INTRODUCTION

There is considerable debate over the meaning of the expressions *kingdom of Heaven* and *kingdom of God* used in the Gospels and in the rest of the New Testament and the relationship of this kingdom to the church. The debate addresses three related questions. The first question concerns the nature of the kingdom. When used in the Gospels and in the rest of the New Testament, do these expressions refer metaphorically to a spiritual kingdom or literally to a physical, earthly kingdom, or to both? The second question, linked to the first, is whether the kingdom in view is presently in existence or is strictly in the future. The third question addresses the relationship between this kingdom and the church.

The approach in answering these questions is, first, to determine whether the expressions *kingdom of Heaven* and *kingdom of God* are synonymous or whether they refer to distinct kingdoms. Next, the major views on the meaning of the two expressions are identified, along with the theological systems represented by each view. Following this, the key texts in the debate are examined. The study of the key texts is intentionally deductive. The underlying premise is that the expressions refer exclusively to the future millennial kingdom of Jesus as the promised Messiah. What must be determined is whether the evidence from the key texts supports the underlying premise. The discussion concludes by considering the relationship between the kingdom of Heaven/kingdom of God and the church.

SYNONYMOUS OR DISTINCT KINGDOMS

Preliminary to examining the meaning of the expressions is determining whether the kingdom of Heaven and the kingdom of God are synonymous or refer to two distinct kingdoms. Considering their use in the New Testament, it is evident that the two expressions are not distributed equally. The expression kingdom of Heaven is found only in Matthew’s gospel, where it is used thirty-two times.1 Conversely, the expression kingdom of God is used four times in Matthew,2 fourteen times in Mark, thirty-two times in Luke, twice in John, six times in Acts, eight times in Paul’s letters, and once in Revelation.

Although most interpreters treat the two expressions as synonymous, older dispensationalists often distinguished the kingdom of Heaven from the kingdom of God. These older

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1 “Kingdom of Heaven” occurs as a secondary reading in Matt 7:21; 19:24; and John 3:5.

dispensationalists understood the kingdom of Heaven to refer to Jesus’ future messianic kingdom and defined it as a worldwide kingdom that includes both saved and unsaved. In contrast, they understood the kingdom of God to refer to God’s universal, spiritual rule over the redeemed. The two kingdoms are related, according to these, in that all who are members of the kingdom of God are also participants in the kingdom of heaven.3

The problem with such a distinction is that it runs counter to the evidence. Specifically in view here is the evidence from the Synoptics where the preponderance of uses occurs and where comparisons can be made. Whenever Matthew records a statement of Jesus where Jesus refers to the kingdom of Heaven, parallel passages in Mark or Luke invariably use kingdom of God in place of Matthew’s kingdom of Heaven.

For example, in Matthew 19:23, Matthew records Jesus saying, “It is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.”4 Interestingly enough, in the very next verse, Matthew records Jesus essentially repeating the thought, except that “kingdom of God” is used instead of “kingdom of Heaven.” In 19:24, Jesus states, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

In the parallel account in Mark 10:23–25, the same two statements are recorded. The telling difference is that in Mark, “kingdom of God” is used in both statements. In 10:23, Mark records the words of Jesus, “How hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God.” And, in 10:25, Mark records Jesus declaring, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

Both Matthew’s account and Mark’s account record Jesus’ words in connection with the story about the rich, young ruler. The indication is that the two accounts are citing Jesus’ words in the same historical context. Thus, what Matthew records Jesus saying about the rich and the kingdom of Heaven, Mark records Jesus saying about the rich and the kingdom of God. In fact, even within Matthew’s account, the initial statement about the rich uses the kingdom of Heaven, while the subsequent statement, essentially repeating the first, switches to the kingdom of God.

From all of this, it is evident that the two expressions are synonymous and used interchangeably. This was seen both between Matthew’s gospel and Mark’s gospel and within Matthew’s gospel itself. For this reason, most dispensationalists today agree with the majority of interpreters and see no distinction between the two expressions.5

In response to the question of why Matthew prefers the one and Mark or Luke the other, perhaps the simplest answer is the best. The Jews treated the names of God with the greatest

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4 Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the *New American Standard Bible*, 1995 edition.
reverence and often would use a euphemism such as “heaven” in place of the divine name. Matthew, writing primarily to Jews, uses “kingdom of Heaven” as a euphemism for “kingdom of God” to reflect this practice and to protect the sensitivities of his readers. Matthew is able to do this without violating Jesus’ authorial intent in that the two expressions refer to the same kingdom.

This is not to say that Matthew avoids using God’s name altogether. In fact, the name “God” appears over fifty times in Matthew’s gospel. What is argued here is that when Jesus linked God’s name with the expression “kingdom,” Matthew felt constrained to use a euphemism for God’s name to guard God’s transcendent holiness and to avoid offending his Jewish readers. The four times Matthew uses “kingdom of God” are all in citations where for contextual reasons Matthew intentionally records the expression that Jesus himself used.

MAJOR VIEWS

While most today agree the two expressions are synonymous, there is continuing debate over the identification of this kingdom. At the risk of oversimplification, there are roughly three views. The first is that the kingdom of Heaven/God refers exclusively to Christ’s present spiritual rule over the church. This is the view generally embraced by both amillennialists and postmillennialists.

The second view is that the kingdom of Heaven/God refers strictly to Christ’s future earthly rule in the millennial kingdom. While allowing for exceptions, traditional dispensationalists generally champion this view.

The third view represents a combination of the first two: depending on the context, the kingdom of Heaven/God refers either to the present, spiritual rule of Christ over the church or to the future, earthly rule of Christ in the millennial kingdom. This is the view most often supported by covenant premillennialists and by progressive dispensationalists.

6 See, for example, Dan 4:26; Matt 21:25; Luke 15:18, 21.
As mentioned earlier, the underlying premise in this study is that the expressions the kingdom of Heaven/God used in the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament refer exclusively to Christ’s future millennial kingdom. Thus, the underlying premise agrees with the second view. The key texts must be examined to determine if the second view is sustained. Following the initial discussion on Old Testament antecedents, the procedure is to list the arguments against the second view, namely, the arguments in favor of a present, spiritual kingdom, and then to respond to those arguments.

THE OLD TESTAMENT ANTECEDENTS

Although the expression “kingdom of God” is not found in the Old Testament, the concept of a future kingdom established by God over which his Messiah would rule is present throughout the Old Testament canon. Furthermore, the corresponding concepts of Messiah and messianic kingdom are replete in extra-biblical Jewish literature from the intertestamental period onward. Consequently, Jesus’ proclamation of a coming kingdom in first century Palestine would naturally have been associated by his Jewish audience with the kingdom promised in the Old Testament. Specifically, Jesus’ announcement of an impending kingdom would have called attention to the antecedent prophecies in the Old Testament involving the Messiah and his kingdom.

In addition, while recognizing a measure of diversity in Judaism as to the nature of the messianic kingdom, nevertheless the description of this kingdom in intertestamental literature is essentially consistent with what is found in the Old Testament promises. In other words, the Old Testament presents something of a unified picture in its predictions of the messianic kingdom, and this unified picture is reflected in the intertestamental literature. Taken at face value, the Old Testament promises consistently depict an earthly kingdom with national Israel restored to its land as the head of the nations and with the Messiah ruling from Jerusalem and exercising worldwide dominion.

Using Daniel’s prophecies as a template and beginning in the second chapter with Daniel’s interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, Daniel describes five successive kingdoms or


13 Ibid., pp. 418–20. Commenting on the concept in Judaism as evidenced by the intertestamental literature, Caragounis notes, “Although the term ‘kingdom of God’ is rare in Judaism, the idea is almost ubiquitous, either explicitly as the kingdom of the Messiah or implicitly in descriptions of the messianic age” (ibid., p. 418).


15 DJG, s.v. “Kingdom of God/Kingdom of Heaven,” pp. 418–20. Caragounis sees two basic concepts in Judaism’s expectations concerning the messianic kingdom: a temporary, Davidic kingdom, sometimes thought of as encompassing the whole world, and a transcendental, everlasting kingdom encompassing the universe (ibid., p. 418).

world empires that arise in sequence. That these are earthly kingdoms is made clear in that Daniel identifies the first kingdom as the neo-Babylonian empire under Nebuchadnezzar (2:38). Following the fourth world empire, Daniel declares “the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed...; it will crush and put an end to all these kingdoms” (Dan 2:44). Since the first four kingdoms are all earthly kingdoms, this final kingdom likewise is to be understood as an earthly kingdom.

This interpretation is further supported by Daniel’s dream-vision of the four beasts recorded in chapter seven. Similar to Nebuchadnezzar’s dream in chapter two, Daniel describes his vision of four beasts arising in succession, each beast representing a king and his respective kingdom (7:17). Following the activity of the fourth beast, Daniel sees an individual he describes “like a Son of Man” coming with the clouds of heaven and being presented to one called “the Ancient of Days” (7:13).

Daniel further observes that to the one coming with the clouds there was given dominion, glory, and a kingdom in order that all mankind might serve him (7:14). This future kingdom is further said to belong to the “Highest One” and as incorporating the sovereignty and dominion of all the kingdoms under heaven that have come before it (7:27). Again, this future kingdom of the Highest One is defined in terms of the kingdoms that have preceded it. That is, it will be an earthly, world-wide kingdom, having dominion over the inhabitants of the earth.

Finally, in chapter nine, Daniel receives a revelation from the angel Gabriel regarding the destiny of Daniel’s people, the Jews, and their capital city, Jerusalem. Gabriel gives Daniel a chronological timetable that includes the coming of Messiah the Prince, his being cut off, the razing of Jerusalem, and the making and breaking of a covenant in the end times, accompanied by warfare (9:25–27). All of this, according to Gabriel, is a prelude to the bringing in of “everlasting righteousness” and the “anointing of the most holy place” (9:24). From the previous chapters, what is in view here with the bringing in of “everlasting righteousness” and the “anointing of the most holy place” is the establishing of Messiah’s kingdom with Jerusalem and its temple as its capital.

Taken together, the evidence from Daniel argues that the kingdom promised in the Old Testament was a world-wide kingdom with the Messiah ruling from Jerusalem and exercising dominion over the nations of the earth. In that Jesus is the Messiah, his proclamation of the kingdom of Heaven/God recorded in the Gospels had this kingdom, promised in the Old Testament, as its antecedent.17

This conclusion is further supported when it is noted that Jesus, like John the Baptist before him, uses the expression the kingdom of Heaven/God throughout his ministry without ever defining it. In other words, he uses the expression without defining it precisely because he anticipated that the nation understood from the Old Testament the nature of this kingdom. Had a different kingdom been intended, it would have been incumbent upon Jesus to provide

AN EXAMINATION OF THE KEY TEXTS

Synoptic References to the Nearness/Presence of the Kingdom of Heaven/God

Arguments for a Present, Spiritual Kingdom

Those taking kingdom of Heaven/God as referring to a present, spiritual kingdom interpret the announcement by Jesus in Matthew 4:17, “the kingdom of Heaven is at hand,” to mean that this kingdom has, in some sense at least, already arrived. This interpretation is supported, proponents argue, by Jesus’ declaration in Matthew 12:28 that “the kingdom of God has come upon you.” In other words, Jesus’ statement in Matthew 4:17 that the kingdom is “at hand” and his statement in Matthew 12:28 that the kingdom “has come” are taken as synonymous, both referring to a present kingdom. That being the case, this kingdom must be different from the kingdom promised in the Old Testament, in that, unlike the Old Testament promise, Jesus did not sit on David’s throne at any point during his First Advent.

Added to this is Jesus’ response to the question about the timing of the kingdom, recorded in Luke 17:20–21. Jesus declares that the kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed. Rather, Jesus says, “the kingdom of God is within you” (NIV). Taking these words as describing the internal nature of the kingdom, proponents conclude that the kingdom Jesus announced as having come is, in essence, a spiritual kingdom, and not a physical kingdom.

Arguments for a Future, Earthly Kingdom

Several problems surface with the above reading of these texts. The expression Jesus uses in Matthew 4:17, “is at hand,” is in the perfect tense and has a temporal force. The construction is frequently found in the New Testament of that which has drawn near in time, of that which is impending or imminent. As such, it is regularly used of events in the eschaton that, though future, are spoken of in the New Testament as having drawn near.

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20 Cf. 2 Sam 7:8–29; 1 Chr 17:7–27; Ps 89:20–37; 132:10–18. See the discussion in George Eldon Ladd, A Theology of the New Testament, rev. and ed. Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), pp. 372–73. Ladd argues that in Acts 2:29–36 and elsewhere, the NT redefines the Davidic throne, locating the throne as presently in heaven at the Father’s right hand, and, thus, the NT redefines the Davidic kingdom to include a present, spiritual form of the kingdom where Christ rules from heaven over the lives of his followers (ibid.).

21 Supporters generally take the plural “you” in 17:21 as generic in an effort to avoid the implication that Jesus was addressing his opponents with this statement (e.g., William Hendriksen, Exposition of the Gospel According to Luke, New Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978], pp. 805, 809–10).

The perfect tense, for example, is used to describe the Second Advent of Christ in James 5:8, the final salvation of Christians in Romans 13:12, and the end of the present age in 1 Peter 4:7. In all of these instances, the expression describes something that is still in the future as approaching or coming near in terms of time. Thus, consistent with its use in describing future events, Jesus could simply be saying in Matthew 4:17 that the earthly kingdom promised in the Old Testament has drawn near in time, not that it is present. In fact, when used in a temporal sense in the New Testament, a case can be made that the perfect tense never refers to that which is present, only to that which is approaching or drawing near.

Jesus’ declaration in Matthew 12:28, “the kingdom of God has come upon you,” can be interpreted in one of two ways consistent with the concept of a future kingdom. Jesus’ declaration is made in connection with his casting out demons by the Spirit of God. The thought could be that the kingdom has come in the sense that the king himself is present, a metonymy of association. Or, the expression could be taken as proleptic, describing something that is so certain that it is stated as if it were already a present reality. With either interpretation, Jesus’ statement in Matthew 12:28 can be harmonized with Matthew 4:17, with both expressions referring to a future kingdom consistent with the Old Testament promises.

In addition, the context effectively argues against taking Jesus’ declaration in Luke 17:21, “the kingdom of God is within you,” as a reference to a spiritual kingdom that resides within. Jesus is responding to the Pharisees who have rejected Jesus’ messianic claims and are asking Jesus why they are not seeing the prophetic signs that were to precede the kingdom. Jesus’ response cannot mean that the kingdom is a spiritual kingdom that resides within these unbelieving Pharisees. Furthermore, the expression Jesus uses is better translated “among you” or “in your midst,” rather than “within you.”

What Jesus is saying is that the signs of the kingdom will not be observed, that is, recognized by unbelievers like the Pharisees. For the Pharisees, the real question is not about the signs of the coming kingdom, which they have already observed and have rejected, but about who Jesus is—the King of the coming kingdom who is standing in their midst. The kingdom of

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23 In all three passages the perfect tense is used.

24 The temporal use of the perfect tense is found in Matt 3:2; 4:17; 10:7; 26:45; Mark 1:15; Luke 10:9, 11; 21:8, 20; Rom 13:12; Jas 5:8; 1 Pet 4:7. See BDAG, s.v. “ἐγγίζω,” p. 270.


26 As an example of the proleptic use of the aorist tense elsewhere, see Paul’s statement in Rom 8:30 that all those whom God has justified He has also “glorified.” Similarly, DJG, s.v. “Kingdom of God/Heaven,” p. 423.

27 A generic “you” in Luke 17:21 is unlikely in that, according to 17:20, Jesus is directly addressing the Pharisees.

God is in their midst in the sense that Jesus the King is standing before them. Access to the kingdom of God can only be gained through him.29

In short, the expression “is at hand” in the perfect tense is used in a temporal sense in the New Testament in a number of passages of something in the future that has drawn near in time. It is never clearly used of something that is present. That argues for taking Matthew 4:17, “the kingdom of Heaven is at hand,” as referring to a future kingdom, not a present kingdom.

In addition, since the expression, “the kingdom of heaven is at hand,” is used several times in the Gospels, the parallel expression in Matthew 12:28, “the kingdom of God has come,” used once must be interpreted in light of the many uses of “is at hand” rather than the many uses by the one. Lastly, the Lord’s statement in Luke 17:21, “the kingdom of God is in you,” is better translated, “the kingdom of God is in your midst,” and taken to refer to the presence of the King. It cannot refer to a present spiritual kingdom in the life of the unbelieving Pharisees.

The Parables of Matthew 13 and the Mysteries of the Kingdom

Arguments for a Present, Spiritual Kingdom

Proponents offer three lines of evidence from Matthew 13 and the parallel passages in support of taking the expression kingdom of Heaven/God as referring to a present, spiritual kingdom. The first involves Jesus’ description of the parables in 13:11 as representing the “mysteries of the kingdom of Heaven.”30 Jesus intends by his use of “mysteries” that these parables represent new revelation about the kingdom and, specifically, new revelation about the nature of the kingdom between his First and Second Advents.

For this reason, proponents argue that the “mysteries” of the kingdom should be understood as revealing the mystery “form” of the kingdom during the period between the Advents. Thus, Jesus in effect redefines the kingdom in these parables, describing it in terms of his present, spiritual reign in the life of his disciples.31

In support of this interpretation, proponents assert that the formulas used to introduce the individual parables in Matthew 13 identify the kingdom as present. The first such formula, “the kingdom of heaven may be compared to,” is found in 13:24 and uses the aorist tense. As such, it should be translated in the sense that the kingdom of Heaven “has now become like,” with the following parable describing some truth about the kingdom in its present form.32

The remaining formulas in Matthew 13 use a cognate construction in the present tense. In

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29 Similarly Bock, though he still interprets the statement about the Lord being present or among them as supporting an initial or inaugurated form of the kingdom (Luke, 2:1417–18).
30 The parallel passage in Mark 4:11 uses the singular, “the mystery of the kingdom of God.”
that the first formula uses the aorist, the cognate constructions with the present should be interpreted in harmony with the first, each introducing a parable revealing something about the present form of the kingdom.33

The second line of evidence is that Jesus’ description of the kingdom in these parables demands a present form of the kingdom. For example, in both the parable of the mustard seed (13: 31–32) and the parable of leaven (13:33), the kingdom is depicted in terms of its starting out small and gradually growing or spreading until it fills the entire earth. While this is consistent with a present form of the kingdom—the gradual increase in the number of believers submitting to the kingship of Jesus in the present age—it is not consistent with what Daniel and others say about the sudden establishment of the messianic kingdom at the Lord’s return.34

The third line of evidence is found in 13:41 where Jesus states that individuals will be removed from his kingdom when he returns. The thought is that there must be some form of the kingdom already in existence when the Lord returns, if at that time he needs to remove individuals from his kingdom. The conclusion drawn from the above evidence is that there is a present form of the kingdom. Further, this present form is a spiritual kingdom where Jesus rules in the lives of his followers.35

Arguments for a Future, Earthly Kingdom

It must be granted that the evidence for a present, “spiritual” form of the kingdom in Matthew 13 appears weighty. However, the evidence can be interpreted where no redefining of the kingdom is seen and, therefore, no present form of the kingdom is supported. Discussing each issue in sequence, the expression in Matthew 13:11, “the mysteries of the kingdom of Heaven,” refers to truths about the kingdom which were previously hidden but were now being disclosed.36 The specific truths that are being revealed must be determined from the parables themselves. The concept of a mystery “form” of the kingdom reads something into the text that is not required by the context.

The first parable recorded in Matthew 13 is the parable of the sower. What it reveals is an ongoing proclamation of the gospel in the period between the Lord’s First and Second Advents. In effect, the first parable and its interpretation set the pattern by which the subsequent parables in this chapter are to be understood. As such, the “mysteries” of the kingdom of Heaven introduce the revelation that there will be an interval between the Lord’s First Advent and his establishing his kingdom at his Second Advent.

Nothing in this parable suggests a present form of the kingdom, only a present proclamation of the gospel. Applying this to the rest of the chapter, the parables in Matthew 13 address the

33 Ibid.
events and activities during the present interval between the First and Second Advents in preparation for the coming kingdom, the kingdom itself being future.37

Applying the above to the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven, these parables point to the interval between the Advents and the ongoing proclamation of the gospel during this interval. As the gospel continues to be proclaimed, the number of those saved, like the mustard seed and the leaven, continues to grow. The result is that at the end of the age there is a great host of believers qualified to participate in the kingdom the Lord establishes at his return.

Some will enter the kingdom in their natural bodies, having survived the Tribulation judgments and the Lord’s subsequent removal of unbelievers from the earth (Matt 25:31–46). Many others will have been resurrected and will enter in glorified bodies. The point is, when the Lord returns to establish his kingdom, the number of believers will be great, like the mature mustard seed, and the earth will be filled, like the leavened lump.38 That being the case, nothing in Matthew 13 requires interpreting the “mysteries of the kingdom” as introducing a hidden, spiritual form of the kingdom. Both parables address the spread of the gospel and the growth of the numbers of believers qualified to participate in the Lord’s future kingdom.

The same may be said of the formulas introducing the parables. To argue that the aorist tense in Matthew 13:24, “the kingdom of Heaven may be compared,” means that the parable describes a present form of the kingdom is to ignore the evidence. The Synoptics show considerable variation in the formulas used to introduce these parables, from the aorist subjunctive to the present and future indicative. Furthermore, the authors appear to use them interchangeably. The parable of the mustard seed is introduced with the present indicative in Matthew 13:31, the aorist subjunctive in Mark 4:30, and both the present and future indicative in Luke 13:18.

According to those arguing for a present form of the kingdom, the aorist and present tense in these formulas introduce parables about the present form of the kingdom and the future tense introduces parables about the future form of the kingdom. Yet, as can be seen with the parable of the mustard seed where all three tenses are used, such distinctions simply cannot be maintained.

Furthermore, parables using the future tense appear to be teaching the same point as others where the aorist or present tense is used. For example, the parable of the wedding feast is introduced in Matthew 22:2 with an aorist tense while the similar parable of the ten virgins is introduced in Matthew 25:1 with a future tense. Both parables describe similar events and activities associated with the kingdom of heaven. Thus, it is better to view all three tenses in


38 McClain, The Greatness of the Kingdom, pp. 440–441.
these introductory formulas as gnomic (i.e., introducing general or proverbial truths) and explain the use of one tense versus another as simply a matter of stylistic variation.  

The evidence from the parables themselves further supports viewing the kingdom as strictly future. If the parables in Matthew 13 are describing a present form of the kingdom, defined as the Lord ruling in the hearts of believers, a problem arises. Two of these parables, the parable of the wheat and tares (13:24–30) and the parable of the dragnet (13:47–50), describe that which is good existing side by side with that which is bad or evil. If the good represent believers and the bad unbelievers, in what sense can both be part of this kingdom? In other words, how can both believers and unbelievers be a part of this kingdom, if this kingdom represents the Lord’s spiritual rule in the life of believers?

Proponents of a present form of the kingdom counter the above criticism. They argue that the field in which the good and bad are found growing together in the parable of the wheat and tares does not represent the kingdom. Rather, the field in this parable is specifically identified as the world (13:38). As such, the good wheat and the bad tares are located together in the world, not in the kingdom.  

However, this explanation fails to address the Lord’s statement in 13:41 at the conclusion of this parable. The Lord declares that he will send forth his angels to gather the evil ones “out of his kingdom” at the end of the age. If the kingdom in view is the Lord’s spiritual reign in the lives of believers, as proponents of a present form of the kingdom argue, in what sense must the Lord remove evil ones from this kingdom when he returns?

Furthermore, in the parable of the dragnet, the Lord directly links the kingdom with the dragnet. He says, “the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet cast into the sea” (13:47). He then describes this net as containing both good fish and bad (13:48). Thus, the tension remains. How can this kingdom, depicted by the dragnet, include both the good and the bad, if this kingdom represents the Lord’s present spiritual rule in the lives of believers?

A related question is this. If these parables introduce a mystery form of the kingdom, defined as the Lord’s present spiritual rule in the lives of believers, is this rule something that the Lord did not exercise in lives of Old Testament believers? Or, if the Lord rules in the hearts of all true believers, whether in the Old Testament or New, in what sense is Jesus introducing a present, spiritual form of the kingdom? The Lord cannot both rule in the hearts of all true believers, both Old Testament and New Testament believers, and at the same time be introducing a mystery form of the kingdom involving his present, spiritual rule in the hearts of believers.

Perhaps the key passage in these parables that seemingly describes a present form of the kingdom is 13:41. There individuals are said to be removed from the kingdom when the Lord

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returns, suggesting that a kingdom exists when the Lord returns. However, when this passage is compared with similar passages in Matthew, no present form of the kingdom is seen.

According to Matthew 25:31–33, when the Lord returns he will sit on his throne and judge the nations, separating the sheep (believers) from the goats (unbelievers). The goats are removed from the earth (25:46) and the Lord says to the sheep, “Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (25:34). The sequence is clear. The Lord returns, sits on his throne, judges the nations, removes unbelievers, and invites believers to receive their inheritance, that is, to enter his kingdom. Thus, based on Matthew 25:31–33, what the Lord describes by the expression “gather out of his kingdom” in Matthew 13:41 is his removing unbelievers from the earth just prior to his establishing his kingdom.41

References in the Epistles Relating Believers in the Church to the Kingdom

Arguments for a Present, Spiritual Kingdom

There are three passages in Paul’s letters where Paul mentions the kingdom of God or the kingdom of God’s Son and links his readers to this kingdom in such a way that these passages are used to support a present, spiritual form of the kingdom. The first is Romans 14:17. In the surrounding verses, Paul discusses how the strong in the faith, those who have greater freedom in things no longer prohibited by Scripture, are to relate to those weak in the faith. In the context of eating meat once prohibited, Paul cautions the strong not to eat if the weaker brother is encouraged to do what his conscience prohibits. This would result in the weaker brother sinning against his own conscience and, as a consequence, against God.

Paul’s support for his prohibition, that the strong not eat meat if it causes the weaker to stumble, is that “the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” Paul’s reference to the kingdom of God has been interpreted as locating the kingdom in the present age—those strong in the faith are to heed Paul’s warning as members of this kingdom—and as describing it as spiritual rather than physical—the kingdom is not eating and drinking.42

A similar statement is found in 1 Corinthians 4:20. In this context, Paul warns those in Corinth who oppose him of his intent to come to Corinth to confront them. When he does, he will expose their false claims of power with a display of his own power. Paul expresses his confidence in the outcome of this confrontation by saying, “the kingdom of God does not consist in words but in power.” Again, Paul’s declaration has been interpreted to mean that there is a present form of the kingdom where Christ rules in the lives believers and where apostolic power is on display.43

41 E.g., McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, p. 441.
Perhaps the strongest evidence for a present form of the kingdom in Paul’s writings is found in Colossians 1:13. In the preceding context, 1:9–12, Paul records his prayer for the readers. In the course of his prayer, Paul mentions believers giving thanks to the Father. Part of the reason he and the Colossian believers are to give thanks, Paul says, is that the Father “has rescued us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son.” Here Paul seems clearly to describe a present form of the kingdom in which he and the Colossian believers have now been placed. It is a kingdom in which Christ as God’s Son rules and in which the readers have already been established or “transferred.”

*Arguments for a Future, Earthly Kingdom*

Outside of the Gospels, the expression “the kingdom of God” is not often used, and that is true of Paul’s writings. On the occasions where Paul speaks of the kingdom of God, these generally have an eschatological or Second Advent reference, as acknowledged by those who hold to a present form of the kingdom. The question is whether the passages mentioned above are an exception to the overall rule. That is, do they refer to a present kingdom or, consistent with Paul’s more common use, to a future kingdom?

Paul’s reference to the kingdom of God in Romans 14:17, “the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit,” is somewhat elliptical. Paul does not further clarify the nature of this kingdom. Paul’s statement could be taken in defense of a present form of the kingdom, but it could also be interpreted as a reference to the eschatological kingdom. In short, Paul could simply be contrasting the characteristics of the present world with those of the future kingdom.

Specifically, Paul could be saying the present world is characterized by eating and drinking, the pursuit of temporal pleasures. The future kingdom is characterized by righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. In their relationship with each other, the Roman believers, indwelled by God’s Spirit, should not be driven by that which characterizes this present world. Rather, they should be driven by that which characterizes the world to come. Thus, Paul is calling on his readers to measure their present conduct in a fallen world by the conduct that will characterize God’s future kingdom. That being the case, there is nothing in this passage that requires a reference to a present kingdom.

A similar case can be made for Paul’s allusion to the kingdom in 1 Corinthians 4:20, “for the kingdom of God does not consist in words but in power.” The future kingdom will be characterized not only by righteousness, but also by the overt display of divine power as

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46 James D. G. Dunn, *Romans*, 2 vols., Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1988), 2:823. Although holding to a present, spiritual form of the kingdom, nevertheless, Dunn’s comment comes close to the above, “For both Jesus and Paul the character and power of the still future rule of God can provide inspiration and enabling for the present” (ibid.). Cf. 1 Cor 6:9–10; Gal 5:21.
Jesus, the messianic King, rules with absolute authority. As an apostle, Paul is an official emissary of the Messiah and his kingdom. Just as Jesus displayed his credentials during his First Advent as the messianic King, so Paul is able to display his credentials as the Lord’s legate.

What Paul asserts in this verse is that, as an official representative of the future kingdom, he has true apostolic power and authority. Those opposing him in Corinth should beware. He will not allow anyone who opposes the work of God to go unchallenged. And, when he does challenge those who oppose him, it will not be with words only, but with the display of divine power. Again, there is nothing in this passage that demands Paul has a present kingdom in view.

The same may be said of Paul’s reference to the kingdom in Colossians 1:13, “He rescued us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son.” The question with this passage focuses on the meaning of the expression “transferred.” According to its form—aorist indicative—it has in view something that the Father has accomplished for the readers. Does Paul’s statement refer to what the readers presently experience, in which case Paul has in view a present kingdom? Or, does Paul’s statement refer to the readers’ position rather than to what they now experience, in which case Paul has in view the future kingdom?

The second option is viable because Paul employs the aorist indicative elsewhere in similar ways. For example, in Ephesians 2:7, Paul describes God as having “seated” the believers in Ephesus “in the heavenly places in Christ.” Clearly, Paul is describing the position believers enjoy “in Christ,” not their present experience. Believers are not now actually sitting in the heavens. The same may be said of Paul’s statement in Colossians 1:13. In fact, the evidence from the immediate context argues that Paul is describing the readers’ position, not their present experience. And, if that be the case, then the kingdom in view is the future millennial kingdom of the Son and not a present, spiritual kingdom.

Paul’s statement in Colossians 1:13 clarifies and supports his previous statement in 1:12 about what the Father has done that should provoke the readers’ thanksgiving. They should thank the Father, Paul writes, because the Father has qualified them “to share in the inheritance of the saints.” Paul explains that the Father has done this by transferring the readers “to the kingdom” of his Son. Thus, the inheritance the readers have is further defined by Paul as their having been transferred to the kingdom of God’s Son.

An inheritance can refer to something one already has (e.g., Acts 1:17) or to something one expects to receive in the future (e.g., Titus 3:7). Assuming for the moment it is the latter, Paul

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48 Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), pp. 334–35. Hoehner’s comments reflect this understanding of the text, “Although we are in the heavens positionally, we remain on the earth to live a resurrected life in connection with the resurrected Christ” (p. 335).
could be describing the kingdom as a future inheritance, which the readers now have as their right but not yet as their experience (cf. Eph 5:5).

The counterpart to the Father’s transferring the readers to the Son’s kingdom is his removing or rescuing them “from the domain of darkness.” In context, the expression, “the domain of darkness,” refers to the present world system over which Satan rules and which is characterized by the darkness of sin and unbelief. Again, Paul could be referring to the actual experience of the readers. They are no longer enslaved to sin and Satan, but are under the authority of the Son in his kingdom. Or, Paul could be referring to the position of the readers. They are true citizens of the coming kingdom, though still living in the present, fallen world.

The second interpretation is preferred. Elsewhere, Paul exhorts believers to put on the whole armor of God to guard against Satan’s strategies (e.g., Eph 6:11). While believers are no longer enslaved to sin and Satan, they must guard themselves against Satan’s influences because they are still residents of Satan’s domain. As such, Paul is describing the readers’ present position in Colossians 1:12 when he states they are no longer in the “domain of darkness,” not their present experience.

That being the case, Paul’s subsequent statement in 1:13 about readers being transferred into the kingdom of God’s Son also describes the readers’ present position, not their present experience. They have been “transferred” into this kingdom in the sense that they have been made its citizens.\(^{49}\) Thus, consistent with Paul’s references to this kingdom elsewhere, the kingdom in view in Colossians 1:13 is future, not present.

CONCLUSION

Scripture teaches that God exercises absolute control over his creation and, as such, is the eternal King and Sovereign of the universe and all that it contains (e.g., Dan 4:25–26). Scripture also teaches that the Lord continues to rule in the lives of believers, as he always has (e.g., Rom 10:6–13). What has been argued above is that the expressions “kingdom of Heaven”/“kingdom of God” are used exclusively in the New Testament to refer to the future millennial kingdom promised in the Old Testament and fulfilled by Christ at his Second Advent.

This conclusion contributes to two larger theological discussions that are simply mentioned here and not developed. The first discussion involves the question of continuity versus discontinuity in the relationship between the Testaments and between Israel and the church. Those championing greater continuity between the Old and New Testaments and between Israel and the church argue that in some sense, at least, the church is presently fulfilling the kingdom promises given to national Israel in the Old Testament. A key argument in defending this continuity is the interpretation of the expressions “kingdom of Heaven”/“kingdom of God” in the New Testament as pointing to a present, spiritual kingdom.

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Yet if the expressions “kingdom of God/kingdom of Heaven” are not used in the New Testament to describe a present form of the kingdom, then a key argument for greater continuity between the Testaments and between Israel and the church is removed. As was argued above, the expressions are used in the New Testament to refer to the future messianic kingdom promised to national Israel in the Old Testament and established with national Israel by Christ at his Second Advent. The church fully participates in the promised kingdom in the eschaton as co-regents with Christ (e.g., Rev 2:26–27; 3:21). There is no clear evidence, however, for a present form of this kingdom and, therefore, no clear evidence that the church is presently fulfilling the Old Testament promises.

The second discussion involves the relationship between the social responsibilities depicted as part of the promised kingdom in the Old Testament and in the Gospels and the application of these responsibilities to the church. Those holding to a greater continuity between the Old and New Testaments and between Israel and the church argue that these social responsibilities are a part of the church’s mandate and must be implemented by the local church. And, the justification for placing these kingdom responsibilities on the church is the understanding that the church represents in some sense at least a present form of the promised kingdom.

Again, however, if the expressions “kingdom of God/kingdom of Heaven” are not used in the New Testament to describe a present form of the kingdom, then the justification for applying a kingdom social ethic to the church is significantly undermined. This is not to say that believers in the church are free from any social responsibilities. The New Testament is replete with commands directing believers in the church to be fully engaged in helping fellow believers and even those outside the church (e.g., Gal 6:10). What is argued against is that the church itself is to embrace the social program that will be part of the future kingdom or that local churches must implement such a social agenda either as part of or in addition to the Great Commission.