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The Kingdom of God and The Millennium

The kingdom of God is one of the central themes of the Bible; some students of Scripture view it as “the” central theme. In many ways, the Bible relates to us that God is the sovereign Lord of creation, though the expression of that kingdom, at least from the human perspective, may take different forms. The kingdom of God actually encompasses several distinct aspects.

Aspects of the Kingdom of God

At least three distinct aspects of the kingdom of God are alluded to in Scripture, they are: the universal kingdom, the visible kingdom, and the invisible kingdom (*see* Figure 5.1, p.65). While our present study is concerned mainly with the visible kingdom, and particularly its millennial aspect, it would be helpful to survey all three aspects to see how they relate to each other so we don’t confuse them.

The universal aspect of the kingdom of God

God’s sovereignty over all creation is often referred to as His “universal kingdom.” This concept appears early in Israel’s history and is a frequent theme in the Psalms (*cf.* 10:16; 29:10; 103:19-22; 145:10-13). The universal kingdom of God encompasses all creation, and includes even the realm of the ungodly (both human and angelic), for they too are under the sovereign rule of God. David says of this aspect of God’s kingdom,

[Psalm 103:19-22]

The LORD has established his throne in heaven,
and his kingdom rules over all.
Praise the LORD, you his angels,
you mighty ones who do his bidding,
who obey his word.

Praise the LORD, all his heavenly hosts,
you his servants who do his will.
Praise the LORD, all his works
everywhere in his dominion.
Praise the LORD, O my soul.

The visible aspect of the kingdom of God

To the Hebrew mind in the Old Testament, the kingdom of God was equated with God's theocratic rule over the nation of Israel. Ultimately this rule was to have its fullest expression in the rule of God through His Messiah, at which time Israel would be vindicated and exalted, and experience the joy of profuse divine blessing and peace.

Only in the New Testament does the millennial aspect of the visible kingdom come into sharp focus, in contrast to the Old Testament, which made no distinction between the millennium and eternity (*cf.* Isa. 65:17-25). It is in the book of Revelation we learn that the earthly kingdom rule will occur in two phases (*see* Figure 5.2, p. 69). The first phase is to occur on the present earth (before it is re-created) and is called "the millennium" (Rev. 20:4-10), which as the name suggests, encompasses the first one thousand years of the visible kingdom. The second phase of the visible earthly rule of God occurs in eternity with the creation of the new heavens and earth, and the placement of the New Jerusalem that will rest upon the new earth (Rev. 21:1-22:5).

The invisible aspect of the kingdom of God

The invisible kingdom of God refers to God's rule in the hearts of those yielded to Him. This aspect, like the universal aspect, is a present reality. This facet of the kingdom is largely developed in the gospels (*cf.* Matt. 6:33; 18:1-4; Mk. 9:1; Lk. 17:20-24; Jn. 18:36), but can be found elsewhere in the New Testament (*cf.* Col. 1:13). Many Bible interpreters confuse the visible and invisible aspects of the kingdom and incorrectly view references to the invisible aspect of the kingdom as support for a "spiritualized" (allegorized) view of the millennium.

The "kingdom of Heaven," discussed extensively in the Gospel of Matthew, should not be confused with the invisible kingdom of

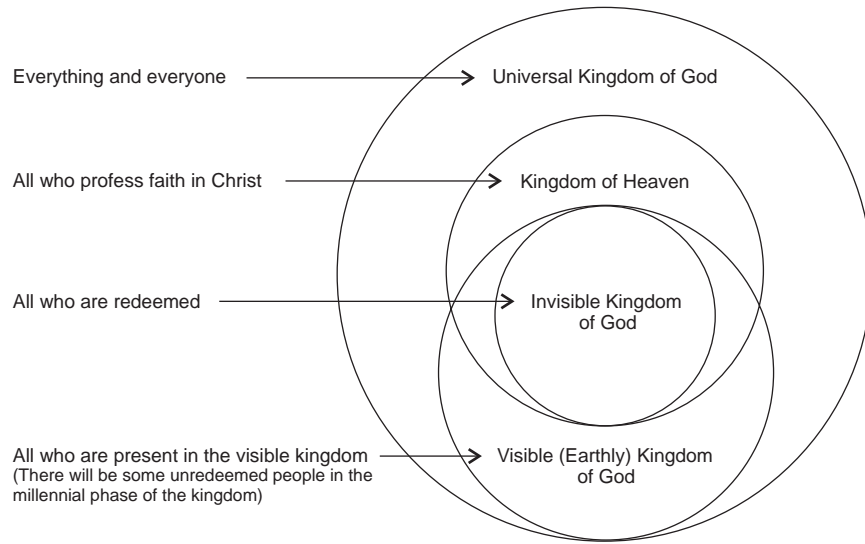


Figure 5.1 Aspects of the Kingdom of God

The universal aspect of the kingdom of God includes everyone (and everything). The kingdom of Heaven is a corporate term most often applied to all who profess faith in Christ (whether redeemed or not). At present, the visible church is the expression of the kingdom of Heaven on earth (though technically speaking, the two are not identical). Only the redeemed are part of the invisible kingdom of God (sometimes popularly referred to as the “mystical kingdom” of God). The first phase of the visible, earthly kingdom (the millennium) will include both redeemed and unredeemed people; however, the final phase (eternity) will include only the redeemed. Confusing these ideas invariably results in incorrect biblical interpretation.

God (see, Appendix F: *The Kingdom of Heaven and the Course of the Present Age*, p. 361). While the invisible kingdom of God includes only truly saved people, the kingdom of Heaven encompasses all who outwardly profess faith in Christ. The parables of Matthew 13 indicate that as the present age progresses, the kingdom of Heaven will be corrupted by the presence of unregenerate people. The kingdom of Heaven includes all who profess faith in Jesus Christ, and includes the truly saved (those who are part of the invisible kingdom) along with many who profess faith in Christ but are not redeemed. At present, the visible church, which includes both saved and lost is representative of the kingdom of Heaven, but strictly speaking the two cannot be equated since the kingdom of Heaven extends beyond the bounds of the church age.

The Necessity of a Future Earthly Kingdom

The Old Testament concept of an earthly kingdom emerges first from the Abrahamic covenant and is then expanded upon in the Palestinian, Davidic and new covenants. These four covenants shape the Old Testament idea of the visible kingdom of God (which, as we will see, is inseparably tied to the nation of Israel). A simple analogy may help to illustrate the relationship of these covenant promises to other Old Testament prophecies concerning the kingdom. If we think of the covenants (the Abrahamic, Palestinian, Davidic, and new covenants) as the bold lines of a coloring book, determining the shape of the picture, we could then think of other prophecies as the colors applied within those lines. The covenant promises form the outline of God's plan for Israel. Other millennial prophecies supply additional details that must be understood within the framework of the covenant promises; together they form a picture of God's plan for Israel's future (which includes certain blessings for the Gentiles).

Since the covenants define the kingdom program for Israel (and in a larger sense, God's program for future world history), it's important that we begin with a thorough examination of these covenants before looking at the other prophetic passages.

The Abrahamic covenant

The provisions of the Abrahamic Covenant are stated in Genesis 12:1-3, 6-7; 13:14-17; 15:1-21; 17:1-14 and 22:15-18. It is important to examine each of these passages in order to glean all of the provisions. Genesis 15:1-12 is of particular interest since it also includes the account of the solemn ceremony in which God sealed His promises as an unconditional covenant with Abraham (Abram) and his descendants after him, forever.

[Genesis 12:1-3] The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

[Genesis 12:6-7] Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

[Genesis 13:14-17] The LORD said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, "Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you."

[Genesis 17:1-14] When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers." Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make

nations of you, and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God." Then God said to Abraham, "As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner – those who are not your offspring. Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant."

[Genesis 22:15-18] The angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven a second time and said, "I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me."

[Genesis 15:1-21] After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward." But Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir." Then the word of the LORD came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir." He took him outside and said, "Look

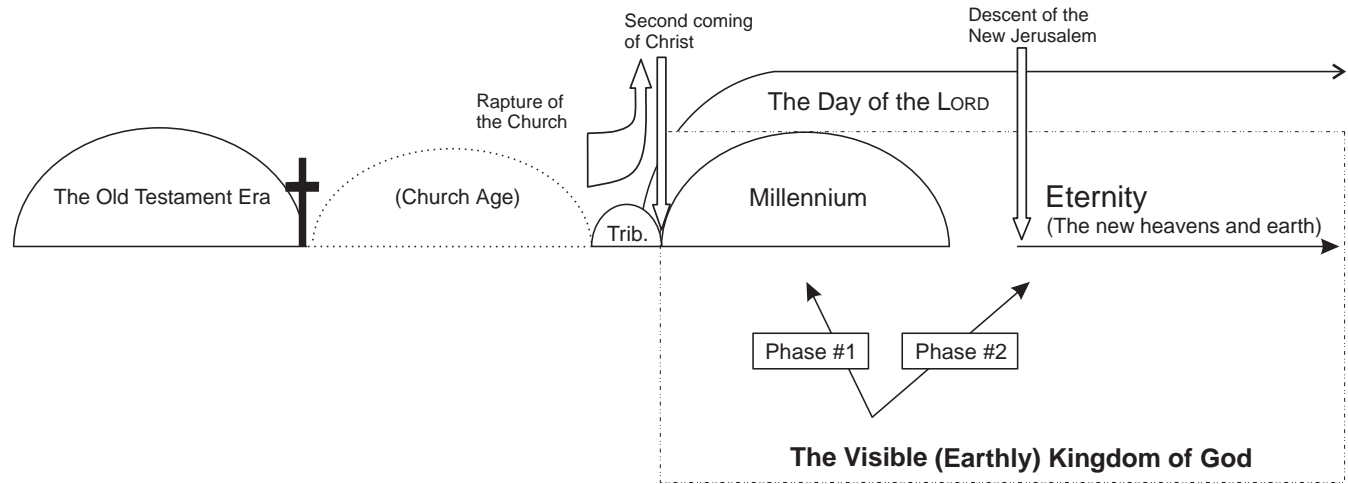


Figure 5.2 Phases of the Visible Kingdom of God

The visible (earthly) kingdom of God will unfold in two phases. The millennium (the first one-thousand years) is the first phase. The second phase, referred to as “eternity,” will take place on the new earth to be created after the destruction of the present earth at the end of the millennium. The New Jerusalem, the heavenly city, will be present during the eternal phase of the kingdom.

up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness. He also said to him, “I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it.” But Abram said, “O Sovereign LORD, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?” So the LORD said to him, “Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon.” Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half. Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away. As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. Then the LORD said to him, “Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age. In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.” When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, “To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates—the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites.”

In these passages God made the following promises to Abraham personally. 1) Abraham’s name will be great (12:2). 2) He will be the father of many nations (17:5). 3) His descendants will be innumerable (13:16; 15:5; 22:17). 4) Kings will come from him (17:6). 5) God will be his God (17:7). 6) The one who blesses Abraham will be blessed, and the one who curses Abraham will be cursed (12:3). 7) The covenant is to be a perpetual (eternal) covenant (17:7).

In addition to the personal promises made to Abraham, God also made the following promises to his descendants. 1) They will become a great nation (12:2). 2) They will, at some time, come to

possess the land forever (17:8). 3) God will be their God (17:8). 4) They will be victorious over their enemies (22:17). 5) God's covenant will be established with them forever (17:7). The covenant also includes a blessing for the Gentiles, that they would be blessed through Abraham (12:3; 22:18).

The Abrahamic covenant expressly promises that Abraham's descendants will come to possess the land which God showed to Abraham, and that they will live in that land as recipients of divine favor forever. That these promises have never been invalidated is a point that will be considered later; first we will look at the relationships between the Abrahamic, Palestinian, Davidic, and new covenants.

The Palestinian covenant

The Palestinian covenant, so called because it was made with Israel upon their entrance into the Promised Land, is recorded in Deuteronomy 29:1-30:20. Moses indicated its connection to the Abrahamic covenant when he said:

[Deut. 29:12-13] You are standing here in order to enter into a covenant with the LORD your God, a covenant the LORD is making with you this day and sealing with an oath, to confirm you this day as his people, that he may be your God as he promised you and as he swore to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

What God swore to Abraham in the Abrahamic covenant, and subsequently confirmed to Isaac and Jacob, He was prepared to implement as Abraham's children stood on the verge of their entrance into the land over four hundred years later. This covenant seems to have had two purposes: 1) to ensure that the people understood their inheritance of the land was the direct result of the promises previously made to Abraham (29:12-13), and 2) to clarify for the people the conditions under which they could expect to enter into the enjoyment of this promise; the condition being their continued obedience to God (29:16-29). One of the most interesting features of this covenant is found in 30:1-10; here God indicates that they would rebel in the future and their rebellion would cost them the enjoyment of this covenant blessing, such that they would be dis-

persed from the land, but the covenant itself would not be invalidated. Rather, the blessing would be reserved for a generation that would call upon Him and to which He would respond by bringing them back into the land.

[Deut. 30:1-10] When all these blessings and curses I have set before you come upon you and you take them to heart wherever the LORD your God disperses you among the nations, and when you and your children return to the LORD your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you. Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the LORD your God will gather you and bring you back. He will bring you to the land that belonged to your fathers, and you will take possession of it. He will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers. The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live. The LORD your God will put all these curses on your enemies who hate and persecute you. You will again obey the LORD and follow all his commands I am giving you today. Then the LORD your God will make you most prosperous in all the work of your hands and in the fruit of your womb, the young of your livestock and the crops of your land. The LORD will again delight in you and make you prosperous, just as he delighted in your fathers, if you obey the LORD your God and keep his commands and decrees that are written in this Book of the Law and turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

The Palestinian covenant should be seen as a reaffirmation and amplification of the land promises previously made to Abraham, and its perpetual validity is apparent from the language of the covenant itself.

The Davidic covenant

The Davidic covenant is found in 2 Samuel 7:12-17, in which God said to David,

“When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings inflicted by men. But my love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.”

There are four key provisions of this covenant. 1) David will have a son who will build the house of the Lord (v. 13) – which was fulfilled in Solomon. 2) While God would correct David’s son, He would never take the throne from him (vv. 14-15). 3) God promised that David’s house (his lineage) would endure forever (v. 16). 4) God also promised that the right to the throne of Israel would forever remain with David’s line of descendants (v. 16).

While the text of the covenant does not make reference to the Abrahamic covenant, the connection is apparent since the people that David’s line will perpetually have the right to rule, are the people of promise under the Abrahamic covenant. The prophet Jeremiah later demonstrated a connection between these two covenants when he uttered the following prophecy:

[Jer. 33:25-26] . . . This is what the LORD says, “If I have not established my covenant with day and night and the fixed laws of heaven and earth, then I will reject the descendants of Jacob and David my servant and will not choose one of his sons to rule over the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. For I will restore their fortunes and have compassion on them.”

The Davidic covenant expands upon the national (or kingdom) aspect of the Abrahamic covenant by stating that the right to the throne of Israel will forever remain with David’s line. This is the reason the New Testament makes the point of establishing that Christ is a descendant of David, since He is the one who will ultimately rule over Israel in fulfillment of the covenant promises.

The new covenant

The prophecy of the new covenant is found in Jeremiah 31:31-34. Here Jeremiah prophesies,

[31:31-34] "The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, Know the LORD, because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

In this prophecy God promised that He would someday establish a new covenant with Israel, a covenant by which He will write His laws on their hearts (v. 33) – probably a reference to the giving of the Spirit, indicative of regeneration. The result will be that all Israel will know the Lord (v. 34). While the implementation of this covenant is dependent upon the work of Christ upon the cross, that work does not in itself fulfill this promise, for it has not yet resulted in the salvation of Israel as a nation. Therefore, we must conclude that the new covenant is yet to be fulfilled (though Christ's completed work on the cross has already established the basis for this covenant's inauguration and ultimate fulfillment). The new covenant reveals the nature of the special relationship (first promised in the Abrahamic covenant) that Israel is to have with God. Gentiles are not left out of the picture, since they too are to be blessed under the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 12:3; 22:18).

The unconditional nature of the covenants

It is important to recognize that the Abrahamic covenant, as well as the other three covenants, are all unconditional in nature. This does not mean that there is no condition to be met in order for them to be fulfilled, for in that sense, there is a condition – genuine faith.

Rather, the unconditional nature of these covenants refers to the fact that Israel's disobedience, both past and present, has not, indeed cannot, invalidate these covenants, because their continuance was never linked to Israel's faithfulness—only the "enjoyment" of their blessings was conditioned upon faith. Though generations of Abraham's descendants have turned from God, yet God maintains His covenanted promises, ready to fulfill them to that elect generation who will, at the appointed time, turn to their rightful Messiah—Jesus Christ.

When the unconditional nature of these covenants is understood, it becomes apparent that whatever partial benefits Israel may have enjoyed historically as a result of these covenants, in no sense can it be said that they have been fulfilled. The position of covenant theology, which generally sees no place for the fulfillment of these covenants in the future, is that their continuance was conditioned upon Israel's faith; and since Israel broke faith with God, manifested ultimately in the rejection of their Messiah, these covenants have been invalidated, as far as Israel is concerned, and the promised blessings transferred to the church (allegorically, of course).

Contrary to the position of covenant theology, there are three reasons for believing that God has not abandoned His covenant with Abraham. 1) The form of the covenant given in Genesis 15:9-21 is that of an unconditional, or unilateral covenant, in which all of the responsibility for the fulfillment rests solely with one party, in this case God. The scene in Genesis 15:1-21, in which Abraham divided various animals, and God, depicted by a great smoking furnace, passed between the divided pieces, is a picture of the sealing of the Abrahamic covenant—equivalent to the formal signing of a treaty. The fact that only God passed between the divided pieces is significant. Normally in this type of covenant, known as a suzerainty-vassal treaty, both parties would pass between the pieces together, thus indicating their mutual obligation to keep the conditions of the covenant, lest they bring upon themselves a curse. That God alone passed between the pieces is indicative that the covenant obligations rest solely upon Him. In other words, it was not up to Abraham or his descendants to do anything to validate this covenant. Of course no individual, nor the nation as a whole, could enter into the blessings of the covenant apart from faith (Gen. 17:13-14). Nevertheless,

faithlessness on the part of an individual, or an entire generation of individuals, would not invalidate the covenant itself; it would merely exclude that individual (or generation) from the covenant blessings. In other words, the validity of the covenant, and the enjoyment of its provisions by a specific set of people, are two entirely distinct issues. God rejected those who rejected the covenant relationship, but He did not reject the covenant itself. If a generation arises that will accept the covenant relationship, they will have the covenant fulfilled to them. Since the promises were made concerning a people, they will be fulfilled when an elect generation of Jews turns to God through acceptance of Jesus Christ, their Messiah. 2) Even though Abraham's descendants were disobedient and fell into idolatry, subsequent statements made in the Scripture indicate that their disobedience had not invalidated the covenant. For example, the Abrahamic covenant is invoked in 1 Chronicles 16:16-18, a thousand years after it was made with Abraham. During much of that time, Israel had lived in idolatry, yet the covenant itself was not invalidated. The psalmist in Psalm 105:1-11 says,

He remembers his covenant forever, the word he commanded, for a thousand generations, the covenant he made with Abraham, the oath he swore to Isaac. He confirmed it to Jacob as a decree, to Israel as an everlasting covenant: "To you I will give the land of Canaan as the portion you will inherit."

If disobedience, or lack of faith could invalidate the Abrahamic covenant it surely would not have survived the first one thousand years of Israel's history. 3) The subsequent Palestinian, Davidic, and new covenants are also indicated as being unconditional, eternal covenants. When seen in light of their connection to the Abrahamic covenant, it becomes clear that they all must share the same unconditional quality.

Concerning the unconditional nature of the Davidic Covenant, God, through the psalmist, in Psalm 89 said:

[vv. 28-37] "I will maintain my love to him forever, and my covenant with him will never fail. I will establish his line forever, his throne as long as the heavens endure. If his sons forsake my law and do not follow my statutes, if

they violate my decrees and fail to keep my commands, I will punish their sin with the rod, their iniquity with flogging; but I will not take my love from him, nor will I ever betray my faithfulness. I will not violate my covenant or alter what my lips have uttered. Once for all, I have sworn by my holiness and I will not lie to David that his line will continue forever and his throne endure before me like the sun; it will be established forever like the moon, the faithful witness in the sky.”

Almost four hundred years later, on the eve of Israel’s expulsion from the land because of rampant idolatry, God spoke these words through the prophet Jeremiah:

[Jer. 33:20-22] This is what the LORD says: “If you can break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night, so that day and night no longer come at their appointed time, then my covenant with David my servant—and my covenant with the Levites who are priests ministering before me—can be broken and David will no longer have a descendant to reign on his throne. I will make the descendants of David my servant and the Levites who minister before me as countless as the stars of the sky and as measureless as the sand on the seashore.”

Both the nature of these covenants and subsequent biblical statements reflecting back on them indicate they were made unconditionally, meaning they have not been invalidated by Israel’s past unbelief and that God intends to fulfill them through his sovereign election of a future generation (Jer. 31:31-37).

Implications of the Abrahamic, Palestinian, Davidic, and new covenants

The Abrahamic covenant which promises the descendants of Abraham a land forever has neither been invalidated nor fulfilled. Unless we can conceive of God as being unfaithful, the fulfillment of these promises must be a future reality. The connection between the Abrahamic covenant and the subsequent prophetic descriptions of the kingdom (*e.g.*, Isa. 11:4-10; 35:5-10; 60:1-22; 65:17-25; Ezek. 34:25-31; Joel 2:21-27; 3:18-21) leaves no doubt that the Abrahamic covenant is the basis of the kingdom promises for Israel.

The Palestinian covenant repeats the land provisions of the Abrahamic covenant and further expands upon the basis for Israel's enjoyment of this promise (which is faith, and faithfulness). In this covenant, God foresaw Israel's disobedience and dispersion (Deut. 30:1-8) and promised their restoration upon a return to faith in Him. Of course, Israel's ultimate return to the Lord can only occur as a result of inward spiritual conversion.

The Davidic covenant is an expansion upon the national aspect of the Abrahamic covenant in that it specifies that David's house is to have a perpetual right to the throne of Israel. The promise requires that when the kingdom prophecies are fulfilled, a member of David's house must rule over Israel. This will ultimately be fulfilled in the person of David's ideal Son, the Messiah (Isa. 9:6-7).

The prophecy of the new covenant specifies how God intends to bring about the implementation of the Abrahamic covenant – by genuine spiritual renewal on the part of Abraham's descendants. It would be nonsense to suppose that a non-elect, unregenerate people could live in a state of perpetual blessing and special divine relationship as envisioned in the Abrahamic covenant. Therefore, before God can fulfill His promises to Abraham He must raise up an elect generation of Jews who will respond to His offer of salvation, and thus enter into the blessings of the covenant. It is important to recognize that election is at the heart of Israel's conversion, for if salvation ultimately depended upon man, the fulfillment of these promises could never be anything more than a remote prospect. Yet God intends, by His sovereign choice, to bring spiritual life to Israel so that His covenanted promises can be infallibly brought to pass (see, Appendix C: *The Biblical Basis of Premillennialism*, p. 281).

In summarizing the implications of these four covenants, we see that God intends to regather Abraham's children, breathe spiritual life within them, and plant them securely in their land, with David's Son – their Messiah – ruling over them forever. The implementation of this program will necessitate a partial regathering of Israel prior to the millennium, and a full regathering early in the millennium (Isa. 11:12; 49:8-26; 66:1-20; Amos 9:11-15; Zech. 8:1-23).

The Millennial Phase of the Visible Kingdom

Naturally, since the promises made in the Abrahamic covenant and subsequently confirmed to Israel—and expanded upon in the Palestinian, Davidic, and new covenants—are eternal, they cannot be fulfilled in any finite period of time. The visible kingdom, envisioned in Old Testament prophecy, is an eternal kingdom. As stated previously, it is only in the New Testament we learn this kingdom is to be manifested in two phases: the first phase, generally referred to as “the millennium,” involves the first one thousand years (approximately) of the kingdom which will take place on the present earth (Rev. 20:4-7); the second phase will be manifested forever in the new heavens and earth (Rev. 21:1-22:5). Because the characteristics of these two phases differ significantly, they are generally treated separately as “the millennium,” and “eternity” (see Figure 5.2, p. 69). We will address the eternal phase of the kingdom in chapter nine.

The time, location, duration, and general character of the millennial kingdom

The timing of the millennium

The millennial kingdom is a future reality. This is apparent from a few simple observations. 1) The promises and prophecies concerning the millennium have never been fulfilled. 2) Scripture indicates that the millennium will be inaugurated shortly after the second coming of Christ (Zech. 14:1-9; Rev. 19:11-20:6). 3) Revelation 20:3-6 indicates that a resurrection of believers (both the Old Testament saints, and those saved after the rapture of the church who do not survive until the second coming) will occur at the beginning of the millennium. Obviously, this resurrection has not yet occurred.

The location of the millennium

The millennial kingdom will be global; however, Israel (and Jerusalem in particular) will be the center of attention during the period, since it is from there that the Messiah will reign (Isa. 2:1-4), and Israel will occupy a special place of honor at the head of the nations (Isa. 60:1-22; 61:4-9; 62:1-12; Jer. 16:14-18; 30:18-22; Mic. 4:1-2;

Zeph. 3:20). Isaiah describes Israel during the millennium in these words,

[Isa. 60:1-22]

"Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD rises upon you.
See, darkness covers the earth
and thick darkness is over the peoples,
but the LORD rises upon you
and his glory appears over you.
Nations will come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

"Lift up your eyes and look about you:
All assemble and come to you;
your sons come from afar,
and your daughters are carried on the arm.
Then you will look and be radiant,
your heart will throb and swell with joy;
the wealth on the seas will be brought to you,
to you the riches of the nations will come.
Herds of camels will cover your land,
young camels of Midian and Ephah.
And all from Sheba will come,
bearing gold and incense
and proclaiming the praise of the LORD.
All Kedar's flocks will be gathered to you,
the rams of Nebaioth will serve you;
they will be accepted as offerings on my altar,
and I will adorn my glorious temple.

"Who are these that fly along like clouds,
like doves to their nests?
Surely the islands look to me;
in the lead are the ships of Tarshish,
bringing your sons from afar,
with their silver and gold,
to the honor of the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel,
for he has endowed you with splendor.

"Foreigners will rebuild your walls,
and their kings will serve you.

Though in anger I struck you,
in favor I will show you compassion.
Your gates will always stand open,
they will never be shut, day or night,
so that men may bring you the wealth of the
nations – their kings led in triumphal procession.
For the nation or kingdom that will not serve you will
perish; it will be utterly ruined.

“The glory of Lebanon will come to you,
the pine, the fir and the cypress together,
to adorn the place of my sanctuary;
and I will glorify the place of my feet.
The sons of your oppressors will come
bowing before you;
all who despise you will bow down at your feet
and will call you the City of the LORD,
Zion of the Holy One of Israel.

“Although you have been forsaken and hated,
with no one traveling through,
I will make you the everlasting pride
and the joy of all generations.
You will drink the milk of nations
and be nursed at royal breasts.
Then you will know that I, the LORD, am your Savior,
your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.
Instead of bronze I will bring you gold,
and silver in place of iron.
Instead of wood I will bring you bronze,
and iron in place of stones.
I will make peace your governor
and righteousness your ruler.
No longer will violence be heard in your land,
nor ruin or destruction within your borders,
but you will call your walls Salvation
and your gates Praise.
The sun will no more be your light by day,
nor will the brightness of the moon shine on you,
for the LORD will be your everlasting light,
and your God will be your glory.
Your sun will never set again,
and your moon will wane no more;
the LORD will be your everlasting light,

and your days of sorrow will end.
Then will all your people be righteous
and they will possess the land forever.
They are the shoot I have planted,
the work of my hands,
for the display of my splendor.
The least of you will become a thousand,
the smallest a mighty nation.
I am the LORD;
in its time I will do this swiftly.”

The duration of the millennium

As the name implies, the millennium will last approximately one thousand years (Rev. 20:2,3,4,6,7). Satan’s confinement, which begins prior to the millennium, is to last for one thousand years, after which he will be released for a short time. His release will result in a rebellion and the deaths of those who follow him (Rev. 20:7-10). How much time lapses between Satan’s release and the final rebellion is not stated in Scripture, so it is not possible to give a precise figure for the length of the period. The destruction of those who follow Satan marks the end of the millennium. It may well be that the destruction of the rebellious invokes the dissolution of the present heavens and earth and prepares the way for the new heavens and earth (Rev. 20:7-21:8).

The general character of the millennium

Humanly, the millennium will be a period characterized by health, prosperity, satisfaction, and longevity (Isa. 65:18-25, cf. 35:3-7). Isaiah’s description of the earthly kingdom (though he does not distinguish between the millennial and eternal phases) is one of the earliest in the prophetic writings of the Old Testament.

[Isa. 65:18-25]
“But be glad and rejoice forever
in what I will create,
for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight
and its people a joy.
I will rejoice over Jerusalem
and take delight in my people;
the sound of weeping and of crying

will be heard in it no more.

“Never again will there be in it
an infant who lives but a few days,
or an old man who does not live out his years;
he who dies at a hundred
will be thought a mere youth;
he who fails to reach a hundred
will be considered accursed.
They will build houses and dwell in them;
they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
No longer will they build houses and others live in
them, or plant and others eat.
For as the days of a tree,
so will be the days of my people;
my chosen ones will long enjoy
the works of their hands.
They will not toil in vain
or bear children doomed to misfortune;
for they will be a people blessed by the LORD,
they and their descendants with them.
Before they call I will answer;
while they are still speaking I will hear.
The wolf and the lamb will feed together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox,
but dust will be the serpent’s food.
They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,”
says the LORD.

Only the redeemed will enter the millennial kingdom from the tribulation (Matt. 25:31-46). They will be joined by the glorified church saints (having been raptured from the earth prior to the outpouring of divine wrath at the day of the Lord) as well as the resurrected tribulation saints who did not survive to the second coming, and the resurrected Old Testament saints. Of these four groups, only the saints who survived the tribulation will enter in their natural (untransformed) bodies. While Scripture does not explicitly address the question of whether those saints living in their natural bodies will be subject to death during the millennium, there is reason to believe they will survive the entire period, since the resurrection of the righteous occurs at the beginning of the millen-

nium and there is no mention of any subsequent resurrection of any righteous dead. If this hypothesis is true, then only the unsaved will die during the millennium (this would also seem to be consistent with Isaiah 65:20). The unsaved will be the descendants of redeemed people who go into the millennium in their natural bodies from the tribulation. These unredeemed descendants, though subject to death, will live much longer lives than is presently possible (Isa. 65:20-22). As the period progresses, the population of unsaved people will swell to enormous proportions, possibly far exceeding the population of the saints (Rev. 20:7-9).

Governmentally, the millennium will be a “theocratic” kingdom, with Christ ruling the world from Jerusalem, which will serve as both the religious and political center of the world (*cf.* Isa. 9:6; Rev. 20:6). Concerning this, Micah prophesied,

[Micah 4:1-3]

In the last days
the mountain of the LORD’s temple will be established
as chief among the mountains;
it will be raised above the hills,
and peoples will stream to it.
Many nations will come and say,
“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob.
He will teach us his ways,
so that we may walk in his paths.”
The law will go out from Zion,
the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
He will judge between many peoples
and will settle disputes for strong nations far and wide.
They will beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will not take up sword against nation,
nor will they train for war anymore.”

There will continue to be nations in the millennium, and each nation will continue to have a significant measure of freedom in governing itself (Isa. 2:2-5). Apparently some of the laws of the nations will originate from Zion. The presence of people in their unglorified state, including an increasing number of unregenerate

people, especially toward the end of the period, will naturally result in problems. Disputes between nations will still occur, but undoubtedly with less frequency and far less intensity, since Christ will be present to mediate. Apparently it will be necessary on occasion for Christ to remind some of their dependence upon Him (both spiritual and political) by depriving them of blessings, such as rain, for failure to fulfill their obligation of worship (Zech. 14:16-19); clearly, the millennium is not a perfect age.

Economically the millennium will represent a time of unparalleled prosperity (Joel 2:21-27; Amos 9:13-15). Amos prophesies,

[Amos 9:13] "The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when the reaper will be overtaken by the plowman and the planter by the one treading grapes. New wine will drip from the mountains and flow from all the hills."

The amelioration of the effects of the Edenic curse upon the earth (*cf.* Isa. 11:6-9; Rom. 8:18-24) will undoubtedly account for much of this prosperity; however, the presence of Christ and the influence of godliness in business, government, social institutions, and the sciences will certainly have great effect, not to mention the positive economic impact brought about by the elimination of armed conflict. (Isa. 2:4).

Socially the millennium will be characterized as a time of unprecedented peace, world harmony, and justice (Isa. 9:1-7). The presence of Christ and the absence of Satan's influence, at least until the end of the period, will affect the world in such a positive way that even with an ever increasing population of unredeemed people, the world will experience unparalleled harmony both in the natural and human realms not seen since before the fall of man. At the present time, the ways of the world dominate society; in the millennium, the knowledge of the Lord and His ways will be the predominant influence (Isa. 9:11; 54:13; Hab. 2:4). The blessing that will flow out of this is impossible to overestimate.

Religiously the peoples of the earth will worship only the true God, at least overtly. In Ezekiel 40-48, Ezekiel records what must be the plan for a millennial temple. Isaiah also mentions a millennial

temple (Isa. 2:3; 60:13), and adds that burnt sacrifices will be offered (Isa. 56:6-7; 60:7). Jeremiah echoed the same thought when he prophesied that the Levitical priests would never fail to have a man to stand before God continually “to offer burnt offerings and to present sacrifices” (Jer. 33:18). Zechariah, while not making explicit reference to the temple, did indicate that all the peoples of the earth will be represented at the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles. Although worship will be quite natural for the saved that enter the period, as time progresses and the population of the unsaved increases, there will be increased reluctance to render worship to God (Zech. 14:16-19). The idea that there are to be animal sacrifices in the millennium (*i.e.*, burnt offerings, *cf.* Jer. 33:18) has proved to be problematic for some who perceive this as a reversion to the Old Testament economy. However, when the true historical significance of the biblical sacrifices is understood as pointing to Christ’s sacrifice, their use in millennial worship is easily understood as a memorial to Christ’s work upon the cross. As such, any sacrifices in the millennial temple do not indicate a reversion to an earlier economy; rather they function as a remembrance, much like the church’s present celebration of the Lord’s Supper.

Events of the millennium

While many of the more general features of the millennium are described in Scripture, very little is known of actual events. In fact, only three events are mentioned: the resurrection of the righteous at the beginning of the period, the release of Satan after one thousand years, and the final rebellion that marks the conclusion of the period. The judgment of the nations (Matt. 25:31-46, *cf.* 7:21-23; Lk. 13:22-28), though not strictly a millennial event, will take place during the short interval between the second coming and the beginning of the millennium. At that judgment Christ will determine who will be allowed to enter the kingdom.

The judgment of the nations

The judgment of the nations occurs during the interlude between the tribulation and the millennium (*cf.* Dan. 12:11-12; Matt. 25:31-46). Since only the redeemed may enter the kingdom, the purpose of this judgment is to exclude the unredeemed, who will be consigned to Hades until their final judgment. How Christ will judge

so many in so short a period of time is not stated in Scripture. Since the righteous and the unrighteous will be separated from one another by the angels at the second coming (Matt. 13:29 *cf.* v. 40, 47-49; 24:31), it is possible that this is a summary judgment wherein the righteous and unrighteous are dealt with as groups. If this is the case, and there is strong reason to believe it is, then it stands in contrast to the final judgment of the lost after the millennium, in which everyone's works will be examined individually. In any case, only the righteous will be allowed to enter the kingdom.

The resurrection of the righteous

Daniel 12:11-12 indicates that those who survive to forty-five days after the close of the tribulation period are "blessed." It is possible that the reason for this is that the resurrection occurs on the forty-fifth day and thus, those survivors will have escaped physical death forever. (An alternate explanation for the statement in Daniel is that if one survives to the forty-fifth day beyond the close of the tribulation, he has successfully come through the judgment of the nations and is thus assured of a place in the kingdom.) Whether the resurrection occurs precisely on the forty-fifth day from the second coming, or merely close thereto, the occasion seems to signal the beginning of the millennium. In Revelation 20:4 John gives the following description of this resurrection.

[Rev. 20:4] I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshipped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years.

Satan's release and deception of the nations

After the resurrection of the righteous dead, there is no mention of specific events until the release of Satan after his one thousand years of confinement. We know only that the saints will rule with Christ during this period (Rev. 20:4-5) and the general characteristics of the age, which have already been noted. The release of Satan marks a turning point in the millennium. Satan will quickly exploit,

consolidate, and organize any disaffection present on the part of those confirmed in their unbelief. They will likely view him as some sort of “deliverer.” How long it will take for this rebellion to proceed is not certain; it could be months or years. The immediate effects of Satan’s release on the millennial environment is not stated in Scripture; but it would seem likely that as the rebellion grows conditions within the millennium will be affected, at least at the spiritual, social, and political levels. The rebellion will ultimately turn to overt conflict. Scripture seems to present the rebellious as vastly outnumbering the saints. John relates this prophetic picture:

[Rev. 20:7-9] When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth—Gog and Magog to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the seashore. They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God’s people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them.

After the destruction of those rebelling against Christ, Satan (and presumably his host of fallen angels) will be cast into the Lake of Fire (Rev. 20:10).

Summary

The millennium is the first phase of the visible kingdom of God on earth. The Abrahamic Covenant, along with the Palestinian, Davidic, and new covenants provide the biblical framework for our concept of the visible kingdom of God. Although Israel has been unfaithful, their unfaithfulness has not—indeed cannot—invalidate the promises God has made. God has sworn and will bring His promises to pass. There is an elect generation of Jews, chosen by God, who will by faith enter into the blessings of the covenant that their forefathers forsook. It is to that generation, as well as the righteous dead of Israel who will be raised, that God will fulfill His promise of an eternal kingdom, first in the millennium (upon the present earth), then forever in the new creation.