

Without a doubt Michael Vlach's new book *He Will Reign: A Biblical Theology of the Kingdom of God* presents one of the best statements on the Kingdom of God. The more I got into the book, the more I liked its straightforward exegesis and close theological reasoning. It is a real joy to be able to commend this work to others, for it will certainly represent one of the high-water marks on this sorely needed topic in our day. This will surely raise the discussion of the kingdom of God to a whole new level and it probably will become a classic in our times. I enthusiastically commend it to all who love God's word and who look forward to his soon appearance.

Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., Ph.D.

President Emeritus
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

This is much welcomed treatment of the Bible's teaching on the kingdom of God. I have always appreciated the careful scholarship of Michael Vlach. This book is no exception. This will be a standard to which pastors and teachers should turn for years to come.

Mark L. Bailey, Ph.D.

President, Dallas Theological Seminary

Seldom in recent years has a book been written on the Kingdom of God that was at once both an academic book but also a book for the church. Michael Vlach of Master's Seminary has written the most perceptive book on the Kingdom of God that I have seen in years. The outline is clear and natural, and every pastor, as well as every scholar, will profit from the reading of this superb book. May God bless this book to make a difference in the life of your church. Vlach understands as few do God's overall plan for the Kingdom of God involving both Israel and the church.

Paige Patterson, Ph.D.

President
Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary
Fort Worth, Texas

I first met Mike Vlach about 25 years ago when he was a pastoral intern at a church in Lincoln, Nebraska. We spent a few hours talking about the kingdom of God and whether there was a spiritual form during the present church age or was it totally future, except for God's sovereign rule. I agree with Dr. Vlach that the kingdom John the Baptist came preaching and Jesus spoke of is totally future. Matthew 13 teaches that it is postponed until after the second coming of Christ. In a day when so many wrongly think the current church age is a spiritual form of the kingdom, Dr. Vlach brings a sober reality to the issue by surveying the entire Bible on the matter and argues that kingdom is the best organizing theme of Scripture. Anyone interested in the Bible should be interested in this excellent work.

Thomas D. Ice, Ph.D.

Executive Director
Pre-Trib Research Center

Dr. Vlach has done all of us a big favor. He wades through a daunting number of interpretive problems and textual details, but does it with clarity, brevity, and simplicity. He shows great courtesy to the scholars with whom he disagrees, and interacts with their best arguments. Dispensationalists must embrace this work. All others must not ignore it.

Michael G. Vanlaningham, Ph.D.

Professor of Biblical Studies
Moody Bible Institute

In his book, *He Will Reign Forever: A Biblical Theology of the Kingdom of God*, Michael Vlach offers a biblical theology of the kingdom of God, explaining key Bible passages concerning the timing and nature God's kingdom. This includes an explanation of texts from Genesis 1 through Revelation 22. This is a readable yet thorough treatment of God's kingdom program that takes into account progressive revelation and how God's kingdom plan unfolds throughout history.

Mitch Glaser, Ph.D.

President, Chosen People Ministries

Michael Vlach's *He Will Reign Forever* may be one of the most refreshing books I have reviewed in a while. Closely reasoned, well-written, clearly understandable, and comprehensive in scope, this work will please those who have been longing for a biblical theology of kingdom that does not follow the assumptions of the "conventional wisdom" of evangelicalism that requires belief in the presence of the Messianic, Davidic Kingdom in this Church Age. While not everyone will accept the interpretation of all the various passages, the detailed analysis that Vlach gives will provide the basis for ongoing discussions of a biblical view of the kingdom of God in fresh ways for the next generation.

Mike Stallard, Ph.D.

Director of International Ministries
Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry

Michael Vlach has done a great service to God's people by writing *He Will Reign: A Biblical Theology of the Kingdom of God*. The subject is timely, important, and handled with skillful reverence for the authority of Scripture. Sadly, many contemporary notions regarding the Kingdom of God are not biblically grounded and quite often reflect ideas read into, rather than out of, the biblical text. Dr. Vlach's work is a welcome remedy for this problem! The Kingdom is rescued from clichés and restored to its biblically defined, God-centered glory. Praise God for this wonderful work of biblical theology!

David M. Doran, D.Min.

President, Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary
DMin, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

HE WILL REIGN FOREVER

A Biblical Theology
of the Kingdom of God

MICHAEL J. VLACH



Silverton, OR

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*This book is dedicated to Trevor Craigen,
my mentor and friend.*

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FOREWORD

By John MacArthur

Daniel 2 records an episode where Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, was troubled by a dream that provoked so much panic in his heart that “his sleep left him” (v. 1). He was afflicted with both insomnia and amnesia. Only a misty memory of the dream remained in his consciousness, but it nevertheless made such an impression on him that he was desperate to recover a clear memory of it, and he longed to know its meaning. So he called in his sorcerers and soothsayers “to tell the king his dreams” (v. 2). For obvious reasons, the king’s wise men were unable to describe, much less interpret, a dream the king himself couldn’t clearly remember. Nebuchadnezzar was so frustrated by this that he threatened to kill all the wise men in Babylon (his top advisors)—and even issued an order for their mass execution (vv. 12-13).

At that point Daniel intervened and offered to try to interpret the dream. God showed Daniel both the dream and its interpretation “in a vision of the night” (v. 19). It was an image—a massive, imposing Colossus representing a succession of world empires. The figure had a head made of gold. Its arms and chest were silver. The midriff and thighs were bronze. The legs were made of iron, and the feet were a blend of iron and clay. Those sections (each made of distinctive materials that diminished in value, beauty, and quality from top to bottom) represented a succession of world empires.

As Daniel explained the meaning to Nebuchadnezzar, he said, “You are the head of gold. Another kingdom inferior to you shall arise after you, and yet a third kingdom of bronze, which shall rule over all the earth. And there shall be a fourth kingdom, strong as iron, because iron breaks to

pieces and shatters all things. And like iron that crushes, it shall break and crush all these. And as you saw the feet and toes, partly of potter's clay and partly of iron, it shall be a divided kingdom, but some of the firmness of iron shall be in it, just as you saw iron mixed with the soft clay" (vv. 38-41).

In other words, Daniel's prophecy laid out the flow of world history precisely as it later unfolded. Four successive empires dominated the world in the long era that spans the remainder of Old and New Testament history, starting with the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar (the golden head). Babylon fell to Medo-Persia (the silver torso). That empire was conquered by Greece (the abdomen and legs of bronze). And the glory of Greece was eclipsed by the Roman empire (the legs of iron). The stamp of Roman rule is still evident in the ordering of nations today, and the feet of iron and clay represent a final attempt to unite the whole world in one great empire—perilously fragile but with an appearance of strength. The best evidence suggests that this is a yet-future coalition of nations, and it will most likely be a revived form of the Roman Empire.

But the most important detail in Nebuchadnezzar's dream is what happens at the end of it. All the world's empires are finally and permanently shattered by a giant stone, hurled into this graphic picture of world history by the hand of God Himself. "A stone was cut from a mountain by no human hand, and ... it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold" (v. 45). Daniel is emphatic about the importance and the certainty of this prophecy: "God has made known to the king what shall be after this. The dream is certain, and its interpretation sure."

What does the stone signify? Its meaning is clear: "The God of heaven will set up *a kingdom that shall never be destroyed*, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever."

Thus a prophecy given to an ancient pagan king perfectly foretells the climax of Scripture's entire story line. Every other yet-to-be-fulfilled prophecy in Scripture ultimately points to that very same truth. It was the theme of John the Baptist's preaching: "The kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt 3:2). Jesus Himself echoed the same message from the time He began to preach publicly: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt 4:17). It's what our Lord instructed the Twelve to preach: "Proclaim as you go, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand'" (Matt 10:7). He

described the Christian message as “this gospel of the kingdom” (Matthew 24:14; see also 4:23; 9:35). Acts 19:8 describes the apostle Paul’s standard approach to ministry as he went from city to city: “He entered the synagogue and continued speaking out boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading them *about the kingdom of God.*”

Christians too easily forget or ignore the glaring fact that the kingdom of God was so prominent in Jesus’ own mind and message. The kingdom is what we are commanded to “seek first” (Matt 6:33). If that’s not a priority, our values are skewed. We ought to be thinking about and longing for the kingdom of God daily. After all, the very first petition in the Lord’s prayer is, “Your kingdom come” (Luke 11:2).

We don’t hear enough, think enough, or talk enough about the kingdom. But it is coming—and the general spirit of apathy that surrounds the subject is to the detriment of our spiritual health and sanctification.

As Dr. Michael Vlach so clearly shows in this book, a very powerful argument can be made that the kingdom of God is the central and unifying theme of Scripture, and it is the climactic fulfillment of the story of redemption. In his words, the kingdom of God is both “the grand theme of Scripture and the solution for all that’s wrong.”

If you are a believer, there is a true and important sense in which “the kingdom of God has [already] come near to you” (Luke 10:9). Indeed, “the kingdom of God is in your midst” (Luke 17:21). “To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God” (Mark 4:11). The kingdom of heaven belongs to people who exhibit true, childlike, saving faith (Matthew 5:3; Mark 10:14). That includes every genuine believer.

But the greatest fulfillment of the kingdom promise is yet to come, and it will be unspeakably glorious. “There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from then on and forevermore” (Isaiah 9:7).

Sadly, the average Christian today has no clear concept of the kingdom—what it is, why it is important, or why Christ wanted us to pray that the Lord would hasten its coming. As Dr. Vlach demonstrates, most Christians’ concepts of the kingdom are overspiritualized, too abstract, and lacking in biblical substance.

This book is a wonderful remedy for that flaw. In fact, I've never seen a finer treatment of the subject. It is a careful, thorough, superbly documented survey of what Scripture teaches about the kingdom, tracing the unfolding of this great theme through biblical history and into eternity future. The work is well researched, thoroughly biblical, compellingly logical, and eminently readable. From the first page of the introduction, it is clear that this is no dry academic treatise. Dr. Vlach writes from the heart, yet with profound scholarly insight, in a way that I believe will fill *your* heart with excitement and expectation. It will also inform your mind with clear understanding. It will energize your prayers with urgency and passion. It will inundate your soul with earnest anticipation. And it will give you a healthy, holy longing for the kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven.

PREFACE

The kingdom of God is not just an interesting academic pursuit for me. It is intensely personal and practical. It is the basis of my hope and the solution to everything wrong in the world. Every frustration, fear, and doubt can be answered by the kingdom of God.

My heart longs for the kingdom. I think about its coming daily. If statistics are correct, I am well into the latter half of my lifespan. Both of my parents have passed away. One of my sisters recently succumbed to a cruel fatal disease. It seems as if every month I hear of someone diagnosed with cancer or some life-threatening situation. My experiences certainly are not unique. The world my children are inheriting seems to worsen daily. Increasingly, good is called evil and evil is considered good. Traditional values are mocked. Even a creation ordinance like marriage has been redefined.

Yet in spite of these sober and disappointing realities, I love life. I love relationships—my wife, my children, friends, co-workers, and students. I am more enthralled than ever with the color and beauty of God’s creation—the mountains, forests, and beaches. I love the four seasons, especially the fall with its spectacular colors of leaves and visits to favorite pumpkin patches. I never tire of college football with its colors, bands, rivalries, and traditions. I also love Thanksgiving meals with family and am a sap for the same old Christmas traditions and songs every year. I love fishing and reading comic books with my sons and hearing my daughters sing. I enjoy listening to music and watching a great movie. I could go on and on.

Life is full of excitement, color and activity. The thought of not being able to participate in life with all its beauty and relationships is depressing if I take my eyes off Jesus for a moment. I think of the haunting words of the

atheist Christopher Hitchens who hopelessly said before he died, “It will happen to all of us that at some point you’ll be tapped on the shoulder and told, not just that the party is over, but slightly worse: the party’s going on but you have to leave.”

I, too, do not want the party to end. I want life. But I also don’t want this fallen and tragedy-soaked world to continue forever either. So I find myself conflicted. I love being alive and in God’s creation. Yet I am grieved and frustrated by this fallen and dangerous world. I think this is the reality of being a “son of the kingdom” in this age before the kingdom actually arrives. If you know Jesus, your desires are probably similar. You love life. You love God’s creation and the many good things He has given you, yet you are frustrated because of this broken world. You, too, have a heart for God’s kingdom, even if you have not thought of it in those terms. That is why Christians need to understand God’s kingdom plans. When you study the kingdom you are examining the grand theme of Scripture and the solution for all that’s wrong.

Yet many Christians live without understanding God’s kingdom purposes. They know they are saved and headed for a better place someday, but their understanding of the kingdom is foggy and often clouded with unbiblical conceptions. The kingdom has been over-spiritualized for so long and made so abstract that many Christians wonder why they don’t long for it. Bad theology has taught us the kingdom of God is simply an inner heart experience or some wispy spiritual experience in the sky after you die. You know the scene, the cultural depictions—sitting on a cloud forever. Perhaps there is some shuffleboard for recreation. Or perhaps sitting in a church pew forever. A well-known *Far Side* commercial once showed a man with wings on a cloud in heaven with a halo on his head. Looking incredibly bored, he said, “Wish I’d brought a magazine.” Sadly, many think this is what the future holds. But your heart does not long for this, and it shouldn’t. This is not the kingdom God offers.

We need a proper understanding of the kingdom. In the following pages we will discuss how the Bible presents the kingdom of God. From Genesis through Revelation the kingdom involves a beautiful and fantastic restoration of all things. It involves God’s reign over every aspect of creation. It includes people, animals, and all creatures in the universe. It involves food, music, celebration, laughing, and rejoicing. Most importantly, the kingdom

brings a thriving relationship with God and our Savior, Jesus Christ, who is at the center of God's kingdom program. It also involves real interactions and activity with other people who know God. The kingdom also includes nations doing real cultural activities (see Rev 21:24, 26). In other words, the kingdom is life and life abundantly (see John 10:10).

The kingdom also makes everything we do and every trial we face worth it. "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). And, "If we endure, we will also reign with Him" (2 Tim 2:12). A tangible kingdom awaits all who devote their lives to King Jesus. No matter how bad things get, a wonderful kingdom awaits.

Before we embark on our study, I would like to thank Dr. Trevor Craigen, my professor and then colleague and most importantly, friend. He encouraged me during my early seminary days to keep studying and writing about the kingdom.

INTRODUCING THE KINGDOM

The kingdom of God is a major theme of Scripture. The goal of this book is to present a comprehensive biblical theology of the kingdom of God from a new creationist perspective. Let me define what I mean by this.

First, this is a *biblical theology* of the kingdom. It examines a wide variety of kingdom passages from both the Old Testament (OT) and New Testament (NT). This work traces the kingdom theme from Genesis 1 through Revelation 22 with many stops along the way. The goal is to be comprehensive, examining and harmonizing most kingdom passages, particularly those that address the kingdom's *nature* and *timing*. Also, when the kingdom interacts with other important themes such as covenants, promise, seed, salvation, people of God, and others, this work addresses those as they relate to the kingdom.

There are two reasons for adopting a biblical theology approach. First, it is helpful to look at the kingdom theme from the perspective of unfolding progressive revelation. The doctrine of the kingdom unfolds throughout the canon of Scripture over many centuries. Second, this approach satisfies my desire to address a wide variety of kingdom passages, including many that are often overlooked. In short, this book will survey many kingdom passages in order to grapple with the full array of evidence.

In addition, this book offers a *new creationist perspective* on the kingdom. What is a new creationist perspective? It is a holistic understanding of the kingdom that gives justice to the multi-faceted dimensions of God's kingdom program. A new creationist approach affirms that God's kingdom program involves both spiritual and material elements. It also acknowledges

the importance of individuals, the nation Israel, Gentile peoples, and the church. Also, this perspective understands that Jesus the Messiah is the center of the kingdom program and the One who restores all things (Col 1:15–20) through His two comings to earth. All of these play a role in the kingdom.

The title “new creationist” is based on a model of God’s purposes known as the “new creation model.”¹ This model emphasizes the physical, social, political, and geographical aspects of God’s kingdom. This includes a coming new earth, activities on the new earth, and bodily resurrection.² As Craig Blaising states, “The new creation model expects that the ontological order and scope of eternal life is essentially continuous with that of present earthly life except for the absence of sin and death.”³ Thus, eternal life is embodied life on earth. This approach “does not reject physicality or materiality, but affirms them as essential both to a holistic anthropology and to the biblical idea of a redeemed creation.”⁴ It affirms the tangible nature of the kingdom as taught in passages such as Isaiah 2; 11; 25; 65, 66; Romans 8; and Revelation 21.

This model is contrary to over-spiritualized views of the kingdom associated with a “spiritual vision model” perspective that downplays the importance of physical and national matters in God’s kingdom. A spiritual vision approach often makes the kingdom primarily a spiritual entity, denying the importance of material and tangible parts in God’s purposes. It also tends to ignore or reinterpret the significance of national Israel and land promises in Scripture.

1 See Craig A. Blaising, “Premillennialism” in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 160–81. Blaising explicitly uses this designation and gives a detailed explanation of what a new creation model is. For more discussion on the new creation model see also Steven L. James, “New Creation Eschatology and the Land,” Ph.D. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2015. J. Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 304. Not everyone who identifies with a new creation model will agree on all details of Bible prophecy, but they do emphasize literal fulfillment of physical promises and refute the spiritualization of physical promises.

2 Blaising, “Premillennialism,” 162.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

A new creation model approach, on the other hand, emphasizes the future relevance of matters such as nations, kings, economics, agriculture, the animal kingdom, and social-political issues. Life in the future kingdom of God will be largely similar to God's purposes for the creation before the fall of Adam, which certainly involved more than just a spiritual element. God did not create Adam to sit on a cloud forever. Adam was tasked to rule from and over the earth for God's glory. He failed. But Jesus, who is the Last Adam (1 Cor 15:45), and those who identify with Him, will have a successful reign from and over the earth in fulfillment of God's purposes for humanity (Matt 19:28; Rev 5:10). The kingdom of God is dynamic and active, not static.

The final heaven or new earth is not an ethereal spiritual presence in the sky. As Moore points out, "The point of the gospel is not that we would go to heaven when we die. Instead, it is that heaven will come down, transforming and renewing the earth and the entire universe."⁵ Far from being only a spiritual entity, the eternal destiny of the redeemed includes a holistic renewal of human existence and our environment:

The picture then is not of an eschatological flight from creation but the restoration and redemption of creation with all that entails: table fellowship, community, culture, economics, agriculture and animal husbandry, art, architecture, worship—in short, *life* and that abundantly.⁶

The new creation model was the primary approach of the church of the late first and early second centuries A.D. It was found in apocalyptic and rabbinic Judaism, and in second century Christian writers such as Irenaeus of Lyons.⁷ The new creationist perspective, as presented in this work, is a form of dispensationalism and consistent with ideas presented in both revised and progressive dispensationalism. A new creationist thinking approach be summarized in the following points:

5 Russell D. Moore, "Personal and Cosmic Eschatology," in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville: B&H, 2007), 912.

6 Ibid. 859. Emphasis in original.

7 Blaising, "Premillennialism," 164.

1. **A new creationist approach affirms the importance of the material realm in God's purposes.** God's creation includes both material and immaterial elements (Col 1:16). Both are important. The original kingdom of Genesis 1–2 was physical and so too will the coming kingdom. God does not abandon His creation—He will restore it. A new creationist approach rejects over-spiritualized Platonist tendencies to view physical matters negatively. God will complete His purposes for this earth to be ruled over successfully.
2. **A new creationist approach affirms that physical promises in the Bible will be fulfilled just as the Bible writers expected.** The Bible includes many physical promises (i.e. land, material prosperity, etc.). Just as spiritual promises like forgiveness of sins, a new heart, and the indwelling Holy Spirit have been fulfilled, so too must land and physical blessings promised in Scripture. A new creationist perspective affirms spiritual realities but denies that the Bible spiritualizes, transcends, or reinterprets physical promises. Both spiritual and physical promises will be fulfilled just as God promised.
3. **A new creationist approach affirms that the coming new earth will be this present earth purged and restored.** This earth that God created “very good” (Gen 1:31) is not headed for annihilation but restoration. The creation was subjected to futility because of man's sin but it has “hope” since the glorification of God's people involves creation being freed from its current corruption (Rom 8:20). Jesus refers to cosmic renewal as the “regeneration” (Matt 19:28) and Peter calls it the “restoration of all things” (Acts 3:21). The new earth will be “new” in that it will be purified, refreshed, and restored; yet it is still this “earth.” God will succeed in making His creation everything He intended for it to be. Satan does not get the final victory over this earth.
4. **A new creationist approach affirms the importance of individuals, Israel, and nations in God's plans.** God works with various groups. First, He saves individuals (Matt 11:28–29). Second, God sovereignly chooses and uses the nation Israel as a vehicle

for His plans (Gen 12:2; Rom 11:26). Third, God will bless all people groups and nations (Gen 12:3; 22:18; Rev 5:9). Isaiah 19:16–25 promises that in the coming kingdom the nations of Egypt, Assyria, and Israel will be present as geo-political entities. Revelation 21:24, 26 tells of multiple nations and kings bringing their glory into the New Jerusalem. The gospel is going to all nations in this present age, but a future era is coming when national entities will serve the Lord. The Bible teaches the importance of individuals, Israel, and the nations. It also affirms the importance of the church, which in this age, is God’s instrument for kingdom proclamation before Jesus returns to set up His kingdom.

5. **A new creationist approach affirms the importance of particular and universal entities.** When it comes to realities such as Israel and the nations of the world, both work together in harmony. Isaiah 27:6 states, “In the days to come Jacob will take root, Israel will blossom and sprout, and they will fill the whole world with fruit.” As God blesses Israel, He will bless other nations (Amos 9:11–15). Likewise, when God fulfills His land promises with Israel (Gen 15:18–21) He will bless other nations in their lands as well (Isa 19). Universal blessings to the nations do not negate particular promises to the nation Israel. Nor do God’s plans to bless the nations mean Israel is no longer significant in God’s purposes. In fact, fulfillment concerning the *particular* (Israel) leads to the fulfillment of the *universal* (the world). Both are important and promises to both will be fulfilled because of Jesus. Since Israel and Israel’s land are microcosms of what God will do for all people groups, the narrower particular elements concerning Israel do not need to be denied or universalized.
6. **A new creationist approach affirms God’s kingdom will involve social, political, geographical, agricultural, architectural, artistic, technological, and animal elements.** With Genesis 1:26–28, God tasked man with a kingdom/cultural mandate—to rule and subdue the earth. The kingdom of God is not a static, colorless existence in the sky but a vibrant and multi-dimensional

experience on the new earth. Man was created to interact with his environment, including culture. He will continue to do so in the kingdom of God in a holistic manner. This involves international harmony, tranquility in the animal kingdom, planting of vineyards, and the building of houses (see Isa 2:2-4; 11; 65:17-25). This will occur because of the Last Adam, Jesus the Messiah (1 Cor 15:24-28, 45), who will succeed from and over the realm (earth) where the first Adam failed.

A new creationist perspective also asserts that the kingdom program includes many features that are complementary, not mutually exclusive. Some treatments of the kingdom of God exclude important facets. The following are examples of statements that are too narrow or incomplete:

- “The kingdom is not physical; it is spiritual.”
- “The kingdom is no longer about nations; it is about individuals.”
- “The kingdom is no longer about Israel; it is about Jesus.”
- “The kingdom is no longer national; it is international.”

These contrasts are not biblical. They create false dichotomies and “either/or” scenarios when “both/and” fits better. Sometimes remnants of Platonism arise when spiritual aspects of the kingdom only are emphasized or the kingdom is declared to be “spiritual” not “earthly.” This book’s approach, however, often sees “both/and” instead of “either/or” scenarios.

Another important issue is how the NT and OT relate to each other. Some claim the NT *transforms* or *transcends* the storyline begun in the OT.⁸ But this work asserts that the NT *continues* the storyline of the OT prophets in a literal and straightforward manner. No transforming or transcending of the Bible’s storyline is necessary. God does not reinterpret His previous inspired revelation. Nor is there a reality shift from OT expectation to

8 For example, Beale states, “Thus, the NT storyline will be a *transformation* of the OT one in the light of how the NT is seen to be an unfolding of the OT.” G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 6. Stephen Wellum says that with the coming of Jesus, “many of the themes that were basic to the Old Testament have now been *transposed and transformed*.” Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical/Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 598. Emphases in the above quotations are mine.

NT fulfillment. NT fulfillment is consistent with the original message and intent of the OT writers. Great continuity exists between OT expectation and NT fulfillment.⁹ This includes matters such as the fulfillment of promises concerning the nation Israel, Jerusalem, and the temple. Literal fulfillment of OT realities will be fulfilled over the course of Jesus' two comings. Unfulfilled promises at Jesus' first coming do not need to be spiritualized. They look forward to literal fulfillment at His return (see Acts 3:18, 21).

Yet another key feature of this book is the attention given to contingency or conditions concerning the timing of the kingdom. As part of His sovereign plan God has determined that the kingdom's arrival on earth is based on certain factors and responses. As William Barrick states, "Part of the reason God's kingdom has not yet come stems from fallen mankind's consistent antagonism to God's sovereign purpose for His own earthly kingdom."¹⁰ God has determined that His kingdom is linked with Israel's acceptance of the Messiah. Passages such as Leviticus 26:40-45; Matthew 23:37-39; Luke 19:41-44; and Acts 3:19-21 show this to be the case. God is sovereign over all things, yet human responses affect the timing of some eschatological events (see Jer 18:1-10).

This work also views ethnic and national Israel as a key component in the Bible's storyline. This work rejects replacement or fulfillment theology. Israel and Israel's land are not shadows and types that become non-significant once Jesus arrives. Instead, Israel and Israel's land, under the leadership of the reigning Messiah, are microcosms of what God will do for all people groups in the kingdom. What is true for the particular (Israel and Israel's land) will also be true for the universal (other nations and their lands). Thus, we affirm both national Israel's significance and what God will do for all nations (Rom 11:12, 15).

Finally, this book is not primarily about the various millennial views,¹¹ but it does strongly affirm what is called premillennialism. There will be an

9 By NT fulfillment we refer to literal fulfillment of the OT expectations through two comings of Jesus the Messiah. We are not saying all aspects of the OT prophetic message have occurred yet, but they will be in the future.

10 William D. Barrick, "The Kingdom of God in the Old Testament," in *The Master's Seminary Journal* 23 (Fall 2012): 174.

11 While this book addresses opposing views of the kingdom at times, it is focused mostly on a positive presentation of the kingdom. It does not address every objection made against the view presented here.

earthly kingdom of Jesus after this present age but before the eternal state. The Bible's story line demands a future earthly reign of the Last Adam and Messiah (Jesus) upon the earth. Jesus and those who belong to Him must successfully reign *from* and *over* the realm (earth) where the first Adam was tasked to rule but failed (see Gen 1:26–28). This kingdom of the Messiah must occur before the eternal state begins when Jesus hands His successful mediatorial kingdom reign to God the Father (see 1 Cor 15:24, 28). Thus, a future, earthly kingdom before the eternal state is an important part of the Bible's narrative.

I hope this treatment of the kingdom is more than an academic pursuit. The kingdom is a fantastic hope for the believer and all people who believe in Jesus. My hope is that this study can help provide a proper understanding of the kingdom and draw people devotionally to a closer relationship with the King. As Paul joyfully declared:

Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen (1 Tim 1:17).

PART

1

INTRODUCTION
TO THE KINGDOM
PROGRAM

THE IMPORTANCE
OF THE KINGDOM

There are many great themes in the Bible—“covenant,” “promise,” “glory of God,” “the holiness of God,” “salvation,” “law,” “people of God,” etc. But is it possible to identify a central theme of Scripture that functions like a hub or center in which other important themes are connected? Scholars continue to debate this issue, and some even think the search for one such central theme is misguided. James Hamilton aptly observes, “Some conclude that the very fact that so many ‘centers’ have been proposed proves that there is no center.”¹

All of the themes mentioned above are important and deserving of serious study, and there is no reason to pit one theme against another. Yet, this book asserts that the kingdom of God is the grand central theme of Scripture that encompasses all other biblical themes. As Graeme Goldsworthy notes, “In focusing on the kingdom of God we are really looking at a key element that gives biblical theology its coherence.”²

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- 1 James M. Hamilton, Jr., *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 52. Hamilton argues “salvation through judgment” is the center of the Bible’s storyline.
 - 2 Graeme Goldsworthy, “The Kingdom of God as Hermeneutic Grid,” in *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 12 (Spring 2008) 4. See also, Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom: An Inductive Study of the Kingdom of God* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1959), 4-5. John Bright is also right when he notes, “The concept of the Kingdom of God involves, in a real sense, the total message of the Bible.” John Bright, *The Kingdom of God* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1953), 7. Pentecost notes, “The great theme of God’s kingdom program can be found throughout the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. It is a theme that unifies all of Scripture.” J. Dwight Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come: Tracing God’s Kingdom Program and Covenant Promises Throughout History* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1990), 11.

There are several reasons why the kingdom of God is the central and unifying theme of Scripture. First, the kingdom is a thread that runs from the first chapter of the Bible through the last.³ Genesis 1 begins with God as Creator/King of the universe and man as God's image-bearer who is created to "rule" and "subdue" the earth for God's purposes and glory (see Gen 1:26–28). Then the last chapter of the Bible (Rev 22) shows God and the Lamb on the throne and God's people ruling on the new earth:

There will no longer be any curse; and *the throne of God and of the Lamb* will be in it, and His bond-servants will serve Him... . and *they will reign forever and ever* (Rev 22:3, 5).⁴

As the Bible begins, man is in God's presence with a kingdom to reign over (see Gen 3:8). At the end of the Bible, redeemed mankind is again in God's direct presence as God's people reign over the earth forever and ever.⁵

So kingdom language is found at the beginning and end. The story begins with God as King and man's right to rule under Him. It then culminates with God on the throne and man reigning under Him over a new earth. What takes place between these sections is the fall of man, the promise plan of salvation, and the arrival of King Jesus and the redemption He brings. After the period between Jesus' two comings there will be the restoration of all things by which God reverses the curse and establishes His kingdom upon the earth. In sum, God's kingdom program involves five major parts or developments:

1. Creation
2. Fall
3. Promise

3 Richard Mayhue notes, "With the exceptions of Leviticus, Ruth, and Joel, the OT explicitly includes various mentions in 36 of its 39 books. Except for Philippians, Titus, Philemon, 1, 2, and 3 John, the NT directly mentions the subject in 21 of its 27 books. All in all, 57 of the 66 biblical books (86 percent) include the kingdom theme." Richard L. Mayhue, "The Kingdom of God: An Introduction," in *The Master's Seminary Journal* 23 (Fall 2012): 168.

4 Emphases mine.

5 Thus there is a close connection between man's kingdom reign and reigning in the immediate presence of God for His glory.

4. Redemption
5. Restoration

The relationships of these five parts to the kingdom program can be seen in the following:

KINGDOM PROGRAM → → → → → → →

| | | | | |
|--------------------|----------------|-------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Creation | 2. Fall | 3. Promise | 4. Redemption | 5. Restoration |
| (Gen 1-2) | (Gen 3) | (Gen 3:15–Mal) | (Gospels–Epistles) | (Revelation) |

The kingdom theme in the five parts of the Bible’s storyline can be summarized:

1. First, the kingdom is present with *creation* as God the King of creation tasks His image-bearer, man, to rule and subdue His creation.
2. Second, the *fall* marks man’s failure to rule God’s creation; both God’s image-bearers (humans) and the creation come under the devastating effects of the fall.
3. Third, the *promise* plan guarantees the seed of the woman will eventually succeed over the power behind the serpent (Satan); the fall will be reversed and man will effectively rule over creation.
4. Fourth, Jesus the King brings *redemption* through His atonement, and His death is the basis for the kingdom and reconciliation of all things.
5. Fifth, with the *restoration* of all things God’s kingdom plan is fulfilled as Jesus successfully reigns over the earth; this kingdom merges into the perfect kingdom of the Father.

The Bible’s storyline shows how the *kingdom created* goes to the *kingdom fallen*, which then leads to the *kingdom restored*. This storyline is centered and anchored in Jesus the Messiah.

Second, the kingdom permeates OT history and prophecy. In addition to the kingdom mandate of Genesis 1:26–28, God assembled His chosen people Israel to become a kingdom (see Exod 19:5–6). With the

Abrahamic Covenant Israel was chosen to be the means of bringing blessings to the families of earth (see Gen 12:2-3).⁶

Samuel-Kings describes the rise and fall of the kingdom in Israel. The prophets, who take center stage while Israel was in decline, prophesied about future days when the kingdom would be restored to Israel with blessings to the nations (see Amos 9:11-15). Daniel 2 and 7 reveal that God's kingdom will be established suddenly and dramatically after four successive Gentile empires.⁷

Much of the OT describes the establishment of God's kingdom on earth with the nation Israel. Yet even with Israel's decline and fall, the prophets predict a future kingdom where God will restore the kingdom upon the earth. At the heart of the coming kingdom will be a special King, One in whom the kingdom program finds fulfillment (see Isa 9:6-7). This King is Jesus the Messiah (see Luke 1:32-33) who is the centerpiece and focal point of this glorious kingdom.

Third, the kingdom of God was central in the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus:

Now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt 3:1-2).

From that time Jesus began to preach and say, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt 4:17).

6 Sailhamer points out, "One of the central issues in the message of the Pentateuch is the coming king and his eternal kingdom." John H. Sailhamer, *The Meaning of the Pentateuch: Revelation, Composition, and Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), 37.

7 Stephen Dempster states, "Significantly, a key concept in the last narrative section of the Tanakh that begins with Daniel and ends with Chronicles is the term 'kingdom' (of God)." Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, New Studies in Biblical Theology, ed. D. A. Carson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 48-49.

Both the forerunner of Jesus and Jesus himself made the kingdom the focus of their ministries.⁸ The kingdom was also the message of the twelve apostles who received their commission from Jesus:

These twelve Jesus sent out after instructing them: “Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as you go, preach, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand’” (Matt 10:5–7).

Put together, Jesus, John the Baptist, and the apostles were consumed with proclaiming the kingdom.⁹ Belief in Jesus the Messiah qualified one for entrance into this kingdom (see John 3:3).

Jesus urged His hearers to seek the kingdom and its righteousness (Matt 6:33) and to pray for its coming (Matt 6:10). The parables of Matthew 13 reveal “mysteries” concerning the kingdom of heaven. On the night before His death Jesus mentions the kingdom of God five times (see Luke 22). The resurrected Jesus spent forty days instructing His disciples concerning the kingdom of God (see Acts 1:3). The last question asked of Jesus before He ascended into heaven was, “Lord, is it at this time you are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). Acts closes with Paul proclaiming the kingdom of God to Jewish leadership (Acts 28:17–31).

Fourth, the focus of NT eschatology is on the second coming of Jesus and His kingdom reign. Jesus declared that end times events were signs the kingdom of God was near (Luke 21:31). Jesus said placement on His throne accompanies His second coming in the company of His angels (Matt 25:31). Jesus’ return in Revelation 19 is followed by a thousand-year reign mentioned in Revelation 20:1–6, followed by the final form of the kingdom in the eternal state (see Rev 21–22:5). One could argue the entire book of Revelation describes how the kingdom of God dramatically replaces the

8 Herman Ridderbos stated, “The central theme of Jesus’ message ... is the coming of the kingdom of God.” Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1962), xi. Schreiner states, “The kingdom of God is a central theme in Jesus’ ministry.” Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 79.

9 Ibid. “It may be rightly said that the whole of the preaching of Jesus Christ and his apostles is concerned with the kingdom of God.”

kingdom of Satan. Thus, the claim that “kingdom” is the primary theme of Scripture is well supported.

RELATIONSHIP TO OTHER KEY THEMES

The kingdom theme connects harmoniously with other major themes of the Bible. For instance, “covenant” is a major theme of Scripture, and the covenants are the instruments through which the kingdom program unfolds.¹⁰ The Noahic Covenant promises stability of nature as the platform for God carrying out His kingdom purposes. The Abrahamic Covenant reveals that Abraham will be the father of a great nation, Israel, who will serve as the platform for bringing blessings to all nations. The Davidic Covenant shows that the ultimate King will be a descendant of David who will rule and bless the entire world from Israel. The New Covenant explains how God will change the hearts of His people and grant His Holy Spirit so they will always obey Him. Each of these covenants works together in harmony to guarantee that God’s kingdom purposes will be fulfilled. Dwight Pentecost is right that “God’s kingdom program” is “the outworking of His eternal and unconditional covenants.”¹¹

Next, Walter Kaiser has rightly emphasized the importance of the “promise” theme in Scripture.¹² The promise plan begins after the fall with the promise of a “seed” of the woman who would one day crush the power behind the serpent (Satan) and reverse the curse (see Gen 3:15). This promise plan narrowed and became more specific through the lines of Noah, Shem, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, and David. Finally, it finds specific fulfillment in the ultimate “seed,” Jesus Christ (see Gal 3:16). “Promise” is such a major part of God’s purposes that I have included it in my five-point paradigm of history: Creation, Fall, *Promise*, Redemption, and Restoration. Some paradigms omit “promise,” and jump from “fall” to “redemption.” Yet “promise” should be included since a major part of the Bible’s story is

10 For example, Goldsworthy shows how “covenant” fits within the kingdom concept: “Some would prefer covenant as a central theme rather than that of kingdom. But the covenant is the formalizing of a relationship which conveys membership in the kingdom.” Goldsworthy, “The Kingdom of God as Hermeneutic Grid,” 11.

11 Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come*, 9.

12 See Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978).

centuries of expectation of the Messiah. Yet this promise plan also comes under the umbrella of the kingdom since it is through the promised “Seed” (Jesus) that God saves His creation.

Likewise, salvation and the redemption of God’s image bearers is an important theme. Jesus came to save sinners and His atoning ministry is a major emphasis (see Mark 10:45). Yet as important as human salvation is, it is not the primary theme of Scripture. God’s kingdom program encompasses not only human salvation but also all things. Humans are the high point of creation since they are made in God’s image. Yet Colossians 1:15–20 discusses the reconciliation of all things material and immaterial in the cosmos because of the cross of Christ.¹³

The cross is the basis for reconciling both people and creation. Acts 3:19–21 confirms that salvation of people is related to the “restoration of all things.” Peter told the leaders of Israel in this section that if they “repent and return” they would be forgiven of their sins and then participate in the “times of refreshing” (the kingdom) and the restoration of all things. In other words, salvation leads to kingdom. Thus, the kingdom program is broader than salvation of people since it involves all things. John 3:3 indicates that unless one is born again he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Salvation is the requirement for entering God’s kingdom. When people believe they join the right side of God’s kingdom program and are qualified to enter the kingdom when it comes.

Then there is the glory of God, which some see as the theme of Scripture. There can be, however, a distinction between a *theme* of Scripture and the *purpose* for which God does what He does. God works all things for His glory and the kingdom program is the way and means through which God brings glory to Himself. God is the majestic sovereign of the universe who manifests His glory through His kingdom program.

Not everyone agrees that “kingdom” is the main theme of Scripture, and there are good Christians who passionately posit another theme. The goal here is not to pit one theme against others since they all fit together perfectly. Nor is agreement on this issue necessary for one to benefit from this book. Even if one believes another theme is more central, all should agree

13 Universal reconciliation is not the same as universal salvation. All things will be reconciled to Christ, which includes the judgment and destiny of nonbelievers.

the kingdom is a crucial part of God's plans and a thorough study of it is beneficial. The major themes of Scripture work together in a symphonic-like harmony. Yet "kingdom" is a key theme of the Bible. As one tracks the kingdom theme through Scripture he or she is tracking the storyline of the Bible.¹⁴ Dempster rightly notes that the "many stories" in Scripture "constitute a single Story. And this Story is about the reclamation of a lost human dominion over the world through a Davidic dynasty."¹⁵ When the story reaches God's intended goal the saints of God will be ruling the new earth in a never-ending perfect kingdom in the direct presence of God (Rev 22:3, 5).

WHAT IS A KINGDOM?

We now define the term "kingdom." The word is *malkuth* in Hebrew and *basileia* in Greek.¹⁶ There are other terms relevant to the kingdom concept. But like any term, the meaning of "kingdom" and similar terms is not found primarily in the etymology or origin of the word but in its usage. Usage determines meaning.

Malkuth and *basileia* often are translated as "royalty," "royal power," "reign," and "kingdom." The concept of "kingdom" includes at least three essential elements:

1. *Ruler*—a kingdom involves a ruler with rightful and adequate authority and power.
2. *Realm*—a kingdom involves a realm of subjects to be ruled.
3. *Rulership*—a kingdom involves the exercise of ruling.¹⁷

14 Pentecost says he discovered that as he traced the kingdom theme from Genesis through Revelation: "That theme provided a unifying structure that bound all the Bible together into a unit, and by which all the history recorded there could be understood and related." Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come*, 9. I agree with his assessment.

15 Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*, 231.

16 *Malkuth* is found 91 times in the Hebrew Bible. The term *mamlakah* is translated "kingdom; sovereignty; dominion; reign" and occurs about 115 times in the OT.

17 McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, 17. Barrick mentions four elements: "first, a *right to rule*; second, a *rule*; third, a *realm* to be ruled; and, fourth, the exercise of the function of *rulership*. These defining elements help to maintain an understanding of biblical teaching beyond a mere reference to the right of kingship or limiting it to the person of the King himself." Barrick, "The Kingdom of God in the Old Testament," 176.

All three elements are needed for a kingdom, including active ruling. As Pentecost points out, “Essential to the word *kingdom* is the actual exercise of authority in a realm over which one has the sovereign right to rule. If the exercise of authority is not in view, the concept of kingdom is not present.”¹⁸

Thus, “there can be no kingdom in the truest sense without the ruler, the realm, and the reigning function.”¹⁹

At times, one of these three elements can be singled out and designated as “kingdom.” For example, in Revelation 1:6 believers are referred to as a kingdom: “and He has made us to be a kingdom.” Yet Revelation 5:10 places the actual kingdom reign in the future: “You have made them to be a kingdom... and they will reign upon the earth.” So in Revelation 1:6 the subjects are referred to as a kingdom. They are the nucleus of the kingdom. But the function of ruling does not occur until the reign on earth begins.

Also, in Luke 19, the nobleman who represents Jesus is said to go “to a distant country to receive a kingdom for himself, and then return” (Luke 19:12). Here “kingdom” refers to receiving kingdom authority. Kingdom authority was granted in a distant country, but the actual kingdom reign occurs when the nobleman returns to his realm of authority to reward his servants and punish his enemies (see Luke 19:11–27).

Some have offered a more general understanding of kingdom claiming that it is primarily the authority to rule and does not necessarily include a territory, domain or subjects.²⁰ Yet the idea of a kingdom without a realm is difficult to maintain. A realm seems necessary for a kingdom to exist. Goldsworthy rightly argues against an abstract understanding of kingdom, saying a kingdom must include both a realm and the function of ruling:

Some have sought to distinguish between a realm and the dynamic of God ruling and to opt for one or the other as the

18 Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come*, 14.

19 McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, 17.

20 See George Eldon Ladd, *Crucial Questions about the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 79. Also, Yarbrough writes, “to the extent that Jesus’ view of the kingdom is informed by the Old Testament, he is less apt to be speaking about a geographically bordered region and more apt to be speaking about a ‘reign’ or ‘supreme authority’ that exists without any particular physical or political boundaries.” Robert W. Yarbrough, “The Kingdom of God in the New Testament: Matthew and Revelation,” in *The Kingdom of God*, ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 107.

meaning of the kingdom. I find this distinction unconvincing. The Bible does not leave the kingdom in the abstract. If God rules, he rules somewhere, even if somewhere is everywhere. There is no abstract rule without a realm.²¹

Thus, it is best to define the kingdom of God as “the rule of God over His creation.”²²

21 Goldsworthy, “The Kingdom of God as Hermeneutic Grid,” 7.

22 McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, 19.