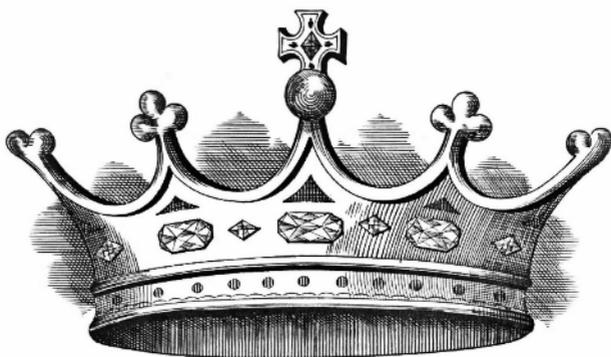
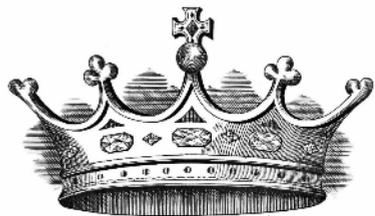


The power and the glory of God's kingdom



The power and the glory of God's kingdom

by Brian Johnston



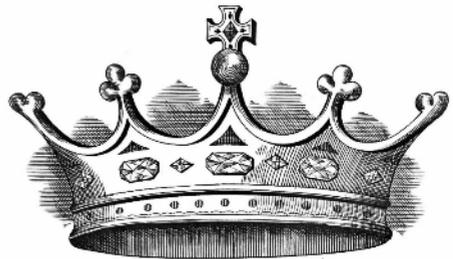
I. The conditional kingdom

Many of us love a conspiracy theory. We hear of governments being accused of master-minding terrorist strikes against themselves and of royalty being accused of contriving a fatal accident. But there's a greater conspiracy theory abroad than any misconceived human rumour! God is planning to remove all worldly power and to establish his own rule – and Christians are in on this! First Corinthians 15:24 says, *Then comes the end ... when [Christ] delivers **the kingdom** to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power.*

With those words, Paul presents to us a snapshot of God's kingdom as it will be some time after the return of Jesus Christ. The Old Testament prophets had written about this long ago, of course, when they predicted a Messiah ruling in glory, finally accepted by Israel. With the eye of faith, godly Israelites at the time of Christ's birth, looked ahead towards this time of Messiah's earthly rule. Typical among them was: *a man from Arimathea, a city of the Jews,*

*who was waiting for **the kingdom of God** ... [he was the man who] ... went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus (Luke 23:50-52).*

Such a sense of anticipation had been built up from prophecies like Daniel's when he wrote of how ... *one like a Son of Man was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, glory and **a kingdom**, that all the peoples, nations and men of every language might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and **His kingdom** is one which will not be destroyed ... but the saints of the Highest One will receive **the kingdom** and possess **the kingdom** forever, for all ages to come (Daniel 7:13-18).* And when Jesus came,



he encouraged this expectation by continually referring to himself as the Son of Man.

Ultimately, all those redeemed by Christ's work of salvation on the cross will be included in this eternal expression of the kingdom: that is, all who have been made holy through the cross of Christ will possess the kingdom forever.

But we've begun at the end, and we should begin at the beginning! So let's now rewind and take the story from the beginning. In Genesis 1 God had said, "*Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion ... over all the earth*" ... *And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over ... the earth"* (Genesis 1:26-28).

There's no doubt, then, that we were made to rule. But sadly, in a now fallen world, this can be done independently of God. God's kingdom is only expressed when human rule on earth is dependent on heaven's will and agenda. Didn't our Lord speak in his example prayer of God's will being done on earth as it is in heaven? When that happens, we see God's kingdom being expressed: individuals on earth being brought together in God's purposes to responsibly carry out his agenda in a corporate way as his kingdom.

To Abraham, God was 'the judge of all the earth' (Genesis 18:25), but from his time onwards, there was one privileged community which was subject to God's rule in a highly detailed way. God became in a very particular sense king of the nation of Israel (Deuteronomy 33:5): as at Mount Sinai in the wilderness, the nation of Israel became the special possession of God. Even when Israel was established under David's dynasty, each earthly king was no absolute monarch. Kings like David were 'the Lord's anointed', deriving sovereignty from the heavenly king to whom he was responsible for the manner in which he exercised his delegated rule.

From this, there would seem to be three requirements for a kingdom – a people, a leader and rules whereby the people are prepared to follow their leader's terms. Let's read the exchange that took place between God and Israel: "*If you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me **a kingdom of priests and a holy nation***" (Exodus 19:5-6). This was a really unique relationship which didn't exist between God and any other nation.

Israel, however, beginning with the ten northern tribes, failed to maintain this commitment, and

the time came when Abijah, one of the kings of David's dynasty ... *stood up on Mount Zemaraim that is in the hill country of Ephraim and said, "Hear me, O Jeroboam and all Israel! [he was addressing himself to the ten breakaway northern tribes] ... you think to withstand **the kingdom of the LORD** in the hand of the sons of David, because you are a great multitude and have with you the golden calves that Jeroboam made you for gods. Have you not driven out the priests of the LORD, the sons of Aaron, and the Levites, and made priests for yourselves like the peoples of other lands? (2 Chronicles 13:4,8-9).*

So the southern king, Abijah, who was still trying to be loyal to the nation's original agreement with God at Mount Sinai, was drawing the line that day according to scriptural principle. As far as he was concerned it was 'us and them' – and the majority northerners of the ten tribes, because of their disobedience, had forfeited any right to the kingdom which now properly contained only the faithful minority of the two tribes in the south.

Sadly, 100 or so years later, the same decline of which Abijah had accused Jeroboam was all too evident in the south also. Abijah's boast was all but gone, and the 'privileged nation' (or

kingdom) status was forfeited through Israel's disobedience – in the south now as well as in the north. By their unrighteousness even the royal line of David proved itself unworthy of the honour of mediating God's rule on earth.

For as long as God was head of his people; they were in turn head of the nations of the world. But when their kingdom status was withdrawn by God, sovereignty over Israel – and indeed sovereignty over the world – passed over into the hands of Gentile rulers. As long as Israel gave God his place; then God would give them their place. But, later, once Israel disobeyed, God permitted kings like Babylon's Nebuchadnezzar to rule the world.

It still remained true, however, that God's rule over Israel had been very special. By contrast, over the Gentiles it was in an altogether more general sense. Incidentally, one of the most significant dates in world history is one you're unlikely to hear about in any secular day-school: it is "... *the fourth year of Jehoiakim, the son of Josiah, king of Judah; the same as the first year of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon*" (Jeremiah 25:1). Why is it important? Because this was the year when Israel was sidelined by God. It's the first specifically Gentile date in the Bible. In that same year,

Jeremiah (who was then in Jerusalem – Jeremiah 36:1) wrote, at the command of the Lord, the story of Israel's persistent pursuit of evil during twenty-three years of his time as a prophet (Jeremiah 25:3). This was the climax of all their backsliding. That year there was also revealed to Jeremiah the 70 years' desolation of the land of Israel which would take place while her people were exiled in Babylon (Jeremiah 25:11-12). The very next year turned out to be important too, because in it two things happened: first of all, at Jerusalem, king Jehoiakim took a knife to God's Word and then burnt the fragments; while Daniel, who was in Babylon with the exiles, interpreted King Nebuchadnezzar's dreams (Daniel 2:1). In other words, the Jewish King Jehoiakim, through his total disrespect for God's Word, had lost the kingdom; while the Gentile king Nebuchadnezzar was being informed by God, through dreams, of his place in world history.

And so began a fateful time for Israel which Jesus called 'the times of the Gentiles' (Luke 21:24) in which Israel would no longer be sovereign even in their own land. How things had changed from the time ... *when the Most High gave the nations their inheritance ... [and] He set the boundaries of the peoples*

according to the number of the sons of Israel (Deuteronomy 32:8). In Psalm 18, David had been able to say to God: *You have placed me as head of the nations* (Psalm 18:43). But with that privilege came responsibility – responsibility in which Israel, sadly, failed. And upon their failure, *God granted sovereignty, grandeur, glory and majesty to Nebuchadnezzar* (Daniel 5:18). That is, sovereignty passed into Gentile hands. Israel, destined originally to be the head of the nations, went into captivity in Babylon. God then put on hold the promises which would have sustained her at the head of the nations and not at the tail. God's longings to bless all the nations of the world through a radiant law-loving Israel had to recede for a set time. But, although sovereignty passed to the Babylonians, we need to realize there was a major difference between them and Israel: for **'the kingdom of the LORD'** (to use Abijah's phrase) would never equally describe the Babylonian empire even when it exercised world dominance by God's sovereign permission. They ruled subject to God's sovereignty, but with Israel God went further in terms of revealing himself to them and establishing a relationship with them that was conditioned by rules.

So we've established that: in Israel in the Old Testament we

find a case of God's special rule as distinct from his general sovereignty in human affairs. *The LORD became king in Jeshurun, when the heads of the people were gathered, all the tribes of Israel together* (Deuteronomy 33:5). Later in Israel, God had certainly permitted kings of David's line who mediated his rule, each being *'the LORD's anointed'*. However, David's kingly line was only heralding the ultimate realisation of God's rule seen in the second Psalm: *"As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill"* (Psalm 2:6). That ideal is yet to be seen in Christ. It was

God's plan to send the Messiah – one who would be rejected by Israel nationally and would gather believers of all nations around him.

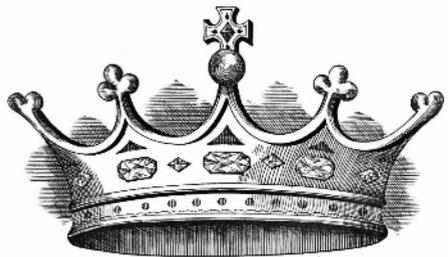
So far, our biblical picture of the kingdom is still a developing one: in which we, too, are implicated, because, as we'll see, there's a spiritual foretaste on offer today as we spread the good news of how to be ready for the ultimate kingdom expression which is still to come.

2. The coming kingdom

Each king appointed in Israel, had the honour of prefiguring the coming king (Messiah), and his kingdom. An insightful Israelite would know that a greater 'David' would one day surpass past glories (Ezekiel 34:23; 37:24). Israel's time of captivity in Babylon had left a vacancy on the throne of David, but the prophets foretold that the crown of Judah would be without a wearer only "until He come whose right it is" (Ezekiel 21:27). So there was hope that the best days still lay ahead. This rightful king would turn out to be the long-expected Messiah. Along with such prophesying of the messianic age, the ultimate expression of the kingdom was also predicted. The fact that the Bible's Messiah is firstly Israel's king meant that Israel's recovery was guaranteed. And so this idea of the coming kingdom is intertwined with the prediction of the coming King. This is why we find the arrival of the Messianic age and the kingdom bound together in what Peter preached at Jerusalem (as well as in what Paul preached at Rome).

Through the prophet Daniel, God said: *'Seventy weeks have been decreed for your people'* (Daniel 9:24). These '70 weeks' chart

Israel's path back to regain sovereignty as head of the nations. Let's find out more about them, for they are the key to the whole framework of Bible prophecy, including the kingdom to come. By allowing Israel to be taken away into captivity in Babylon, God had imposed 70 years of enforced rest on the land of Israel. This was to compensate for the fact that for the past 490 years they had failed to allow the land to lie fallow every 7th year, as God had commanded them (2 Chronicles 36:21). This was typical of their disobedience. So, the 490 years was, if you like, made up of 70 lots of seven years. Now, looking forward from that time of captivity, the '70 weeks' Daniel spoke about in his 9th chapter were in fact another 490 years that now stretched ahead in God's program for Israel – since they can be divided up in the same way into 70



groups of 'sevens'. This is what Daniel said: *Seventy weeks [or 'sevens'] have been decreed for your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to make an end of sin, to make atonement for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most holy place* (Daniel 9:24).

This is from the Jewish language section of Daniel – indicating this was God's plan for Israel through to the time of the end. Obviously all these things haven't happened yet as far as Israel is concerned. For Israel has not yet embraced her Messiah, far less made an end of sin and entered into the experience of everlasting righteousness. So the entire 490 years weren't consecutive from that time onwards in the 6th century BC.

In Daniel, the promise was given that world domination by Gentiles is not to endure for ever; their empires are to pass away. After a period of Gentile domination over Israel, Daniel foretold: "the God of heaven shall set up a **Kingdom**, which shall never be destroyed ... and it shall stand for ever" (Daniel 2:44).

But even before God sets up that future kingdom, he's not even at this time abdicated his sovereignty; since the Gentile kings are reminded that they,

too, hold their power by the permission of God – as Daniel again said: "the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomsoever He will" (Daniel 4:17). And, according to the unfolding of God's plans for this world, it's currently his will for Gentile kings to be dominant.

But that'll change. Israel's future 'trouble' (see Jeremiah 30) and restoration are key moves toward the establishment of God's kingdom. Jesus said: *'there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in **the kingdom of God**, but yourselves being thrown out. And they will come from east and west and from north and south, and will recline at the table in **the kingdom of God**'* (Luke 13:28-29).

So, this is what Jesus' first disciples and the others of their generation were already looking ahead to. Believers in Israel - and outside of Israel (by which I now mean Christian believers) – will possess in fullest measure that same hope. As far as God's purposes for Israel are concerned, normal service will one day be resumed. As the prophet Isaiah predicted: *It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the*

hills; and all the nations shall flow to it ... for out of Zion shall go the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore (Isaiah 2:2-5).

Wonderful times lie ahead for those who love God. The fully ripe kingdom (with Israel back at the head of the nations) will materialize after Jesus Christ, the Deliverer, has returned to Jerusalem (Romans 11:26) and Gentile world power is finally shattered. Jesus looked ahead to such a time when he spoke to his disciples just before going to the cross. He said: *'This is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many ... I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in **the kingdom of God**'* (Mark 14:24,25).

This same futuristic view of the kingdom after the return of the Son of Man is plainly set out by Luke when he records Jesus saying: *'Behold the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they put forth leaves, you see it and know for yourselves that summer is now near. So you also, when you see these things happening,*

*recognize that **the kingdom of God is near**'* (Luke 21:29-31).

The consistent message to Jewish disciples back then in the time of Christ was that sometime after Jesus' death, things were going to be different – Israel would get what it was looking for, but only way in the future – for the kingdom of God does embrace something which will be more like what people expect when there's talk of a kingdom. There'll be a final blossoming of the kingdom, as the Old Testament predicted. The kingdom of God in its full manifestation is future; and its authority will be exercised by 'the saints of the Most High' (Daniel 7:18) - with redeemed humanity (both Jew and Gentile) headed up in Christ. The sovereignty exercised by the kings of Israel will then be seen to have been but a faint picture of the ideal exercise of divine sovereignty in an age yet to come.

Those in the Gospels like Simeon had a keen sense of anticipation of all this: *Simeon ... was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel; and the Holy Spirit was upon him* (Simeon, Luke 2:25). Then there was Anna who: *came up and began giving thanks to God, and continued to speak of Him to all those who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem* (Anna, Luke 2:38). And Joseph also

was: a man from Arimathea, a city of the Jews, who was waiting for **the kingdom of God**; this man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus (Luke 23:50-52).

This was ahead of our Lord's First Advent - and theirs was an expectation based, of course, on the promise given in the first part of the Bible. But the time is still to come when God will send back the Messiah or Christ to this earth. Notice how this early mention of the kingdom of God in the Gospels is side by side with mention of 'the consolation of Israel' and 'the redemption of Jerusalem' - showing that the common expectation of a godly minority in Israel at that time was of Israel's recovery. And they weren't wrong - only premature! And it was a misunderstanding that was set to continue. Disappointed disciples at the time of the cross said: 'We were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel' (Luke 24:21).

Even after the cross, in resurrection, when the Lord Jesus: *presented Himself alive after His suffering ... appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of the things concerning the **kingdom of God** ... they were asking Him, saying, 'Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?' He said to them, 'It is not for you to know times or epochs which*

the Father has fixed by His own authority; but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses' (Acts 1:3-8). So, if we're in danger of being confused by Jesus' words; then the Jews themselves were certainly wrong-footed by their reading of the Old Testament. Even Jesus' closest followers, after the explanations of those 40 days closeted alone with the Master in resurrection, even these disciples wanted the power and glory sooner rather than later. However, as the text from Acts chapter 1 makes clear, at that stage the power and kingdom which Jesus promised was spiritual, centring on the impending power of the Spirit. But the time is certainly coming when we will join with them in judging the world (1 Corinthians 6:2).

As yet we are even now still living in the times of the Gentiles, between the two Advents of the Messiah, and so within the overlapping of two ages: namely, the present age and the age to come. It's as if the age to come has invaded the present age, and now overlaps it. The king and his kingdom have in one sense come, but in another sense are still to come. The kingdom experience which Jesus has promised us is first spiritual and inconspicuous, but in the future it will be more like

what we might call an actual kingdom: and a highly conspicuous one at that. What the first disciples had to grasp – and what we even now struggle with as we try to understand all

the various references to the kingdom of God is this overlap idea. This is the key to a correct and balanced view of the kingdom of God today.

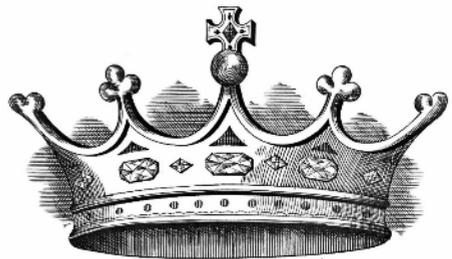
3. The contemporary kingdom

With the arrival on the scene of John the Baptist there came the dawn of a new age. *After John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the **kingdom of God** is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel'* (Mark 1:14-15). So the same message John had preached was taken up by our Lord and later by his apostles as well. Jesus said: *'I must preach the **kingdom of God** to the other cities also, for I was sent for this purpose'* (Luke 4:43-44). And later he sent out his apostles ... *to proclaim the **kingdom of God** and to perform healing* (Luke 9:2).

There could be little doubt that the kingdom was 'at hand' – for it had drawn near in the person of its king. Jesus declared that he was the Son of Man, the one to whom the kingdom was to be given, according to the prophet Daniel's vision. And the 'saints of the Most High' who were to receive the kingdom included Jesus' followers, to whom he said at the Last Supper, *"I appoint unto you **a kingdom**, even as*

my Father appointed to me" (Luke 22:28-30).

But there was a strange sense in which the kingdom was both 'already here' and also 'not yet here'! Consider, on the one hand, how the Lord said, *'If I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the **kingdom of God** has come upon you'* (Matthew 12:28) – which seems to imply that the kingdom of God had arrived. But had it? This is where it gets a little confusing. Jesus seems at first to be saying two different things; first that the kingdom of God had come; then trying to rid people of the idea that it had already come or was even going to come immediately. For example, when he told *a parable, because He was near Jerusalem, and they supposed that the **kingdom of God** was going to appear immediately*



(Luke 19:11). Clearly the Lord didn't want them to suppose that the kingdom of God was soon to appear. But yet he'd already said that it had come upon them.

How can we reconcile this? It seems Jesus taught two aspects of the kingdom. The kingdom is firstly inconspicuous. It's a spiritual kingdom: one that's characterised by gradual, invisible development. This is actually the beginning phase of its final outward fulfilment.

The Lord brought both forms of the kingdom together in some of his parables. Speaking of its present hidden development, he said: *'The **kingdom of God** is like a man who casts seed upon the soil; and he goes to bed at night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts and grows - how, he himself does not know. The soil produces crops by itself; first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head. But when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come'* (Mark 4:26-29). This was the farming analogy which the Lord used to reconcile these seemingly contradictory features of God's kingdom. What becomes ultimately a visible crop to be harvested starts out life as a hidden seed developing under the ground for long periods without human involvement. The kingdom of God had indeed come with the Lord's First Advent, but

not in a way that was outwardly visible, and certainly not as a military show of human might.

This is not to deny there's something going on now; however, the fully ripe kingdom is future, as the Lord made clear when: *He told them a parable: 'Behold the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they put forth leaves, you see it and know for yourselves that summer is now near. So you also, when you see these things happening, recognize that the **kingdom of God** is near'* (Luke 21:29-31).

This describes the sudden arrival of the kingdom in its highly conspicuous form. Long after Jesus' death, things were going to be different – Israel would get what it was looking for – but only way into the future.

If that was going to be a long wait, the Lord had a message for the followers he left behind waiting for Pentecost ... *appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of the things concerning the **kingdom of God** ... they were asking Him, saying, 'Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?' He said to them, 'It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses'* (Acts 1:3-8).

If we're in danger of being confused by Jesus' words; the Jews were certainly wrong-footed by their reading of the Old Testament! They wanted the power and the glory sooner rather than later – even Jesus' closest followers – but at this stage the power Jesus promised was spiritual as it centred on the impending power of the Spirit – even to this day it's not for us to know the time when this great kingdom will come to earth. Even after Jesus' resurrection they continued to hope that he might immediately fulfil those hopes they'd cherished since before his passion: '*Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?*' (Acts 1:6). But from Pentecost onwards, after the Spirit came, they knew that "the Gospel of the Kingdom" which they had to announce was good news about a spiritual kingdom initially.

And there were three main parts to the Gospel which Peter then preached: first, that the time predicted in the Old Testament had arrived (seen in the birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus); second, that Jesus, crucified on earth, is now exalted in heaven (as evidenced by the activity of the Holy Spirit in believers' lives); and third, that this present age will climax in the return of Christ (hence the appeal for repentance

with the offer of forgiveness, the Holy Spirit, and salvation).

Some texts from the book of Acts show there are definitely things we're meant to be doing while we wait for that fully ripe form of the kingdom. Let's look at some verses which give an updated picture of what it means to show respect right now for God's rule. *When they believed Philip preaching the good news about the **kingdom of God** and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike* (Acts 8:12). Then again, after Paul and his companions *had made many disciples, they returned ... strengthening the ... disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, 'Through many tribulations we must enter the **kingdom of God.**' ... They ... appointed elders for them in every church ...* (Acts 14:21-23). So matters such as believer's baptism; keeping the faith; and being in a local church with elders when all taken together show the way in which we're meant to give expression to the as yet spiritual kingdom of God today. Certainly, we can continue what was begun by the apostles: showing respect for God's rule today takes place at a spiritual level – in terms of the obedience of faith – when we organize ourselves just as the first Christians did 2,000 years ago.

Where such submission to kingdom rule is seen overall in the New Testament is in terms of a company of disciples, all baptized by immersion in water, all added locally to church of God fellowship, all within an overall community serving according to one pattern of teaching everywhere, maintained under a fellowship of elders and separated to God. It's both natural and biblical to associate God's rule at this present time with the sphere in which submission to it is most clearly seen – and this, most assuredly, is in Christian testimony which is organized along New Testament lines. In other words, Christian testimony now organized in this biblical way answers to the kingdom of God as it was seen in the Old Testament in which faithful Israel conditionally expressed God's kingdom by obediently following the teaching which they too had received.

Throughout the New Testament, God's Word joins together various theological terms which evoke Old Testament history in a way that is specially relevant to the kingdom of God as it was expressed back then: For example, Jesus says: "***the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people [nation], producing the fruit of it***" (Matthew 21:43); and again: "***Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has chosen***

gladly to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32). The apostle John says: ***He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father*** (Revelation 1:6); whereas the apostle Peter says: ***you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood ... you are a chosen race, A royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession*** (1 Peter 2:5,9).

Peter's words there are so reminiscent of the gathering of the Israelite tribes at the foot of Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:5-6), are they not? So much so that we have to conclude it's deliberate, and we're to understand this as a kingdom update.

All believers belong to the 'not yet here' kingdom, but not all believers belong to the 'already here' kingdom which in its present spiritual expression demands obedience to the Lord's teaching through his apostles. At the first coming of Christ the age to come invaded the present age, so that the two ages now overlap each other, and this overlapping lasts from our Lord's first coming to his second coming. This whole overlapping period is, in a sense, "the last hour" (1 John 2:18), which is prolonged only through the patience of God (2 Peter 3:9). It marks both the end of the old age and the beginning of the new age (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:11;

Hebrews 9:26). In the overlap, all believers belong prophetically to the coming kingdom in the age yet to come, and among those believers currently living in this age are those who, like their identical counterparts 2,000 years ago, may equally – on biblical grounds – claim to give an interim picture of that

ultimate rule of God in the age to come. Righteousness is always necessary for its expression; and this condition of obedience to the Lord's teaching agrees with what was formerly required of Israel nationally. In the future, of course, all disobedience will have been entirely eliminated.

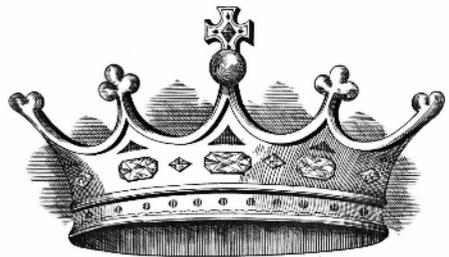
4. The consummate kingdom

A man won a free return ticket for an Atlantic crossing on a luxury liner. He was poor, and decided to take dried biscuits and cheese in a plastic bag on which to live for the duration of the crossing. He was content to eat his meagre fare while the others dined in the fancy restaurants because he was just so glad to be on this trip of a lifetime. But when he was nearly home, he thought he'd try just one meal in the high-class restaurant. He cautiously asked the waiter the price. The waiter was astonished: had he not read his ticket? All the meals were included! The moral of such a story for us is that all believers will enjoy eternally the blessings of God's kingdom, but the opportunity of a present foretaste of the same privilege is included - on our ticket, as it were - and it would be more than a real shame if we missed out on it!

Central to the (synoptic) gospels is Jesus' preaching about the kingdom of God. He was teaching: '*The time is fulfilled, and the **kingdom of God** is at hand*' (Mark 1:15), showing the kingdom of God had arrived

along with the time of the Messianic age ('the time'). Jesus' primary mission to his people was to offer them the possibility of final salvation, which at least sometimes, he expressed by using the term 'kingdom of God.' It's *better* [he said]... *to enter the **kingdom of God** with one eye, than ... to be cast into [gehenna]* (Mark 9:47). Jesus set entering the kingdom in parallel with entering life (cp. vv.43,47) and avoiding hell or gehenna. It seems difficult to disassociate this fully from the final perspective which we've been including in our treatment of the kingdom of God.

But, as we've seen, the Lord also spoke of the kingdom of God as a historical process: one which had been inconspicuously begun, but which was growing to a very conspicuous result (e.g. Jesus as



sower and reaper respectively in his 2 Advents, Mark 4:26-29). He could say: *The Kingdom of God is like a grain of mustard seed which ... grew* (Luke 13:18,19; Mark 4:30-32).

But there again verses such as: *'This is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I say to you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the **kingdom of God**'* (Mark 14:24,25), and: *'Behold the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they put forth leaves, you see it and know for yourselves that summer is now near. So you also, when you see these things happening, recognize that the **kingdom of God is near**'* (Luke 21:29-31) – verses like these obviously point ahead to a more consummate expression of the kingdom in the future.

Equally, the apostle Paul's 'testifying about the kingdom of God' was in terms of trying to persuade unbelieving Jews about Jesus while making known God's salvation to them. If we use Acts 28 as an example, the key points in Paul's preaching there seem to be the identity of the Messiah; God's future purposes for Israel; and the inclusion of Gentiles. Here is, in fact, what we read there: *When they had set a day for Paul, they came to him at his lodging in large numbers; and he was explaining to them by*

*solemnly testifying about the **kingdom of God** and trying to persuade them concerning Jesus, from both the Law of Moses and from the Prophets ... [that] this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles* (Acts 28:23-31).

So Paul's preaching of the future kingdom in that instance was certainly bound up with his preaching of the Messiah from the Old Testament, and it homed in on the preaching of the salvation that's to be received now by faith in the case of Jew and Gentile alike. The urgent need for these unbelievers was to get right with God and so be sure of final salvation from the wrath to come. The Lord himself distinguished two destinies in his kingdom preaching when he said: *'In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the **kingdom of God**, but yourselves being thrown out. And they will come from east and west and from north and south, and will recline at the table in the **kingdom of God**'* (Luke 13:28,29).

It's also possible to discern the 'not yet here' aspect of the kingdom in some of the kingdom references in the later Bible letters, for example where Paul asks: *do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the **kingdom of God**?* (1 Corinthians 6:9); and elsewhere he says *No*

*immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the **kingdom of Christ and God** (Ephesians 5:5); and then finally to the Thessalonians he says, Among the churches of God ... in the midst of ... afflictions which you endure. This is a plain indication of God's righteous judgment so that you will be considered worthy of the **kingdom of God**, for which indeed you are suffering (2 Thessalonians 1:4-6).*

Is Paul not drawing down lessons from the future into the present? What will certainly be true then, must also be true now in churches of God. Of course, there was a contemporary application, and biblically it was to the spiritual expression of the kingdom in New Testament Churches of God. Notice, we're not called because we are worthy; but we're to become worthy because we've been called. The sense here is both a present work in progress as well as the ultimate kingdom expression to come. Condition must be aligned to position, but the latter – our position - is what determines our present kingdom status.

Summarising again, what we've seen is that:

1. all believers today belong prophetically to the coming kingdom in the age yet to come;

2. and those among them who express obedience to the (New Testament) commands of the King also express the kingdom spiritually as they live now in this present Church age;

3. and this condition of obedience is comparable with the obedience required of Israel nationally when they were asked to obey God's Old Testament commands so that they too could be God's kingdom at that time;

4. and finally, it's only natural and biblical to identify God's rule now with the sphere in which submission to it is most clearly seen: that is, where Christian testimony is organized biblically in a way that answers to what we find in the Old Testament (in which faithful Israel then expressed God's kingdom). This was even explicitly identified as 'the Israel of God' (Galatians 6:16) in the New Testament.

In case the question is still asked: 'Which commands must we obey in order to be certain of being in God's kingdom today?' Is it: 'as long as we ensure we are baptized?'; or 'as long as we avoid same-sex unions?' or a string of other such things. But on what basis could it ever be legitimate to be selective? Must we not go by 'the whole pattern of sound teaching' (2 Timothy 1:13)? The guiding standard set in the Old Testament is 'ALL that the Lord has spoken ...' Must we

not then emulate in every applicable aspect the community life of the first century disciples? We've no reason to think that anything short of that complies with the standards God has set out in his Word whereby we may now share in the kingdom privilege - which all will share in the future when sin, disobedience and differences of view will no longer be an issue.

Let's glimpse that future glory again in conclusion: *Then comes the end when he delivers **the kingdom** to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For "God has put all things in subjection under his feet." But when it says, "all things are put in subjection," it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him. When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all (1 Corinthians 15:24-28).*

Believers in Israel and outside of Israel (by which I now mean

Christian believers) will possess in fullest measure the hope which Simeon, Anna and Joseph once cherished at the time of Christ's first Advent.

In that future day, a king will reign righteously and princes will rule justly. Each will be ... like the shade of a huge rock in a parched land (Isaiah 32:1,2). In terms of righteousness, this sets the tone for the present expression of the kingdom in which we're told to:

Seek first **His kingdom** and His righteousness (Matthew 6:33); because it's explained that:

*The **kingdom of God** is ... righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Romans 14:17)*

The life that's truly shaped by the mould of the apostles' teaching will be a life of day-to-day practical righteousness, as shown by Romans chapter 6:12-19. What will characterize the future phase certainly ought to characterize the present phase (as well as it did two thousand years ago at the beginning of the Church age).

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