

The Kingdom of Heaven/The Kingdom of God: A Present Reality, A Future Hope, or Both? A Case Study in Hermeneutics and Theology

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INTRODUCTION

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

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 inductive. 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.

SYNONYMOUS OR DISTINCT KINGDOMS

Preliminary to examining the meaning of the expressions is to determine 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-three times (the variant reading in John 3:5 is secondary). Conversely, the expression *kingdom of God* is used four times in Matthew (the variant reading in 6:33 is secondary), 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 dispensationalists understood the kingdom of Heaven to refer to Jesus' future messianic kingdom. This future kingdom is defined 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 (e.g., John F. Walvoord, *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come*, pp. 30–31).

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 and there is a parallel passage in Mark or Luke, the parallel passage in Mark or Luke invariably uses kingdom of God in place of Matthew's kingdom of Heaven.

For example, in Matthew 19:23, Matthew records Jesus as saying, "It is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven" (unless otherwise noted, all Scripture citations are taken from the NASB, 1995 edition). 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 as well as within Matthew's gospel itself. For this reason, most dispensationalists today agree with the majority and see no distinction between the two expressions (cf. Herbert W. Bateman IV, "Dispensationalism Yesterday and Today," in *Contemporary Dispensationalism: Three Central Issues*, ed. Herbert W. Bateman IV, pp. 23–31).

In response to the question of why does Matthew prefer 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 reverence and often would use a euphemism such as "heaven" in place of the divine name (cf. Dan 4:26; Matt 21:25; Luke 15:18, 21). Matthew, writing primarily to Jews, uses "kingdom of Heaven" simply as a euphemism for "kingdom of God" so as not to offend the sensitivities of his readers. Matthew is able to do that 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. The fact is that the name “God” appears almost fifty times in Matthew’s gospel. What is argued here is that when Jesus and others linked God’s name and kingdom, Matthew felt constrained to use a euphemism for God’s name so as not to offend his Jewish readers. The four times Matthew uses “kingdom of God” are all in citations where Matthew intentionally records the expression that Jesus himself used (12:28; 19:24; 21:31, 43).

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 over simplification, it may be said that 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 expression refers strictly to Christ’s future earthly rule in the Millennium. Traditional dispensationalists regularly 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 Millennium. This is the view generally supported by covenant premillennialists and progressive dispensationalists (cf. Robert G. Clouse, ed., *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*; Darrell L. Bock, ed., *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*).

As mentioned earlier, the underlying premise in this study is that the expression “the kingdom of Heaven/God” as used in the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament refers 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 and then to respond to those arguments.

THE OLDT TESTAMENT ANTECEDENTS

Jesus’ proclamation of a kingdom in first century Palestine would naturally have been associated by his Jewish audience with the use of this expression in the Old Testament. Specifically, Jesus’ use of the term would have called attention to the antecedent prophecies in the Old Testament involving the Messiah and his promised kingdom. Taken at face value, these Old Testament prophecies describe a literal, earthly kingdom, centered in the land of Palestine and the nation of Israel, over which the Messiah would exercise worldwide dominion.

Using Daniel’s prophecies as a template and beginning in chapter two with Daniel’s interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, Daniel describes four successive kingdoms or world empires that arise in sequence. That these are literal, 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 how “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 literal, that is, earthly kingdoms, this final kingdom likewise is to be understood as a literal, 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).

To the one coming with the clouds, Daniel observes, 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 a 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 the 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 destruction 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 (see, among others, the discussion in Stephen R. Miller, *Daniel*, NAC). In that Jesus is the Messiah, his proclamation of the kingdom of Heaven/God as recorded in the Gospels had this kingdom, promised in the Old Testament, as its antecedent.

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 would have 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 a definition for this kingdom to distinguish it from that which was promised in the Old Testament.

AN EXAMINATION OF THE KEY TEXTS

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

Arguments against a Future, Earthly Kingdom

Those taking *kingdom of Heaven/God* as referring to a present, spiritual kingdom interpret the announcement by Jesus in Matthew 4:17 that “the kingdom of Heaven is at hand” to mean that this kingdom has, in some sense at least, already arrived. This interpretation is supported, these 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” is interpreted to mean essentially the same thing as the statement in Matthew 12:28 that the kingdom “has come.” Added to this is Jesus’ response to the question, recorded in Luke 17:20–21, about the timing of the kingdom. 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).

Interpreters conclude from this that the kingdom Jesus announced 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 (2 Sam 7:8–29; 1 Chr 17:7–27; Ps 89:20–37). In other words, since Jesus proclaimed the arrival of this kingdom and since Jesus did not sit on David’s throne at any time during his first advent, this kingdom must be different from that which was promised in the Old Testament. Added to this, Jesus’ statement in Luke 17:21 about the internal nature of this kingdom argues for a spiritual kingdom, not a physical kingdom.

Arguments for a Future, Earthly Kingdom

There are several problems with the above interpretation. The expression Jesus uses in Matthew 4:17, “is at hand,” is frequently found in a temporal sense 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. It is used in this sense to describe the Lord’s return (Jas 5:8), final salvation (Rom 13:12), and the end of the present age (1 Pet 4:7). As with these other eschatological events, Jesus could simply be saying that the earthly kingdom, promised in the Old Testament, has drawn near in terms of time, not that it is present.

Jesus’ declaration in Matthew 12:28, that the kingdom “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 (cf. Rom 8:30, believers are “glorified”). With either interpretation, Jesus’ statement in Matthew 12:28

can be harmonized with Matthew 4:17 and both expressions taken as references to a future kingdom consistent with the Old Testament promises.

As well, the context effectively argues against taking Jesus' declaration in Luke 17:21 that "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, in your midst" rather than "within you" (BDAG, pp. 340–41).

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 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.

The Parables of Matthew 13 and the Mysteries of the Kingdom

Arguments against a Future, Earthly Kingdom

Interpreters 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. In Matthew 13:11, Jesus describes these parables as representing the "mysteries of the kingdom of Heaven." It is argued that the "mysteries" recorded in these parables reveal the nature of the kingdom between the First and Second Advents. As such, the "mysteries" of the kingdom should be understood as revealing the mystery "form" of the kingdom during the period between the Advents (Mark 4:11 has the singular, "the *mystery* of the kingdom of God").

That being the case, Jesus in effect redefines the kingdom in these parables, describing it in terms of his present, spiritual reign in the life of his disciples (cf. George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 2nd ed., rev. Donald A. Hagner, pp. 91–92; Ladd speaks of a hidden or inaugurated form of the kingdom with Jesus presently reigning in the lives of believers that precedes the future or consummated form of the kingdom with Jesus' ruling over the nations of the earth).

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. The remaining formulas in Matthew 13 use a cognate construction in the present tense. In 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 (cf. D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, p. 317).

As well, proponents argue that the parables themselves reveal 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 described in terms of its starting out small and gradually growing or spreading until it fills the entire earth. While this is consistent with the gradual increase in the number of believers 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.

In addition, Jesus specifically states in Matthew 13:41 that individuals will be removed from his kingdom when he returns. The thought is that there is some form of the kingdom already in existence when the Lord returns. Thus, this present form must be a spiritual kingdom in which Jesus rules in the lives of his followers (cf. Carson, *Matthew*, pp. 317–27).

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, hence, no present form of the kingdom is postulated. Discussing each issue in sequence, the expression “the mysteries of the kingdom of Heaven” refers to truths about the kingdom which were previously hidden and are now being disclosed (cf. Rom 16:25–26). The specific truths that are being revealed must be discerned 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 that there 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 is the revelation that there is going to be an interval between the Lord’s First Advent and his establishing his kingdom at his Second Advent. There is nothing in this parable that suggests a present form of the kingdom, only a present proclamation of the gospel. The parables in Matthew 13 address the events and activities during the present interval in preparation for the coming kingdom, the kingdom itself being future.

Applying this to the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven, what these parables teach is that as the gospel is proclaimed during the interval the number of those saved grows so that at the Lord’s return there is a great host of believers qualified to participate in the kingdom, the kingdom itself is still future. At the end, only the saved survive (the Tribulation and Jesus subsequent removal of the goats from the sheep at his return) so that those entering the kingdom are all redeemed (the living in physical bodies, the resurrected in glorified bodies). That being the case, nothing in Matthew 13 requires interpreting the “mysteries of the kingdom” as introducing a hidden, spiritual form of the kingdom (cf. Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, pp. 440–441).

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, what the kingdom has now become, is to ignore the evidence. The Synoptics show considerable variation in these introductory formulas, from the aorist subjunctive to the present and future indicative. Furthermore, they 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 describing similar events and activities associated with the kingdom of heaven. Thus, it is better to view all three tenses in these introductory formulas as gnomic, 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. 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?

A related question is this. If these parables introduce a mystery form of the kingdom, again, defined as the Lord’s present rule in the life of believers, is this rule then something that the Lord did not exercise in life 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 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 (13:46) 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. Applying this to Matthew 13:41, what the Lord describes is his removing unbelievers from the earth just prior to his establishing his kingdom.

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

Arguments against a Future, Earthly 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 form of the kingdom. The first is Romans 14:17. In the surrounding verses, Paul is discussing 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 (Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT, pp. 848–57).

A similar statement is found in 1 Corinthians 4:20. In this context, Paul is warning those in Corinth who oppose him of his intent to come to Corinth and 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, since, he says, “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 is ruling in the lives of Paul and the Corinthian believers and where apostolic power is on display (Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT, pp. 189–92).

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 a prayer he prays 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" (James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, pp. 67–80).

Arguments for a Future Kingdom, Earthly Kingdom

Outside of the Gospels, the *kingdom of God* is not often referenced and that holds true for Paul's writings. On the occasions where Paul speaks of the kingdom of God, these generally have an eschatological reference, as those who hold to a present form of the kingdom acknowledge (e.g., Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT, pp. 740–41). The question is whether the passages mentioned are an exception to the overall rule.

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 in that 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.

Paul could simply be contrasting the characteristics of the present world with those of the future kingdom. 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, indwelt 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.

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 Jesus, the messianic King, rules with absolute authority. Paul as an apostle 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 and the Lord's legate.

In effect, what Paul is saying 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.

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 revolves around 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 form of the kingdom? Or, does it 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 in that 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. The evidence from the context argues in favor of the second option, that Paul is describing the readers' position, not their present experience. As such, the kingdom in view must refer to the future millennial kingdom of the Son.

Paul's statement in 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." And, Paul explains, the Father has done this by transferring them "to the kingdom" of his Son. In other words, 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). Thus, Paul could be describing the kingdom as a future inheritance, which the readers 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 domain. Or, Paul could be referring to the position of the readers. They are true citizens of the coming kingdom, though still living in the world.

The second interpretation is preferred. Elsewhere Paul exhorts believers to put on the whole armor of God to guard against Satan's strategies. While believers are no longer enslaved to sin and Satan, they still must guard against Satan's influences, that is, they are still residents of Satan's domain.

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 rules in the lives of believers (e.g., Mark 8:34). What has been argued above is that the expression "kingdom of Heaven/God" is used exclusively in the New Testament to refer to the future millennial kingdom promised in the Old Testament and fulfilled by Christ in the eschaton.