kingdom of God,” in *Tim LaHaye Prophecy Study Bible*, ed. Tim LaHaye (Chattanooga, TN: AMG, 2001), 1134.

vassal demonstrates loyalty or disloyalty to the suzerain by either obeying or disobeying the specific terms of the covenant text. In the case of the Mosaic Covenant, the suzerain is God, Israel is the vassal, the covenant text is the Ten Commandments and all of their applications as spelled out in the Mosaic Law (Exod. 19–24; Lev.; Deut.), and the blessings and curses for covenant obedience are found in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. In contrast to this suzerain-vassal arrangement, the afore-mentioned unconditional, Abrahamic Covenant represents an ancient Near East covenant known as a "Royal Grant Treaty" where a king promises to unconditionally reward a subject.

If the Abrahamic Covenant and its related sub-covenants are unconditional and the Mosaic Covenant is conditional, then how does God deal with Israel under both of these covenants? The answer lies in understanding the difference between *ownership* and *possession*. Suppose that someone owns a vacation home and yet they are too busy working to visit this home. At this point, this person *owns* the home but does not *possess* or enjoy it. In the same way, the Abrahamic covenant gives Israel unconditional *ownership* of its various promises. Due to the Abrahamic Covenant's unconditional nature, no amount of disobedience on Israel's part can remove her *ownership* of these blessings. While Israel can be severely disciplined by God for disobeying the terms of the Mosaic Covenant (Lev. 26:14-46; Deut. 28:15-68), even resulting in the nation's conquest by foreign powers (Deut. 28:49-50), she can never forfeit *ownership* of the promises spoken of in the Abrahamic Covenant.

However, before Israel can *possess* or enjoy what she owns, she must obey the terms of the Mosaic Covenant. Thus, any given generation within Israel must meet the conditions of the Mosaic Covenant in order to experience the blessings promised in the Abrahamic and Davidic

Covenants.¹³ An important provision of the Mosaic Covenant is that Israel must enthrone the king of God's own choosing (Deut. 17:15). Such an enthronement will thereby satisfy the condition of obedience found in the Mosaic Covenant thus allowing Israel *to possess* rather than merely *own* the Abrahamic Covenant's blessings. The Mosaic Covenant ultimately points toward Christ. In John 5:45-47, Jesus explained to the Jews of His day, "Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; the one who accuses you is Moses, in whom you have set your hope. For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me, for he wrote about Me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?" Here is what the whole picture looks like: While Israel *owns* the covenantal blessings found in the Abrahamic Covenant and related sub-covenants, she cannot *possess* or enter into these blessings until she complies with the condition found in the Mosaic Covenant. However, this condition can be satisfied through the nation's enthronement of the king of God's own choosing (Deut. 17:15), who is Christ (John 5:45-47).

How does all of this relate to the subject of a future earthly kingdom? Although the Abrahamic Covenantal promises and blessings are unconditionally guaranteed to come directly to Israel and indirectly to the entire world, these kingdom conditions will not manifest themselves until national Israel trusts Jesus Christ, her long-awaited King. Because, there has never existed a Jewish generation who has complied with this condition, the messianic kingdom remains in a state of postponement or abeyance up until the present hour. However, one day, a future generation of Jews will comply with this condition resulting in the establishment of the messianic kingdom of God on earth. It will take the events of the future Tribulation period to bring such a generation to faith in Christ thereby leading to the manifestation of the earthly, theocratic, messianic kingdom (Jer. 30:7; Dan. 9:24-27; Zech. 12:10; Matt. 23:37-39; 24:31; 25:31).

¹³ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1990), 86.

Divided Kingdom

The theocratic kingdom over Israel that God began through Moses at Sinai continued unabated through the reigns of the nation's first three kings, Saul, David, and Solomon. Unfortunately, the prosperity that characterized Solomon's forty year reign ended with covenant disobedience as Israel's third king amassed wealth and multiple wives (1 Kgs. 11:1-8) in violation of the Mosaic Covenant (Deut. 17:16-17). Thus, God brought covenant discipline to the nation through the division of the kingdom (1 Kgs. 12). This division resulted in ten tribes forming the northern kingdom, or Israel, and the remaining two tribes forming the southern kingdom, or Judah. Two reasons made Judah in the south the focus of God's kingdom program. First, ancient messianic prophecy indicated that the nation's true king would one day be born into the tribe of Judah (Gen. 49:10). Second, the kings from David's line reigned over Judah only. These Davidic kings are significant regarding tracing God's kingdom program through Scripture since the previously described Davidic Covenant promised that through David's lineage would ultimately come an eternal dynasty and throne (2 Sam. 7:13-16). The kings over the northern kingdom continued in covenant rebellion. Such failure eventually led to maximum divine discipline (Deut. 28:49-50), in the form of the scattering of the northern kingdom by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. (2 Kgs. 17).

Thus, from 722 B.C. until the Babylonian Captivity in 586 B.C., only the southern kingdom, Judah, remained as the earthly theocratic kingdom. Sadly, the southern kingdom imitated the covenant rebellion of the previously dispersed northern tribes, incurring more divine discipline (Deut. 28:49-50), by means of the Babylonian Captivity. When Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon destroyed Jerusalem and the Solomonic temple and took Judah away into captivity (2 Kgs. 25; Ezek. 33:21), the earthly theocracy terminated. In other words, God governed the nation indirectly through various Davidic kings until the deposing of Zedekiah, who was the last of the Davidic dynasty to reign from David's Throne. This termination of the earthly theocracy was signified through the departure of God's Shekinah glory from the temple (Ezek. 10:4, 18-19; 11:23).¹⁴

Times of the Gentiles

This Babylonian Captivity initiated a dark time in Jewish history known as the "Times of the Gentiles" (Luke 21:24; Rev. 11:2). This era is defined as the period of time when the nation no longer has a Davidic king reigning on David's Throne. During this period, Judah would be trampled down by various Gentile powers. These powers include Babylon (605–539 B.C.), Medo-Persia (539–331 B.C.), Greece (331–63 B.C.), Rome (63 B.C.–A.D. 70), as well as the future, revived Roman Empire of the Antichrist (sometimes called "Rome Phase II"). Nebuchadnezzar, in a dream, saw this time period symbolized by a beautiful, dazzling statue. Each part of the statue represents a different Gentile power (Dan. 2). In his dream, Daniel saw the same period of time in the form of four grotesque beasts. Each beast pictured a different Gentile power (Dan. 7). To Nebuchadnezzar, who was the king of Babylon or the first Gentile power to trample down Judah, this period appeared beautiful. This perspective explains why

¹⁴ Toussaint, "The Kingdom of God," 1134.

Nebuchadnezzar perceived this era in the form of an attractive statue. To Daniel, a Jew, whose people would be trampled down by these Gentile powers, this period was dismal. This perspective explains why he saw the Times of the Gentiles as represented by various ferocious beasts.

Note, the Times of the Gentiles, which began with Nebuchadnezzar's deposing of Zedekiah and the Babylonian Captivity in 586 B.C., are marked by the following three characteristics: the termination of the earthly theocracy, the lack of a Davidic king reigning on David's Throne in Jerusalem, and Judah being trampled underfoot by a successive array of Gentile powers. The Times of the Gentiles will run their course and will eventually conclude with restoration of a rightful king reigning on David's Throne, and the return of the *shekinah* glory of God to the Millennial temple (Ezek. 43:1-5). This difficult period will end with the return of Jesus Christ to rule and reign from David's Throne in Jerusalem (Dan. 2:34-35, 44-45; Matt. 25:31). While the Times of the Gentiles began with Nebuchadnezzar's deposing of Zedekiah, it will be terminated at the return and enthronement of Christ thus inaugurating the long-awaited messianic kingdom.

Thus, only after the final kingdom of man (the revived Roman Empire of the Antichrist) has been terminated by Christ, will the Davidic kingdom then be established on earth (Dan. 2:34-35; 43-45; 7:23-27). This fact alone should deter interpreters from finding a premature manifestation of the kingdom in the present Church Age. Unfortunately, "kingdom now" theologians ignore this chronology by arguing for a present, spiritual form of the kingdom, despite the fact that the kingdoms of man have not yet run their course, the Antichrist and his kingdom have not yet been overthrown, and the Second Advent has not yet occurred. This Danielic chronology causes Unger to conclude:

...Daniel *neither* in the image prophecy of chapter 2 *nor* in the beast prophecy of chapter 7 *deals with the present age of the calling out of the church*, the period during which Israel is temporarily in national rejection...Daniel was given the prophetic vision of Rome up to the time of Christ's death (the two legs). The vision resumed with *the resumption of the divine dealing with national Israel* (after the completion of the church at the rapture) during the period between glorification of the church and the establishment of the Kingdom over Israel (Acts 1:6). Hence, the iron kingdom with its feet of iron and clay (cf. 3:33-35, 40, 44) and the nondescript beast of 7:7-8 envision not only Gentile power (1) as it was at the first advent, but (2) also the form in which it will exist *after the church period*, when God will resume His dealing with the *nation* Israel. How futile for conservative scholars to ignore that fact and to seek to find literal fulfillment of those prophecies in history or in the church, when those predictions refer to events yet future and have no application whatever to the church.¹⁵

Old Testament Prophets

Throughout the dark years of national disobedience, Gentile dominion, and kingdom postponement, the Old Testament prophets held out hope for the nation and the world by faithfully speaking of a coming generation of Jews who would return to Yahweh thereby ushering in kingdom blessings. On account of this ray of spiritual light that the prophets provided in the midst of spiritual darkness, Peter refers to prophecy as, " . . . the prophetic word *made* more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts" (2 Pet. 1:19). While it would take multiple volumes to adequately portray all that the Old Testament prophets revealed concerning the coming kingdom,¹⁶ a few predictions from the prophet Isaiah will suffice. According to Isaiah 2:1b-4:

¹⁵ Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Commentary on the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1981; reprint, Chattanooga, TN: AMG, 2002), 1643.

¹⁶ For example, see J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Findlay, OH: Dunham, 1958; reprint, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1964), 481-90.

Now it will come about that In the last days The mountain of the house of the LORD Will be established as the chief of the mountains, And will be raised above the hills; And all the nations will stream to it. And many peoples will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, To the house of the God of Jacob; That He may teach us concerning His ways And that we may walk in His paths." For the law will go forth from Zion, And the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. And He will judge between the nations, And will render decisions for many peoples; And they will hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not lift up sword against nation, And never again will they learn war.

Isaiah 11:6-9 similarly says:

And the wolf will dwell with the lamb, And the leopard will lie down with the young goat, And the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; And a little boy will lead them. Also the cow and the bear will graze, Their young will lie down together, And the lion will eat straw like the ox. The nursing child will play by the hole of the cobra, And the weaned child will put his hand on the viper's den. They will not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain, For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD As the waters cover the sea.

According to these wonderful predictions, when the messianic kingdom materializes, Jerusalem will be the center of world spiritual and political authority. This authority will result in perfect justice, world peace, cessation of conflict with and among the animal kingdom, and universal, spiritual knowledge. These glorious conditions await a future Jewish generation's enthronement of the king of God's own choosing (Deut. 17:15). Such enthronement will make Israel not only the owner but also the possessor of all that is promised in Israel's covenants. As these covenantal blessings come upon Israel in that future day, the entire world will be blessed as well (Rom. 11:12, 15).

Kingdom Offer

Following the Babylonian Captivity in 586 B.C., the prophesied seventy years of national, divine discipline had run their course (Lev. 25:1-7; 2 Chron. 36:20-21; Jer. 25:11; 29:10). The

newly inaugurated Persian government allowed God's people to return to their homeland (Ezra; Neh.). Thus, by the time of Christ, the nation had been back in the Promised Land for over five centuries. However, such long residency in the land did not mean that the Times of the Gentiles had concluded. During all of this time, Israel still had no reigning king upon David's Throne. Moreover, as Daniel predicted (Dan. 2; 7), Israel continued to be under the domination of various Gentile powers. Those powers included Persia, which was followed by Greece, and finally Rome. By the time Christ was born, the Roman Empire occupied the Promised Land, placed Israel under an enormous tax burden, and usurped from the Jews the right to execute their own criminals. Beyond this, the nation had gone through four hundred years of silence when God was not directly speaking to His people through prophetic oracles.

Against the backdrop of such silence and bondage entered Jesus Christ, the rightful heir to David's Throne. The Gospel accounts identify and affirm Jesus Christ as the long-awaited Davidic Descendant prophesied in both the Abrahamic and Davidic Covenants. For example, Matthew's Gospel connects Christ genealogically to both Abraham and David (Matt. 1:17). Matthew also routinely associates Christ with the title "Son of David" (Matt. 9:27). Luke similarly shows Jesus to be the rightful Heir to God's promises to David (Luke 1:32-33, 68-69).

As noted earlier, when the Abrahamic Covenant and related sub-covenants are considered in harmony with the Mosaic Covenant, Israel's covenantal structure can best be described as an unconditional covenant with a conditional blessing. In other words, any Jewish generation must satisfy the conditional Mosaic Covenant before they can enter into the Abrahamic Covenant's unconditional blessings. Such a condition can be satisfied if Israel enthrones the king of God's own choosing (Deut. 17:15). Thus, it was incumbent upon first-century Israel to enthrone Christ in order to enter into all of her covenantal blessings.

The opportunity for first-century Israel to enthrone Christ and consequently experience all these blessings is known as "the offer of the kingdom." This idea is captured in the expression "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" as proclaimed to the nation by John the Baptist (Matt. 3:1-2), Christ (Matt. 4:17), the Twelve (Matt. 10:5-7), and the Seventy (Luke 10:1, 9). What this expression means is that the unchallenged rulership that God experiences in heaven had drawn near to the earth in the person of Jesus Christ, the long-awaited Davidic king. It is also called "the kingdom of heaven" since the kingdom will be inaugurated by the "God of heaven." Notice how Daniel connects this "God of heaven" with His coming kingdom: "In the days of those kings the *God of heaven* will set up a *kingdom* which will never be destroyed..." (Dan. 2:44). Because the king was present, the opportunity to enthrone Him was a reality for first-century Israel. However, the expression "at hand" does not mean that the kingdom had arrived. Rather, the kingdom was near or in a state of imminence or immediate expectation since the presence of the king allowed first-century Israel to make a bonafide choice to enthrone Christ and thus enter into her covenantal blessings.

Notice that the word "kingdom" in the expression "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" is left undefined by John the Baptist, Christ, the Twelve, and the Seventy. This lack of a New Testament definition shows that the notion of the kingdom was understood by how the concept had already been developed in the Old Testament. As we have learned, the Old Testament portrays a coming earthly, messianic kingdom. This kingdom is anticipated in the office of Theocratic Administrator that was lost in Eden, in the biblical covenants, in the earthly theocracy governing Israel from the time of Moses to Zedekiah, and in the predictions of the Old Testament prophets. Had first-century Israel enthroned Christ, this earthly kingdom would have

become a reality not only for the nation but also for the entire world. Israel's covenants would have been fulfilled, and the Times of the Gentiles would have terminated.

Rejection of the Kingdom Offer

Despite the unprecedented opportunity for the establishment of the messianic kingdom due to the presence of the king among the first-century Jews, tragically, Israel rejected the kingdom offer. Why did the Israel of Christ's day reject the opportunity to establish the kingdom? At least two reasons can be given. First, Christ emphasized in the Sermon on the Mount that the kingdom was not only physical and political but also moral and spiritual (Matt. 5–7). Here, Christ reiterated what the Old Testament had already revealed that while the kingdom would certainly be earthly and terrestrial it would also be moral and ethical (Ezek. 37:23-24). Thus, citizens of Christ's kingdom had to exhibit certain moral qualities (Matt. 5:3-12). Because Israel was far more interested in a physical and political kingdom that would overthrow an oppressive Rome than they were in a spiritual and moral kingdom (John 6:15, 26), Christ's emphasis upon the moral characteristics of His kingdom set the stage for Israel's ultimate rejection of the kingdom offer.

Second, Israel pursued righteousness by way of self-effort rather than by accepting the imputed or transferred righteousness offered by Christ (Matt. 5:20). Israel's works-oriented Pharisaical system (Mark 7:13) caused the nation to stumble over Christ's simple message that righteousness can only be gained by faith alone (John 6:28-29). Romans 9:30-32 explains, "What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith; but Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at *that* law. Why? Because *they did not pursue it* by faith, but as though *it were* by works. They

stumbled over THE STUMBLING STONE." While a small Jewish remnant did accept Christ's message, the crux of the nation as well as the nation's leadership stumbled over it.

The Gospels carefully reveal Israel's rejection of the kingdom offer. The turning point is found in Matt. 12:24. When the Pharisees were unable to explain away one of Christ's many miracles, they instead attributed the miracle's performance to Satanic powers. At this point, the expression "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" virtually disappears from Matthew's Gospel. The phrase does not resurface until the offer is re-extended to a distant generation of Jews during the future Tribulation period (Matt. 24:14). Such an absence signifies that God took the kingdom offer off the table when the Pharisees demonstrated unbelief when confronted by Christ's miracles. This rejection of the offer was ratified at Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem as well as by the nation's decision to hand Christ over to the Romans for crucifixion (Matt. 21–23; 26–27). Israel's rejection of the kingdom offer is also represented in the following statement by the nation's religious leaders to Pilate: "Pilate said to them, 'Shall I crucify your King?' The chief priests answered, 'We have no king but Caesar'" (John 19:15). Thus, John well summarizes: "He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him" (John 1:11).

Because Israel rejected the offer of the kingdom, the messianic kingdom was *not* established at Christ's First Advent. Instead of inheriting His rightful kingdom, Christ never became king over the nation and consequently was "cut off" and inherited "nothing" (Dan. 9:26a). While the unconditional Abrahamic Covenant prevents Israel from forfeiting *ownership* of the covenanted promises, first-century Israel's lack of response to the offer of the kingdom prevented the nation from *possessing* these blessings. From the time of Christ up to the present hour Israel remains only the *owner* rather than the *possessor* of the covenanted promises.

Although not *cancelled*, the messianic kingdom remains in a state of *postponement*. Just as past generations of Jews were disciplined for Mosaic Covenant violations (2 Kgs. 17; 25), Christ-rejecting first-century Israel also experienced divine discipline (Deut. 28:49-50) by means of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple resulting in over a million Jewish deaths when Titus of Rome invaded Israel thirty-eight years after the time of Christ in the horrific events of A.D. 70 (Dan. 9:26b; Matt. 24:1-2; Luke 19:41-44).

Interim Age

Due to Israel's rejection of the kingdom offer resulting in the messianic kingdom's postponement, Christ began to explain the spiritual conditions that would prevail during the kingdom's absence. This interim program includes His revelation of the kingdom mysteries (Matt. 13) and the church (Matt. 16:18). Before describing these spiritual realities, a few preliminary remarks must be made about this new interim age.

First, this interim age is intimately linked to the word "mystery" (Matt. 13:11; Eph. 3:9). "Mystery" simply means a previously unknown truth now disclosed. Vine explains, "In the N.T, it [*mystērion*] denotes, not the mysterious (as with the Eng. word), but that which, being outside the range of unassisted natural apprehension, can be made known only by Divine revelation, and is made known in a manner and at a time appointed by God, and to those who are illumined by His Spirit."¹⁷ In other words, both the kingdom mysteries and church are unrevealed in the Old Testament.

Second, the notion that the present, interim age came about as a consequence of Israel's rejection of the kingdom offer in no way implies that it is an afterthought or less important in God's mind in comparison to His program with national Israel. On the contrary, according to

¹⁷ W. E. Vine, *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of the Old and New Testament Words* (Nashville: Nelson, 1996), 424.

Ephesians 3:11, the church was "in accordance" with God's "eternal purpose." In other words, God always knew and purposed that He would create and work through the church. Although Israel's program is revealed in the Old Testament, the church's program is unrevealed. However, this distinction does not mean that God's unrevealed program for the church is of less importance than His revealed program for Israel. Furthermore, although the church represents an interruption or parenthesis between God's past and future dealings with Israel, this in no way implies that the church is of lesser importance than God's past or future dealings with national Israel. The dictionary definition of a parenthesis simply conveys the idea of an interval rather than something of less importance. Thus, understanding the church as a parenthetical break in this manner in no way suggests that the church represents "plan B" in relation to God's purposes for Israel.

Kingdom Mysteries

The first aspect of this interim phase is the kingdom mysteries (Matt. 13:1-52). These represent the course of events to be experienced by the kingdom's heirs or the "sons of the kingdom" (13:38) between Israel's rejection and future acceptance of the kingdom offer. Thus, these mysteries cover the time period between Israel's formal rejection of the kingdom and the Second Advent (13:40-42, 49-50). The kingdom mysteries represent new truths concerning the kingdom that were undisclosed in the Old Testament. Jesus made this point clear when He said, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted... But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear. For truly I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see *it*, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear *it*" (Matt. 13:11, 16-17).

When the eight parables of Matthew 13 are understood harmoniously, they reveal a complete picture of this “mystery age.” First, the parable of the **sower** teaches that the gospel will be preached throughout the course of the mystery age with varying responses based upon how the heart has been prepared. Responders to the truth will be given additional revelation (13:1-9, 18-23). Second, the parable of the **wheat and tares** teaches that it will be difficult to distinguish between the saved and unsaved within professing Christendom throughout the mystery age. The separation between believer and unbeliever will not be made until the Second Advent (13:24-30, 36-43). Third, the parable of the **mustard seed** teaches that Christendom will experience great numerical and geographical expansion from a small beginning (13:31-32). Fourth, because leaven in Scripture typically represents something pernicious or evil (Exod. 12; Lev. 2:11; 6:17; 10:12; Matt. 16:6, 12; Mark 8:15; Luke 12:1; 1 Cor. 5:6-8; Gal. 5:9), the parable of the **leaven** working its way through the meal teaches that professing Christendom will experience increasing moral and doctrinal corruption as the age progresses (Matt. 13:33). This parable predicts increasing apostasy throughout the present age. Unfortunately, “kingdom now” interpreters miss this crucial point by interpreting the leaven as something good rather than evil. Walvoord explains:

What does the leaven represent? Postmillenarians and amillenarians...usually assume dogmatically that leaven cannot represent evil in the parable, although it is universally used to represent evil in both the Old and New Testaments...It is more evident than ever in the last third of the twentieth century that the gospel has not permeated the world and that evil tends to permeate the entire professing church, which is exactly what Matthew 13 teaches. In the Old Testament leaven is consistently used to represent evil...In the New Testament, leaven was used by Christ of the externalism of the Pharisees, of the unbelief of the Sadducees, and of the worldliness of the Herodians, and in general of evil doctrine (Mt 16:6-12; Mk 8:14-21). In Paul’s letters, likewise, leaven represents evil, as in 1 Corinthians 5:6-8 and Galatians 5:7-10. In the parable, the meal represents that which is good...The professing church, however, is permeated by evil doctrine, externalism,

unbelief, and worldliness, which tends to inflate the church and make it larger in appearance, even as the leaven inflates the dough but actually adds nothing of real worth. The history of the church has all too accurately fulfilled this anticipation, and the professing church in the world, large and powerful though it may be, is permeated by the leaven of evil which will be judged in the oven of divine judgment at the end of the age...To some extent, evil will extend even to...the body of true believers in the church as well as those that come to Christ after the rapture...even true believers fall far short of perfection and can embrace to some extent worldliness, externalism, and bad doctrine.¹⁸

Toussaint similarly notes:

The discussion revolves around the significance of the word “leaven” (*zyme*). Many contend that leaven is used here in a good sense and pictures the spread of the gospel throughout the earth. Others state that the word represents evil and is used to illustrate the growth of evil within the group which professes to inherit the kingdom. This latter interpretation has the stronger support. It is consistent with the doctrine of Scripture concerning the evil character of the end of the church age and the tribulation (1 Timothy 4; 2 Timothy 3; Jude; 2 Peter 3; Revelation 6–19). One of the greatest supports for the interpretation that leaven speaks of evil is the use of the word in Scripture. Invariably leaven pictures sin (Exodus 12; Leviticus 2:11; 6:17; 10:12; Matthew 16:12; Mark 8:15; Luke 12:1; 1 Corinthians 5:6-8; Galatians 5:9). Finally the verb used here, “to hide”...is very unusual if leaven represents good. It is a much more fitting word if leaven is to have a sinister effect. This is similar to the idea in the parable of the wheat and the darnel. The way the woman hides the leaven in the meal parallels very closely the manner in which the enemy sowed darnel by night. This parable reveals the fact that evil will run its course and dominate the new age. But it also indicates that when the program of evil has been fulfilled, the kingdom will come.¹⁹

Thus, the present age represents a period when the gospel is preached resulting in the salvation of some. However, a counterfeit sowing will also take place. Despite God’s work throughout this age, Christendom will experience an increasing corruption. This teaching concerning the increasing apostasy of the present mystery age can be found not only in the epistolary material (1 Tim. 4; 2 Tim. 3; 2 Pet. 3; Jude) but also in the Matthew 13 parables.

¹⁸ John F. Walvoord, *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come* (Chicago: Moody, 1974), 102-4.

¹⁹ Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Kregel, 2005), 182.

This teaching on the apostasy of the church does not mean that God cannot sovereignly send refreshing waves of revival and reformation, as He has done at various times. However, these refreshing seasons are not the norm but rather occur only intermittently throughout church history. A proper understanding of this apostasy represents a worldview that is diametrically opposed to “kingdom now” theology, which is the idea that the church will gradually Christianize the world thereby ushering in long-term cultural progress. The only way “kingdom-now” theology can be defended from Scripture is to ignore what the New Testament predicts concerning apostasy in the present mystery age.

Fifth, because Scripture refers to Israel as God's special treasure (Exod. 19:5), the parable of the **earthen treasure** teaches that Christ came to purchase Israel. However, Israel will remain in unbelief throughout the course of the mystery age and will not be converted until the age's conclusion (Matt. 13:44). Sixth, the parable of the **pearl of great price** refers to Christ's death that redeems members of the church throughout this age allowing the Lord to gain a treasure from among the Gentiles (13:45-46). Seventh, the parable of the **dragnet** teaches the coexistence of the righteous and the wicked throughout the age only to be separated by Christ at the age's conclusion (13:47-50). Eighth, the parable of the **householder** teaches that these kingdom mysteries must be considered alongside Old Testament kingdom truth if one is to understand the totality of God's kingdom agenda (13:51-52). In sum, when these eight parables are taken together, the Lord reveals the spiritual conditions that will prevail in the world during an interim period when the kingdom is not present.

A mistake typically made even by dispensational, premillennial interpreters is to contend that the Matthew 13 parables reveal a present spiritual form of the kingdom known as the "mystery form of the kingdom." While not contending that the Davidic kingdom is present, they

instead believe that the kingdom is spiritually present in mystery form only.²⁰ However, even this is to read too much into the text of Matthew 13 than is actually there. Toussaint notes:

It is often alleged that the Lord predicted a form of the kingdom for the Church age in His parables, particularly those in Matthew 13. For many years dispensationalists have referred to these parables as teaching a mystery form or a new form of the kingdom...However, nowhere in Matthew 13 or anywhere does the Lord Jesus use the term mystery form. Rather, He refers to the "mysteries of the kingdom of heaven" (v. 11); that is, the Lord in these parables is giving to His disciples new truths about the kingdom that were hitherto unknown. It is strange that so many dispensationalists claim a new form of the kingdom is introduced in Matthew 13. Dispensationalists argue strenuously for a literal, earthly kingdom that is the fulfillment of the Old Testament when John, Jesus, and His disciples announced its nearness. Then suddenly these dispensationalists change the meaning in Matthew 13.²¹

McClain similarly observes:

The fiction of a present "kingdom of heaven" established on earth in the Church, has been lent some support by an incautious terminology sometimes used in defining the "mysteries of the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 13:11). The parables of this chapter, it is said carelessly by some, describe the kingdom of heaven as now existing in "mystery form" during the Church age. Now it is true that these parables present certain conditions related to the Kingdom which are contemporaneous with the present age. But nowhere in Matthew 13 is the establishment of the Kingdom placed within this age. On the contrary, in two of these parables the setting up of the Kingdom is definitely placed at the end of the "age" (vss. 39 and 49 ASV, with 41-43).²²

As these citations explain, there are at least three problems associated with equating the "kingdom mysteries" of Matthew 13 with a present spiritual form of the kingdom in "mystery form." First, although Christ uses the expression "mysteries of the kingdom of heaven" (v. 11), Matthew 13, or any other place in Christ's teachings for that matter, fails to employ the expression "mystery form of the kingdom." These words must be read into the text. Second, the

²⁰ Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come*, 215-28.

²¹ Stanley D. Toussaint, "Israel and the Church of a Traditional Dispensationalist," in *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism*, ed. Herbert W. Bateman (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), 237.

²² McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, 440-41.

word "kingdom" or *basileia* must be interpreted inconsistently in Matthew's Gospel in order to justify the existence of a present mystery form of the kingdom. While premillennial dispensationalists interpret the word "kingdom" in reference to the future earthly reign of Christ in most of Matthew's uses of the word (Matt. 3:2; 4:17; 6:10; 7:21; 8:11; 10:7; 24:14; 25:1, 34; 26:29), they inconsistently attach a spiritualized and allegorized meaning to the same word in Matthew 13.

Third, according to the revelation of the Times of the Gentiles as given to the prophet Daniel (Dan. 2; 7), the earthly theocracy terminated with the deposing of Zedekiah in 586 B.C. and will not return until the Second Advent (Matt. 25:31). As explained earlier, during this period known as the Times of the Gentiles, Judah will be trampled down by various Gentile powers. Only after the final kingdom of man (the revived Roman Empire of the Antichrist) has been terminated by Christ, will God's kingdom be established on earth (Dan. 2:34-35; 43-45; 7:23-27). Thus, during the Times of the Gentiles, no spiritual form of the kingdom on earth is predicted by Daniel. This omission includes allusions to any spiritual form of the kingdom whatsoever, whether it be a spiritual form of the Davidic Kingdom, an "already but not yet" present manifestation of the Davidic Kingdom, a mystery form of the kingdom, or any other sophisticated vocabulary "kingdom now" theologians choose to employ. The lack of any reference to an earthly kingdom prior to Christ's Second Advent in Daniel's prophecies should deter interpreters from finding a premature spiritual manifestation of the kingdom in the present Church Age. Unfortunately, those promoting a "mystery form of the kingdom" ignore this Danielic chronology by arguing for a present, spiritual form of the kingdom, despite the fact that the kingdoms of man have not yet run their course, the Antichrist and his kingdom have not yet been overthrown, and the Second Advent has not yet occurred.

Church Age

The second aspect of the interim phase during the Messianic kingdom's postponement is Christ's revelation of the church (Matt. 16:18). The church consists of all people, including both the Jewish remnant as well as Gentiles, who have trusted in the very Messiah Israel rejected. Unlike Israel, which was a national identity, the church is a spiritual organism consisting of all nations and ethnicities (Gal. 3:28; Rom. 10:19; Eph. 2:14). The Church Age began on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2 and will conclude with the future rapture of the church from the earth. Lewis Sperry Chafer, founder of Dallas Theological Seminary, used the expression "intercalation" to describe God's work in the present Church Age.²³ This phrase simply means an interruption, interpolation, or interval. This concept best describes what God is presently doing through the church. He is not currently fulfilling Israel's kingdom promises in any sense. He will fulfill these promises in the future kingdom. Rather, in the present, He is doing an entirely new work through the church that interrupts God's past dealings and future dealings with national Israel.

There are at least four reasons for believing that the church began in Acts 2.²⁴ First, the initial reference to the church is found in Christ's prophecy in Matthew 16:18, which says, "I will build My church." Interestingly, the verb translated "I will build" (*oikodomeo*) is in the future tense, thereby indicating that the church did not exist either contemporaneously with or before He made the statement. In other words, the church was destined to come into existence in the future and therefore did not exist in either the Old Testament era or during the time of Christ.

Second, the concept of the church, or a new spiritual organism consisting of both believing Jews and Gentile as co-heirs with equal spiritual status, is categorized by the New Testament as a mystery (Eph. 2:14-15; 3:9). This word "mystery" simply means a previously

²³ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, (Dallas: Dallas Seminary, 1948), 4:41.

²⁴ Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 463, 466.

unknown truth now disclosed (Rom. 16:25-26; Col. 1:26). Vine explains, "In the N.T, it [*mysterion*] denotes, not the mysterious (as with the Eng. word), but that which, being outside the range of unassisted natural apprehension, can be made known only by Divine revelation, and is made known in a manner and at a time appointed by God, and to those who are illumined by His Spirit."²⁵ Because the church itself is a mystery, it is something that could not have existed in previous eras. Thus, Paul designated the church as a "new man" (Eph. 2:15).

Third, the church could not have existed prior to Christ's Ascension (Acts 1). Christ is the head of the church (Eph. 5:23). He did not assume this position until after His Resurrection and Ascension (Eph. 1:20-22). Thus, the church could not have existed prior to His Ascension. If the church had existed prior to this point in time, it would have been functioning with no head. Similarly, the gifts of the Holy Spirit are necessary in order for the church to experience edification (1 Cor. 12:7; 14:26b). Yet, these gifts did not come into existence until after the Ascension (Eph. 4:7-11). Had the church existed before this point, it would have existed without the means of being built up and edified. Thus, when all the data is considered, it is easy to see why the church could not have existed prior to Acts 1.

Fourth, the baptizing ministry of the Holy Spirit began in Acts 2. This ministry involves the Spirit's work in taking men and women at the point of personal faith in Christ and uniting them with the body of Christ, the church. First Corinthians 12:13 says, "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit." The verb baptize (*baptizo*) simply means to identify. Such spiritual identification is not something that the believer must seek. Rather, it is something that the Spirit has already performed in the believer's life at the moment of conversion.

²⁵ Vine, *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of the Old and New Testament Words*, 424.

If we can pinpoint when the Spirit's work of uniting Christians with Christ's body, the church, began, we can similarly identify when the church or the body of Christ began. In other words, when did the Spirit begin to form the body of Christ and initiate His work of uniting believers with this new spiritual body called the church? This work must have started some time after the Ascension. Just before He ascended, Christ put the baptizing work of the Spirit into the future. He explained to the disciples, "for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now" (Acts 1:5). The church also must have started some time prior to Acts 11:15-16. Here, Peter put the launching of the Spirit's baptizing ministry into the past. In Acts 11:15-16, while seeking to validate the conversion of Cornelius, the first Gentile believer (Acts 10), he testified to the Jerusalem church, "And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as *He did* upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'"

Thus, the Spirit's baptizing ministry began some time after Acts 1:5 but before Acts 11:15-16. The only event between these two verses that could logically describe the Spirit's baptizing ministry is Acts 2. Here, the Spirit descended upon the disciples (Acts 2:1-4), and about three thousand people were saved (Acts 2:37-41). When all of the Scripture is considered, we can surmise that the church, the body of Christ, began on the Day of Pentecost as recorded in Acts 2. It is at this specific point in time that the Spirit began taking believers in Christ and uniting them into a new spiritual organism called the body of Christ or the church.

The church, which began in Acts 2, exists for three specific, divinely-ordained reasons. First, the church exists to glorify God (Eph. 3:21). Second, the church exists to edify or build up its members. God has placed spiritual gifts in the body of Christ for the purpose of being faithfully employed so that the church members can be built up, become spiritually mature, and

reach unity (Eph. 4:11-16). Third, the church exists for the purpose of accomplishing world evangelism (Mark 16:15) and to fulfill the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20). During this present Church Age, which has lasted roughly two thousand years so far, the church, rather than national Israel, comprises the preeminent servants of God on earth. During this time, God is busy "...taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name" (Acts 15:14).

What is critical to understand is that God's present work in and through the church is not to be confused with God's program concerning the coming kingdom. Several reasons lead us to this conclusion.²⁶ First, Christ is nowhere directly called the king of the church. Although He is referred to as the head of His body the church (Eph. 1:22; 4:15; 5:23; Col. 1:18) or the groom of His bride the church (Eph. 5:25), He is never specifically designated as the king of His church. Second, there exists a lack of correspondence between what Scripture predicts concerning the coming kingdom and the present spiritual realities in the Church Age. For example, during the kingdom, Christ will rule the world with a rod of iron (Ps. 2:9; Rev. 12:5) resulting in immediate justice against any sin or wrong doing (Zech. 14:16-18; Rev. 20:7-10). The Church Age, by contrast, is often characterized by carnality and a low standard of Christian living (1 Cor. 3:1-3). Hebrews 5:12 describes the reality of such prolonged carnality: "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food." Interestingly, of the seven churches mentioned in Revelation 2–3, Christ rebuked all but two of them for their backslidden condition. Walvoord capsulizes this lack of correspondence between the prophesied kingdom and the present church age: "The Christian era has been no golden age of righteousness nor has the church conquered the world. It is more accurate to recognize that the world has to a

²⁶ Kevin Quick, "The Glory of the Kingdom," online: www.kevinquick.com, accessed 10 August 2012, 718-27.

large degree possessed the church.”²⁷ Some contend that the church is the kingdom since Christ is reigning in our hearts. However, the spiritual reign of Christ in the heart of the believer is not identical to the terrestrial kingdom promises found throughout Scripture (Gen. 15:18-21; Rev. 5:10). Besides, does Christ perfectly reign in the hearts of the believer today? If so, why are there consistent commands given in the New Testament against grieving (Eph. 4:30) and quenching the Holy Spirit (1 Thess. 5:19)? The mere existence of these commands implies that believers have the capacity to commit these sins and consequently inhibit the reigning influence of God in their hearts.

Third, the inauguration of the kingdom is preceded by the proclamation to Israel “repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand” (Matt. 3:2; 4:17; 10:5-7; 24:14). Such a proclamation bears little resemblance to the church’s gospel, which is for all to believe on the name of Jesus Christ in order to experience God’s grace (Acts 16:30-31). Pentecost explains, “The new command of Christ, ‘Ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth’ (Acts 1:8) does not coincide with the gospel of the kingdom which must precede the institution of the kingdom.”²⁸ Feinberg similarly notes, “When men are invited to receive the grace of God in salvation today, they are not urged, ‘Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’”²⁹

Fourth, the New Testament consistently portrays the church as an heir of the coming kingdom as opposed to a ruler in a present existing kingdom (Acts 14:22; 2 Thess. 1:5; 2 Tim. 4:18; 2 Pet. 1:11). James 2:5 says, “Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world *to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom* which He promised to those who love

²⁷ Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, 53.

²⁸ Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology*, 469.

²⁹ Charles Feinberg, *Millennialism: The Two Major Views* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1985), 266.

Him?" (italics added). Premillennial scholar Peters asks, "If the church is the Kingdom, and believers are now in it, why designate them 'heirs,' etc., of a Kingdom."³⁰

Fifth, rather than reigning in kingdom glory, the Scripture predicts the church's present posture as suffering within a hostile world system (John 15:18-19; Rom. 13:12; 2 Tim. 3:12). Peters explains, "The church, instead of being represented as a Kingdom, is held up to us as a struggling, suffering people."³¹ Sixth, the kingdom will be a time in history where there will be no Satanic influence. In fact, the devil will be incarcerated throughout this glorious age (Rev. 20:2-3). Such a scenario hardly fits the consistent New Testament description of Satan's repeated influence against and within the church (1 Thess. 2:18; 1 Cor. 7:5; Eph. 4:26-27; 6:12; Rev 2:10).

Another reason that the church should not be confused with the kingdom is that the kingdom program revolves around national Israel. The New Testament never designates the church as "Israel." In fact, the word Israel is found seventy-three times in the New Testament and it always refers to the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.³² Sometimes Israel in the New Testament refers to Jews in faith and sometimes it refers to Jews in unbelief. However, the term Israel in the New Testament always refers to those who are physical Jews. This word never refers to Gentiles, the Church, or even a group that is a mixture of both Jews and Gentiles. This generalization even holds true with respect to the oft cited Galatians 6:16 passage. Exegetically, the expression "Israel of God" found in Galatians 6:16 only refers to believing Jews within the Galatian churches.³³

³⁰ George N. H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom*, vol. 1 (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1884; reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1952), 1:600.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 1:617.

³² Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology*, 684-90.

³³ S. Lewis Johnson, "Paul and the 'Israel of God': An Exegetical and Eschatological Case-Study," in *Essays in Honor of J. Dwight Pentecost*, ed. Stanley D. Toussaint and Charles H. Dyer (Chicago: Moody, 1986), 181-96.

An additional reason that Israel is not the church is due to the fact that the church and Israel represent separate programs of God. They are two trains running on separate railroad tracks. Theologian and founder of Dallas Theological Seminary, Lewis Sperry Chafer, noted twenty-four differences between Israel and the church.³⁴ Here are a few from Chafer's list and a few of my own.

First, Israel is the wife of Jehovah (Isa. 54:5) while the church is the bride of Christ (Eph. 5:22-33). Second, Israel gave birth to Christ (Rev. 12:1-5) whereas Christ gave birth to the church (Matt. 16:18). Third, Christ will return to rescue Israel upon her national conversion at the end of the Tribulation period (Matt. 23:37-39). Conversely, He will return to rescue the church at the rapture (John 14:1-3). Fourth, king-subject imagery is used to depict God's relationship to Israel (Isa. 33:22) while head and groom imagery is used to depict Christ's relationship with His church (Eph. 5:22-33). Fifth, God's program through Israel began in Genesis 12, and His program through the church began in Acts 2 (Matt. 16:18; 1 Cor. 12:13; Acts 1:5; 11:15-16).

Sixth, while four-fifths of the Bible pertains to Israel, only one-fifth of it deals with the church. Seventh, although Israel was a direct party to the biblical covenants (Jer. 31:31-32), the church was not a party to these covenants since the church was not yet in existence when these covenants were made. The church's relationship to these covenants can best be described as one of a third-party beneficiary rather than a direct party to them. Therefore, the church benefits from the covenants as opposed to being a direct party to them. Eighth, Israel is a nation (Ps. 147:20). As such, she is always biblically portrayed as an independent nation with borders and a capital. Even today Israel is among the nations of the earth, just like Japan, Argentina, Canada, or any other country. By contrast, the church is not a nation (Rom 10:19) but rather is comprised of

³⁴ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 4:47-53.

people from all nations (Gal. 3:28; Eph. 2:11-22; 3:6, 15). Rather than taking her seat among the nations of the earth, the church is a mere pilgrim in the world system (1 Pet. 2:11).

Ninth, while Israel fought physical wars with various enemies such as the Philistines, the church is engaged in spiritual warfare with angelic enemies (Eph. 6:10-20). Tenth, the Scripture assigns numerous *a quo* and *ad quem* statements to Israel (Gen. 15:13-16; Jer. 25:11; 29:10; Ezek. 4:5-7; Dan. 9:24-27). These are timing statements with a specific beginning and ending point for each period. One searches the New Testament in vain to find comparable timing statements for the church. Eleventh, Israel had a priesthood with all her priests coming from the tribe of Levi and the line of Aaron (Exod. 28:1). By contrast, the church does not have a priesthood because it is a priesthood (Rev. 1:6). The New Testament teaches the priesthood of all believers (1 Pet. 2:5, 9). Every Church Age believer is a priest with direct access to God the Father through God the Son (Heb. 4:16).

Twelfth, while Israel will be resurrected at the beginning of the millennial kingdom (Dan. 12:2; John 11:23-24; Rev. 20:4-5), Church Age believers receive their resurrected bodies at the point of the rapture (1 Thess. 4:13-18; 1 Cor. 15:50-58). Thirteenth, Israel's judgment will take place on earth, at the end of the Tribulation period, in the wilderness (Ezek. 20:33-44). By contrast, the only judgment the New Testament reveals for the church is the Bema Seat judgment of rewards in heaven following the rapture (Rom. 14:10; 1 Cor. 3:10-15; 2 Cor. 5:10).

Fourteenth, although the gates of the New Jerusalem are named after the twelve tribes (Rev. 21:12), who were the foundation of Israel (Matt. 19:28), the foundations of the eternal city are named after the twelve apostles (Rev. 21:14), who are the foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20). Fifteenth, people become members of the commonwealth of Israel through physical birth. By contrast, membership in the church is only attained by spiritual birth (John 3:1-9; Titus 3:5).

Sixteenth, Israel was directly governed by the Mosaic Law (Ps. 147:19-20). By contrast, the controlling authority for the church is New Testament revelation. While all Scripture is *for* the church (2 Tim. 3:16; Rom. 15:4), only the New Testament's epistolary literature is directly *about* the church. Seventeenth, the Holy Spirit indwelt and filled Old Testament Jews selectively (Joel 2:28), temporarily (1 Sam. 16:14; Ps. 51:11), and subsequent to salvation in order to enable them to accomplish a special purpose (Exod. 31:3). By contrast, the Holy Spirit indwells all Church-Age believers (1 Cor. 12:13) permanently (John 14:16) and at the point of salvation (Rom. 8:9). Thus, the Spirit's work in and through Israel cannot be used as a pattern to depict the believer's normative experience with the Holy Spirit in the present age (John 7:37-39; 14:16-17; Acts 1:5). Eighteenth, while Christ's farewell address to Israel (Matt. 24:15, 20) is recorded in the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24-25), His farewell address to the church (John 16:12-13) is found in the Upper Room Discourse (John 13-17). Nineteenth, although Israel is referred to as God's first-born son (Exod. 4:22), the church is never given this same designation or title. Twentieth, while Israel's program is revealed in the Old Testament, the church's program was unknown in Old Testament times. Because the church is a New Testament mystery (Eph. 3:3-6), or something previously hidden and now unveiled (Rom. 16:25-26), Church Age doctrine comes exclusively from the New Testament (Matt. 16:18; John 13-17) rather than the Old Testament. Noting such differences should caution us against taking prophecies and promises that are specifically aimed at God's kingdom program through Israel and misapplying them to the present dispensation of the Church Age.

Re-Offer of the Kingdom

However, one day the church's mission on the earth will be completed (Rom. 11:25b) resulting in the church's removal through the rapture. Then God, who is not forgetful of His prior

unconditional covenants with Israel (Exod. 2:24; Ezek. 36:22), will re-extend the offer of the kingdom to national Israel in the midst of the coming Great Tribulation. As noted earlier, when the Abrahamic Covenant is considered alongside of the Mosaic Covenant, Israel's covenantal structure can best be understood as an unconditional covenant with a conditional blessing. Once the nation fulfills the condition of enthroning Christ, she will then become the possessor or enjoyer of what she unconditionally owns. This coming time of unparalleled distress is the means by which God's covenanted nation will become not just the *owner* but also the *possessor* of the covenanted blessings. Just as God today oftentimes brings people to Himself through tribulation, God will use the events of the coming Great Tribulation period to make Israel aware of her need for her Messiah (*Yeshuah* or Jesus). During this time, He will draw Israel to Himself. Thus, Jeremiah 30:7 predicts, "Alas! for that day is great, There is none like it; And it is the time of Jacob's distress, But he will be saved from it."

Once Israel trusts in Christ as her Messiah, she will have fulfilled the long unfulfilled condition found in the Mosaic Covenant. Once this condition is satisfied, that future generation of Jews will then enter into the unconditional covenantal promises thus ushering in the earthly kingdom not only for Israel but the whole world. This covenantal structure shows why Christ conditioned His Second Advent upon Israel properly responding to Him as her Messiah. Christ explained this condition to the Jewish people in Matthew 23:37-39. He said, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. Behold, your house is being left to you desolate! For I say to you, from now on you will not see Me until you say, 'BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD!'" In other words, first-century Israel's failure to fulfill this condition resulted in the

kingdom not being established as well as the imposition of covenantal discipline in A.D. 70 (Deut. 28:49-50). Conversely, future Israel's fulfillment of the condition will be evidenced by the nation's citation of the phrase "BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD!" This phrase comes from Psalm 118:26, which is a Messianic psalm (Matt. 21:9). Once this condition is met, Christ will return to rescue Israel and establish His kingdom through her (Matt. 24:30-31; 25:31).

Therefore, the fact that the Davidic Covenant is not being fulfilled in the present day in no wise negates its future fulfillment. When the disciples inquired as to when the kingdom would be restored to Israel, Christ never challenged the idea of an eventual fulfillment. Rather, He simply challenged the disciples' presupposition of its immediate fulfillment (Acts 1:6-7). In the future Tribulation period, the offer of the kingdom will once again be extended to Israel (Matt. 24:14). Unlike at the First Advent (Matt. 23:37-38), this time the offer will be accepted leading to Christ's return (Matt. 24:30-31) and subsequent earthly kingdom (Matt. 25:34; Rev. 20:1-10).

Transfer of Kingdom Authority

Thus, one of the dominant themes of the Book of Revelation is how this world is transferred from the grasp of Satan to the earthly Messianic kingdom predicted in the pages of the Old Testament. In other words, Revelation explains how the world will eventually transition from the rule that Satan has had on the world ever since the Fall in Eden (Luke 4:5-8; 2 Cor. 4:4; Eph. 2:2; 1 John 5:19) to the future time in history when God and His people "will reign upon the earth" (Rev. 5:10b). Revelation 11:15 captures this theme when it says, "The kingdom of the world has become *the kingdom* of our Lord, and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever."

The mechanism for this transition of authority is the seven-sealed scroll in Revelation, which represents the title deed of the earth.³⁵ As each of the seals is broken, another divine judgment comes upon the world thereby progressively loosening the grip that Satan has had on the planet ever since the Fall of Man. This reality explains why so many of Revelation's judgments bear a striking resemblance to the ten plagues of the Exodus. For example, the sores of the sixth plague (Exod. 9:8-12) resemble the first bowl judgment (Rev. 16:1-2). The rivers to blood of the first plague (Exod. 7:19-21) resemble the third bowl judgment (Rev. 16:4-7). The darkness of the ninth plague (Exod. 10:21-23) resembles the fifth bowl judgment (Rev. 16:10-11). The hail of the seventh plague (Exod. 9:22-26) resembles the seventh bowl judgment (Rev. 16:17-21).

What is the point of these similarities? God took His people out of four hundred years of Egyptian bondage (Gen. 15:13) in the Exodus. In Revelation, God will perform the ultimate Exodus by taking the entire world out of the Satanic bondage it has been under since the Fall. Each Exodus plague progressively weakened Pharaoh's resolve to hold Israel in captivity. Pharaoh's will was ultimately broken through the death of his first born as expressed in the tenth plague. In the same way, each divine judgment in Revelation will progressively weaken Satan's grip on the planet until finally the entire world will be transferred into the glorious Messianic Kingdom. The death of God the Father's "first born" son laid the groundwork for Satan's ultimate defeat (Rev. 5:9). Satan's sentence will finally be imposed as the scroll is progressively opened by God the Son.

Kingdom Establishment

³⁵ Renald Showers, *Maranatha Our Lord, Come!* (Bellmawr: FOI, 1995), 88.

As mentioned earlier, one of the significant purposes of the "Great Tribulation Period" is to bring Israel into a right relationship with her Messiah so that the Messianic kingdom can come to planet earth. As previously stated, unlike at the First Advent, this time the offer will be accepted leading to Christ's return (Matt. 23:37-39) and subsequent earthly reign (Matt. 25:34; Rev. 20:1-10). During this glorious one-thousand year era, everything that was promised in the Abrahamic and Davidic Covenants will find a literal fulfillment when Christ will rule the world from David's Throne (Matt. 25:31) in Jerusalem (Zech. 14:16-18). This time period represents the restoration of the office of Theocratic Administrator lost in Eden. God the Father will govern the last Adam, or God the Son, who in turn will govern the world on the Father's behalf.

Israel's covenants will find their fullest expression during this Age. All that God intended for the earthly theocracy of the Old Testament era will come to fruition not only for Israel, but also for the entire world. The Times of the Gentiles will be brought to an end as Israel will be head again over the nations (Isa. 14:1-2; 60:10, 12, 14, 16). All of the kingdom truths predicted by the Old Testament prophets will become a reality. All that Christ wanted to do for Israel at His first Advent (Matt. 23:37) will come to pass at the Second Advent (Matt. 24:31). With Satan bound during this period (Rev. 20:1-3), the earth will finally be exonerated from the long bondage it has suffered under since the Edenic Fall. The passage that typically comes to mind when discussing Christ's millennial reign is Revelation 20:1-10. As explained throughout, most of the information regarding the conditions of the millennial kingdom have already been anticipated and explained in prior Scripture, especially the Old Testament. Yet, Revelation 20:1-10 provides an important detail since it is the only passage that specifies the kingdom's duration of one-thousand years.

Eternal State

A chronological approach to the Book of Revelation reveals that the Millennial kingdom will be followed by the Eternal State. Thus, it becomes necessary to trace God's kingdom program beyond Christ's one-thousand year earthly reign. Chafer observes that the transition from the Messianic kingdom to the Eternal kingdom (Rev. 21–22) will be marked by seven events. They include:

1. the release of Satan from the abyss, 2. the revolt on earth with judgments upon Satan and his armies, 3. the passing of the old heaven and old earth, 4. the great white throne judgment, 5. creation of a new heaven and new earth, 6. the descent of the bridal city from God out of heaven, and 7. the surrender of the mediatorial aspect of Christ's reign and adjustment to the eternal state immediately following.³⁶

Only after the defeat of Satan (Rev. 20:10) will God destroy the present earth and replace it with the new heaven and earth (Rev 21:1). Why such a precise chronology? This order relates to a point that was brought out early on. According to Ryrie, "Because He must be triumphant *in the same arena* where He was seemingly defeated. His rejection by the rulers of this world was on this earth...His exaltation must also be on this earth."³⁷ In other words, because the office of Theocratic Administrator was lost to this world it must be restored to this world. Yet, with the accomplishment of the earthly, one-thousand-year reign of Christ, this divine prerogative has been fulfilled. Thus, God is now free to start anew. He does so with the destruction of the present heavens and earth and the creation of the new heaven and earth.

Early Church Views

This paper has carefully articulated the coming reality of a future, earthly reign of Christ drawn explicitly and exclusively from the entire Bible. If this biblical interpretation is clear, then it stands to reason that the earliest church fathers also held to a belief of a future, earthly reign of Christ. While the writings of these church fathers should not be elevated to the same level as the

³⁶ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 5:359.

³⁷ Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 511.

divinely inspired biblical text, their work can serve as a check upon our interpretation of Scripture. In other words, we can be further confident that the scriptural interpretation given thus far is correct since those closest to the biblical text, the early church fathers, also held to premillennialism or the reality of the coming, earthly kingdom of Christ. Interestingly, according to the writings of the earliest church fathers, the premillennial view was dominant in the first two centuries of the church. For example, Justin Martyr (A.D. 100–165) in his *Dialogue with Trypho* declared, "But I and every other completely orthodox Christian feel certain that there will be a resurrection of the flesh, followed by a thousand years in the rebuilt, embellished, and enlarged city of Jerusalem as was announced by the prophets Ezekiel, Isaiah, and the others."³⁸

Moreover, church historian Schaff summarizes the millennial views of the early church fathers:

The most striking point in the eschatology of the ante-Nicene age (A.D. 100–325) is the prominent chiliasm, or millenarianism, that is the belief of a visible reign of Christ in glory on earth with the risen saints for a thousand years, before the general resurrection and judgment. It was indeed not the doctrine of the church embodied in any creed or form of devotion, but a widely current opinion of distinguished teachers, such as Barnabas, Papias, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Methodius, and Lactantius.³⁹

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can see from this Genesis to Revelation study, that the kingdom program is all about Israel. Although the Church will participate in the coming earthly kingdom by ruling and reigning with Christ once this kingdom is established (2 Tim 2:11-13; Rev 5:10), the present work of God in the Church Age should not be confused with the establishment of God's kingdom.

³⁸ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 80.

³⁹ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 2:614.