

clear example in the Bible itself of a figurative, nonliteral interpretation of an Old Testament passage dealing with the restoration of Israel" (Hoekema, *Bible*, 210).

Another prophecy of the restoration of Israel applied to the church (Jews plus Gentiles) is Hosea 2:23; see Rom 9:23-26 and 1 Pet 2:10. Compare also 2 Sam 7:11-16 and Acts 2:29-36.

Would those living in OT times have understood that such prophecies did not apply to physical Israel? Would they have understood the concept of a "spiritual" Israel? Most likely they would not. But neither would they have understood that a prophecy about Elijah (Mal 4:5) would not refer to *their* Elijah, but to a man named John the Baptist. That God's eternal purpose would lead through OT Israel to a new Israel called the church was a mystery until NT times (Eph 3:1-11). Not even the prophets—nor angels themselves—knew what their prophecies would entail (1 Pet 1:10-12). But *we* know, thanks to the NT's own teaching; and according to the point made earlier, the OT was written for the *church's* benefit. Thus there is no excuse for continuing to apply prophecies that have already been fulfilled in connection with Christ's first coming to a fictionalized future scenario related to Christ's second coming.

Does God still have a separate plan for national, physical Israel? Many will say yes. Lindsey expresses this common idea: "For us, as believers, our hope is different from Israel's" (128). But the Bible says no. When God tore the veil of the temple asunder at the death of Jesus (Matt 27:51), he was signifying the end of the special role of the Jews (see John 4:21). There is only "one hope" (Eph 4:4); this one hope is the same for Jews and Gentiles alike. God no longer has a *separate* plan for physical Israel.

God still has a *plan* for the Jews, however: he wants them to become a part of his church, the *new* Israel. The only way that "all Israel will be saved" (Rom 11:26) is if they are grafted back into the original olive tree, which has now become spiritual Israel, the church (Rom 11:17-24).

III. THE KINGDOM IN PROPHECY

Another great theme of OT prophecy is the kingdom of God—that the Messiah will come and set up a kingdom over which he will reign forever. Since the kingdom is often equated with the millennial reign of Christ, it is very important that we understand how to interpret kingdom prophecies as they relate to the end time. Here we will use these prophecies as a second illustration of the proper application of the principles of prophetic interpretation discussed at the beginning of this chapter.

All agree that Jesus of Nazareth is the King who fulfills the prophecies about the kingdom. There is serious disagreement, however, as to *how* these prophecies are fulfilled. Especially, there is disagreement as to the *time* and the *nature* of the kingdom Jesus comes to establish. Many believe that when Christ comes back to the earth in his *second* coming, then he will establish a *physical, political kingdom*

in Jerusalem and literally rule over all the peoples of the earth for one thousand years. Others believe that Christ actually established his kingdom when he came the *first* time, and that it is a *heavenly, spiritual kingdom*. The idea is that Christ reigns now from heaven in the hearts of his followers.

What prophecies are at stake here? At this point we can cite only a few of the many that are scattered throughout the whole OT. We call attention first to the promise God made to David, "I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. . . . Your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever" (2 Sam 7:12-13,16). Some elements of this prophecy may refer to Solomon, but its basic application seems to be Messianic.

Several Psalms are called royal Psalms because they appear to be prophecies of the coming Messiah's kingship. An example is Psalm 2, where the Lord God says, "But as for Me, I have installed My King upon Zion, My holy mountain" (v. 6). Then God addresses the King himself: "Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Your inheritance, and the very ends of the earth as Your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron, You shall shatter them like earthenware" (vv. 8-9). This King is surely Jesus Christ (Rev 12:5); but is the mountain on which he is enthroned a physical location in Jerusalem, or is it the heavenly Zion of Heb 11:22?

Another example is Psalm 45, which pictures the King riding forth in majesty to receive his bride. He is addressed with words of worship: "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; a scepter of uprightness is the scepter of Your kingdom" (v. 6).

A final royal Psalm is Ps 110: "The LORD says to my Lord: 'Sit at My right hand until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet.' The LORD will stretch forth Your strong scepter from Zion, saying, 'Rule in the midst of Your enemies'" (vv. 1-2). This is an important prophecy because it is quoted or alluded to so many times in the NT in reference to Christ. The reference to "Zion" shows the connection between this Psalm and Ps 2:6.

The well-known Messianic prophecy in Isa 9:6-7 is also a kingdom prophecy: "For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; and the government will rest on His shoulders; and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. 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." The "throne of David" theme is continued in Ezek 34:23-24, "Then I will set over them one shepherd, My servant David, and he will feed them; he will feed them himself and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and My servant David will be prince among them." See also Ezek 37:21-28.

The book of Daniel contains several kingdom prophecies, notably Dan 2:44, "In the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will

never be destroyed, and that kingdom will not be left for another people; it will crush and put an end to all these kingdoms, but it will itself endure forever.” Also Dan 7:13-14, “I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven one like a Son of Man was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations and men of every language might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed.”

Also significant is Micah 4:6-7, “In that day, declares the LORD, ‘I will assemble the lame and gather the outcasts, even those whom I have afflicted. I will make the lame a remnant and the outcasts a strong nation, and the LORD will reign over them in Mount Zion from now on and forever.’” See also Zech 6:12-13, “Thus says the LORD of hosts, ‘Behold, a man whose name is Branch, for He will branch out from where He is; and He will build the temple of the LORD. Yes, it is He who will build the temple of the LORD, and He who will bear the honor and sit and rule on His throne. Thus, He will be a priest on His throne.’” See Zech 9:9-10.

What do these prophecies mean? What kind of kingdom is this? When is it supposed to be established? How we answer such questions depends in large part on our understanding of the nature of prophecy as such, and the nature of the reality in which it is fulfilled. Since there are many who insist on taking all prophecy literally and applying it to physical realities only, we are not surprised when they take these kingdom prophecies to mean that the Messiah will come and establish a literal, physical, earthly kingdom for the Jews, headquartered in Jerusalem. In fact, many Jews at the time of Jesus’ first coming interpreted them thus. They were “waiting for the kingdom of God,” like Joseph of Arimathea (Mark 15:43), but typically they were expecting an earthly kingdom (John 6:14-15). Even the apostles seemed to have this view (Acts 1:6). Unfortunately, however, this was a false interpretation of the kingdom prophecies, and much of Jesus’ own teaching was devoted to correcting it and explaining the true nature of the kingdom. His remark to Pilate sums up this element of his teaching: “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36).

Nevertheless there are still countless Christians who today take this same approach to the kingdom prophecies. Many of these believe that Christ’s original purpose was to establish an earthly kingdom for the Jews; but most of the Jews would not accept him as their King, and thus this plan was postponed until his second coming. This and other views of the millennium agree that the kingdom of God has not come yet; and when it comes, it will be an earthly kingdom marked by physical peace and prosperity for the whole earth. The whole subject of the millennium will be discussed in the next chapter.

One of the most serious problems caused by the literalist approach to prophecy is that it causes many to apply prophecies to the second coming of Christ that

were actually fulfilled as a result of his first coming. This is especially true of the OT kingdom prophecies. The fact is that according to NT teaching itself, the wonderful kingdom of God, as prophesied in the OT, *has already been established*. Jesus planned to establish it when he came the first time, and he did not fail. The kingdom has not been delayed until his second coming; it is already present. The key to understanding this is to have the right approach to prophecy as such, as outlined earlier in this chapter. Much prophecy is couched in figurative language, and it is fulfilled in spiritual realities. This is true of our present subject; the kingdom Christ came to establish, and did establish, is heavenly and spiritual, as the following discussion will show.

The establishment of the kingdom of God is one of the main themes of NT teaching, especially the teaching of Jesus. As he said in Luke 4:43, “I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, for I was sent for this purpose.” It is significant that this major subject of OT prophecy should figure so prominently in the Gospels. This in itself suggests that the fulfillment of kingdom prophecies was to be accomplished through Christ’s first coming. This conclusion is reinforced by the summary of the message of both John the Baptist and Jesus: “The kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt 3:2; 4:17).³ “Is at hand” is the verb *engizo*, which means “to approach, to come near.” This is a specific affirmation that the kingdom would soon be established.

“Is at hand” or “is near” is still a bit vague, but two other teachings of Jesus give us a more specific time reference for the establishment of the kingdom. One is that John the Baptist was in a sense the dividing line between the prekingdom era and the kingdom era. In Matt 11:11 Jesus said, “Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist! Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” And in Luke 16:16, “The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John; since that time the gospel of the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it.”

The other teaching narrowing down the time of the kingdom’s coming is that some who heard Jesus teach would be alive when the kingdom was established: “But I say to you truthfully, there are some of those standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:27). As Matthew 16:28 sums it up, “Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom” (see Mark 9:1).

Other texts tell us that the kingdom of God was in a sense *already present* at the time Jesus was upon the earth. One possible affirmation of its presence is Luke 17:20-21, “Now having been questioned by the Pharisees as to when the kingdom of God was coming, He answered them and said, ‘The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or, ‘There it is!’ For behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst.’” So translated,

the words “in your midst” declare the kingdom’s presence. However, the same Greek expression could be translated “within you,” as in the NIV. Other teachings are less ambiguous, though. After saying that John the Baptist was a dividing line for the kingdom (Matt 11:11), Jesus added these words: “From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing” (Matt 11:12, NIV). Also, in explaining how he is able to cast out demons, Jesus declares, “But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Matt 12:28).

In what sense could the kingdom of God have already been present during Jesus’ earthly ministry? In the sense that *the king himself* was present, walking the earth in the person of Jesus Christ. He was indeed the “son of David” (Matt 1:1; see Matt 9:27; 12:23; 21:9). The magi sought him as “King of the Jews” (Matt 2:2); Nathanael confessed him to be “the King of Israel” (John 1:49). Jesus’ triumphal entry fulfilled the prophecy of Zech 9:9, “Behold, your King is coming to you” (Matt 21:4-5). Jesus himself acknowledged before Pilate that he was a King (Matt 27:11; Luke 23:3; John 18:33-37), and Pilate placed a sign on the cross which read, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews” (John 19:19).

Without doubt, then, the kingdom of God was already present in some sense since the King himself was present, but this is not the whole story. From the perspective of Jesus’ earthly ministry, the decisive inauguration of the kingdom was still in the future, though the *near* future. Jesus’ statement that some in his audience would not die until they saw the kingdom of God come suggests that this had not happened yet. Mark’s record of this statement shows how this is the case: “Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power” (Mark 9:1). Though the kingdom was already present in a sense, it had not yet come *with power*, in its fullness. As Matthew 16:28 says, some will not die “until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.” This seems to be the same event described in Jesus’ statement to the high priest at his trial, “You have said it yourself; nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Matt 26:64). “Hereafter” points to a future event.

At this point we may pause and ask, what event could Jesus be referring to here? It sounds a lot like the second coming, at which time many believe Jesus will establish his millennial kingdom, an earthly, political kingdom, over which he will reign from a literal throne in Jerusalem. But this interpretation is inconsistent with two things. One, it does not agree with Jesus’ promise that this predicted event would occur before some in his audience had died. Two, it is not consistent with Jesus’ own teaching about the *nature* of the kingdom.

Everything Jesus taught about this latter point shows that the promised kingdom would *not* be earthly and political, but would be ethical and spiritual. When questioned by Pilate about his kingship, Jesus plainly said, “My kingdom is not of

this world. . . . My kingdom is not of this realm” (John 18:36). Participating in this kingdom is a matter not of political power, but of love, righteousness, and childlike trust. To the man who expressed keen understanding of the love commandments, Jesus said, “You are not far from the kingdom of God” (Mark 12:34). The kingdom belongs to the humble and to those who suffer for righteousness’ sake (Matt 5:3,10). One seeks God’s kingdom by seeking his righteousness (Matt 6:33). The spread of the kingdom comes not through earthly power but through the Word of God (Matt 13:19; see 13:3-9,18-23). One enters the kingdom only through a childlike spirit (Mark 10:14-15). In one interpretation of Luke 17:21, Jesus specifically says, “The kingdom of God is within you” (NIV), i.e., its presence is not on the physical level but on the level of the spirit.

From the standpoint of Jesus’ own earthly ministry, then, the establishment of the kingdom in power and fullness had to be an event in the near future that resulted in the spiritual reign of Christ the King over the hearts of his subjects. The event that obviously fulfills these conditions is the risen Christ’s ascension into heaven and his reign in power from God’s right hand, an event that began to be formally announced and applied on earth on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:33-36).

This understanding of the establishment of the kingdom of God is perfectly consistent both with OT prophecy and with Jesus’ own teaching. Prophetic references to the throne of David (e.g., 2 Sam 7:16; Isa 9:7; Jer 30:9; Ezek 34:23-24) are figurative, not literal, in perfect harmony with the nature of prophecy as such (Num 12:8; Hos 12:10). The same is true of prophecies that the Messiah will reign from Zion (e.g., Ps 2:6; Isa 24:23; Micah 4:7), i.e., he reigns from “the Jerusalem above” (Gal 4:26), the nonmaterial “Mount Zion” in “the heavenly Jerusalem” (Heb 12:22). The marvelous prophecy of Christ’s enthronement and kingship in Ps 110:1-2 is specifically said to be fulfilled prior to and in preparation for Pentecost (Acts 2:33-36). The great prophecy in Dan 7:13-14, about the Son of Man coming up to the Ancient of Days and receiving a universal, eternal kingdom, likewise is a reference to Christ’s ascension and enthronement at God’s right hand.

All of Jesus’ own teaching points to the same event. His reference to “the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Matt 26:64), is clearly the same event as Ps 110:1-2 and Dan 7:13-14.⁴ That some in Christ’s audience would see the kingdom coming “with power” (Mark 9:1) is a reference to *Pentecostal* power (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8). In the forty days between his resurrection and ascension, in preparation for the kingdom era that would begin on Pentecost, Jesus was speaking to his disciples “of the things concerning the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3). That Pentecost was the birthday of the church is consistent with Christ’s equation of church and kingdom in Matt 16:18-19. In his Christian witness in Samaria Philip was “preaching the good news about the kingdom of God” (Acts 8:12). Paul’s message to Jews and Gentiles alike was about Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God (Acts 19:8; 20:25; 28:23,31). The redeemed of the present age are members of “the kingdom of His

beloved Son" (Col 1:13). We are part of "a kingdom which cannot be shaken" (Heb 12:28), i.e., a spiritual kingdom in contrast with the pre-Messianic covenant as characterized by physical limitations (Heb 12:18-28).

Our conclusion is that the OT prophecies about the kingdom of God, when understood in light of the principles for interpreting prophecy laid down at the beginning of this chapter, are rightly understood as being fulfilled at Christ's first coming. They refer to the spiritual kingdom Jesus established when he ascended to his throne at the Father's right hand. As is the case with prophecies about Messianic Israel, the prophecies about the Messianic kingdom have already been fulfilled, and fulfilled on a different level as compared with the pre-Messianic Davidic kingdom under the Old Covenant. In fact, the prophecies about Israel and about the kingdom are both fulfilled in the same spiritual reality, the church of Jesus Christ. Just as the church is the true Israel today, so the church is the true kingdom of God. This convergence is seen in Gabriel's prophecy about Mary's virgin-born son, that "the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end" (Luke 1:32-33).

This is a simple, uncomplicated, biblical way to understand prophecy about Israel and about the kingdom of God. It is also faithful to the NT's own interpretation of such prophecy. This is why the NT warns us not to keep focusing on material realities. The true circumcision, the true Israel, says Paul, consists of those "who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh" (Phil 3:3). Therefore, "Keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on the earth" (Col 3:1-2).

NOTES ON CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

¹The new Israel is actually in continuity with the spiritual "Israel within Israel" that existed even in OT times (Rom 9:6).

²This is the Greek word *νυν*, an adverb that means "now." When used as an adjective, as here, it means "present." When used in this latter sense it often refers to this present age in contrast with the age to come. See Rom 8:18; 1 Tim 6:17; 2 Tim 4:10; 2 Pet 3:7. In 1 Tim 4:8 Paul contrasts this "present" (*νυν*) life with the coming life.

³See also Mark 1:15, where Christ's message is summed up as, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand." This, compared with Matt 4:17, shows that there is no difference between "the kingdom of heaven" and "the kingdom of God."

⁴See also Eph 1:20-23; Phil 2:8-11; Heb 1:13; 8:1; 10:12-13.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT THE MILLENNIUM

Our next subject in the exposition of eschatology is *the millennium*, a word that literally means "one thousand years." In the context of theology it refers to a thousand-year period that is somehow connected with Christ's second coming. As a specific historical period it is mentioned in only one passage in the Bible, Rev 20:1-7, where the phrase *chilias ete* (Greek for "one thousand years") appears six times. Exactly how this millennium should be understood is one of the most controversial questions in eschatology.

At stake here are a number of points of disagreement, including all the issues discussed in the previous chapter. Governing all the rest is the question of the nature of prophecy: are the things related to the millennium to be understood as literal or as figurative? For example, must we take the number "one thousand" literally, or does it symbolize simply a long period of time? Also at stake are the role of Israel and the role of the church during this thousand-year period. Also, how does it relate to the kingdom of God?

Millennial views also differ greatly on the matter of *timing*: exactly when does the millennium occur? Does it have any connection with Christ's first coming? How is it related to his second coming? How does it fit into the sequence of other end-time events, such as the rise of the anti-Christ, the tribulation, the rapture, and the resurrection of the dead?

The final and perhaps main thing that is at stake is the *nature* of the millennial kingdom. What conditions will prevail upon the earth during this time? If it is a time when Jesus reigns as King, what will be the nature of his reign, i.e., will it be physical or spiritual? Will Christ be physically present on the earth, or will he somehow reign from heaven? Will the earth itself be a paradise? In what sense will Satan be bound?

In contemplating such questions over the centuries, Christian thinkers have delineated four distinct views about the millennium, called postmillennialism, traditional premillennialism, dispensational premillennialism, and amillennialism.¹ In this chapter we will first explain each of these views. Then we will set forth an overview of the Book of Revelation, with an emphasis upon its cyclical structure. Finally, we will explain and defend the meaning of Rev 20:1-6 from an amillennial perspective.