

The Coming Kingdom - Part 33

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We began scrutinizing New Testament texts that "kingdom now" theologians employ in an attempt to argue that the kingdom is a present reality to show that none of these passages teach a present form of the kingdom. We have examined the typical texts from the Gospels, Acts, and Paul's letters used by "kingdom now" theologians. In this installment we will conclude our examination of the Pauline epistles and begin a similar exploration of the general epistles.

FELLOW WORKERS FOR THE KINGDOM OF GOD

A final text from the Pauline corpus consistently employed by "kingdom now" theologians is Colossians 4:11, which says, "and *also* Jesus who is called Justus; these are the only fellow-workers for the kingdom of God who are from the circumcision." The logic of the "kingdom now" theologian here is that if Paul refers to his co-laborers as fellow workers of the kingdom of God, then they must be all working together to presently establish God's kingdom upon the earth. However, there is no verb in the expression "fellow workers for the kingdom of God." The Greek word translated "for" here is the preposition *eis*. Because a verb does not definitively identify the time period of the kingdom, the word "kingdom" here should be read in harmony with the bulk of the passages in Paul's writings that place the kingdom exclusively in the future (1 Cor. 6:9-10; 15:24, 50; Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5; 1 Thess. 2:12; 2 Thess.

1:5; 2 Tim. 4:1, 18). McClain explains, "The Greek preposition here is *eis*, and therefore the passage may be read in harmony with the idea of a future Kingdom, toward which as a glorious goal all the labors of the Church are directed."¹ Peters similarly observes, "There is only one kingdom...and believers become *'heirs'* of it...The apostles represent themselves and co-laborers as working for it still future, Col 4:11; 2 Thess. 1:5; 2 Tim. 4:18; Heb. 12:28, etc."²

SINCE WE RECEIVE A KINGDOM

Let us now turn our attention to the handful of texts found in the general epistles that "kingdom now" theologians typically use. On such passage is Hebrews 12:28, which says, "Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe." The present tense participle "we receive" indicates to some that the reception of the kingdom is a present manifestation in the life of the child of God. Yet, it is unnecessary to re-write the consistent, biblical, terrestrial definition of the word "kingdom" here based upon a vague reference to it at the conclusion of an epistle. It seems better to interpret this reference on the basis of the *de jure/de facto* distinction

¹ Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), 436.

² George N. H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom* (New York: 1884; reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1952), 1: 600.

that has been discussed earlier in this series.³ While believers are legally heirs of God's coming kingdom, the kingdom is not yet a factual reality upon the earth. Thus, all Hebrews 12:28 teaches is that believers are citizens of the earthly kingdom to come rather than present, factual residents in the spiritual, Davidic kingdom. Concerning Hebrews 12:28, McClain explains:

It is not unusual for Scripture, on behalf of believers, to assert *ownership* regarding certain blessings even before they are *possessed* in Christian experience. Compare 1 Corinthians 3:21–22 where "all things" are said to belong to the believer, yet among these things are some that are yet "to come." The ownership is legally certainly, though the experience of possession may be future.⁴

Regarding Hebrews 12:28, E.R. Craven similarly notes, "the reception of the Basileia herein spoken of manifestly may be *de jure*. Believers on earth receive a sure title to their future possession."⁵

A KINGDOM OF PRIESTS

As noted earlier in the series, Exodus 19:5-6 represent the first reference to the term "kingdom" in relation to God's kingdom in all

of the Bible.⁶ Exodus 19:5-6 says, "Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me *a kingdom of priests* and *a holy nation*." These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel." Notice how parts of these verses are quoted in 1 Peter 2:9 for the benefit of the New Testament saints: "But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A ROYAL PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR God's OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light."⁷ The "kingdom now" theologian treats this New Testament recitation of these verses as follows: if national Israel is called a kingdom of priests in the Old Testament and if these same verses are applied directly to the New Testament Church, then the Church is also a kingdom of priests. If the Church is indeed a kingdom of priests, then she too, like Old Testament Israel, represents a present manifestation of the kingdom of God upon the earth. In fact, amillennialist and "kingdom now" theologian Anthony Hoekema relies upon this very New Testament citation in his attempt to prove that the Church has permanently replaced national Israel in the outworking of God's purposes.⁸

However, all Peter could be indicating by his Old Testament citation of Exodus 19:5-6 in 1 Peter 2:9 is that the Church is analogous or similar to God's kingdom program through Israel in some respects. Such a limited

³ See parts 31 and 32 of this series.

⁴ McClain, 436.

⁵ E.R. Craven, "Excursus on the Basileia," in *Revelation of John*, ed. J. P. Lange (New York: Scribner, 1874), 97.

⁶ See part 3 of this series.

⁷ Italics added to both citations.

⁸ Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 197-98.

interpretation seems preferable in comparison to the notion that the Church is the "New Israel" or the present manifestation of the kingdom of God upon the earth, as is presumed by amillennialists. In other words, just as Israel was God's representative to the nations and called to a life of holiness, the Church's purpose is analogous in regard to its missional calling and personal holiness. It is a logical fallacy to assume that similarity is the same as equality. For example, I have two cars in my garage that are quite similar. Both have a steering wheel, an engine, four tires, seat belts, etc... However, it would be fallacious to assume that one car equals the other automobile merely on account of these similarities. Thus, just because there are some points of similarity between God's kingdom program through Israel and the Church, this does not necessarily mean that the Church becomes the kingdom program through its identity as the New Israel.

Moreover, 1 Peter 2:9 may not even be addressed to the Church as a whole but rather only to the more limited audience of the believing Jewish remnant within the Church.⁹ Curiously absent from 1 Peter 1:1 is any reference to the fact that Peter's letter was addressed "to the church (or churches) of..." This is a familiar formula Paul uses when addressing a Church-wide audience. Peter would certainly have employed it had he had a Church-wide audience in mind. Instead, Peter addresses his audience as those "scattered," which is an English translation from the Greek

word *diaspora*. Peter's use of the word *diaspora* in 1:1 refers to Jews in dispersion among the Gentiles in all of its other New Testament (John 7:35; James 1:1), LXX (Deut. 28:25; 30:4; Neh. 1:9; Isa. 49:6; Jer. 41:17; Ps. 147:2; 2 Macc. 1:27; Jdt. 5:23), and Pseudepigraphical (Pss. Sol. 8:28; T. Asher 7:2) uses.

Other terms found in verse 1 Peter 1:1 also seem to be describing Jews in the *Diaspora*. For example, they are called "aliens" or "sojourners" (*parepidēmois*). This word is also used only of Jews (1 Pet. 1:1; 2:11; Heb 11:13). The etymology of this compound word means "away from home" (*para* means "away" and *epi* means "from" and *dēmos* means "home" or "house rules").¹⁰ Thus, the word is a fitting description of Jews outside of their homeland in the *Diaspora*. Elsewhere Peter calls his audience "pilgrims" (1 Pet. 2:11, KJV), which also is a fitting description of Jews outside the land.

In addition, the concepts found in 1 Peter 2:9 are inapplicable to the Church as a whole and are applicable only to a believing Jewish audience. Interestingly, "race," "nation," and "people" are all singular nouns. These nouns could not be describing the church as a whole since the church consists of many races, nations, and peoples (Gal. 3:28). Paul even indicates that the Church is not a nation (Rom 10:19). However, these terms aptly describe the Jewish race. Because Peter, who was the apostle to the circumcised (Gal 2:7-8), wrote this letter, it is logical to assume that a Jewish

⁹ Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology*, rev. ed. (Tustin, CA: Ariel, 1994), 186-88; idem, *The Messianic Jewish Epistles*, Ariel's Bible Commentary (Tustin, CA: Ariel, 2005), 318-21.

¹⁰ Stanley Toussaint, class notes of Andy Woods in BE2035A Seminar in Hebrews and General Epistles, Dallas Theological Seminary, Spring 2003.

audience is in view. Thus, to assume that Peter wrote to a Gentile audience in 1 Peter is to assume that Peter not only went outside his ministry sphere but that he also violated his disposition against ministering to the Gentiles (Acts 10; Gal. 2:11-14). If this more limited interpretation of Peter's original audience is correct, then Peter's only point in citing Exodus 19:5-6 in 1 Peter 2:9 would be to show that although national Israel as a whole had failed to live up to her high calling as given in Exodus 19:5-6, the believing Jewish remnant within the Church has not similarly failed. In other words, Peter by using this citation is not indicating that the Church at large now represents the kingdom of God upon the earth, as is incorrectly presupposed by amillennialists and other "kingdom now" theologians.

(To Be Continued...)



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