

The Kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ

“And He Shall Reign for Ever and Ever”

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Every year just after Thanksgiving I pull out my tape of Handel’s *Messiah* and pop it into the cassette player of my Mazda truck. As I drive around I’m serenaded by the awe-inspiring melodies of this justly famous musical composition put together by one history’s greatest composers. Some of my favorite words come from the famous “Hallelujah Chorus”:

Hallelujah! For the Lord God omnipotent reigneth.

The Kingdom of the world is become the kingdom of our Lord, of His Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever.

*King of kings and Lord of Lords.
Hallelujah!*

I doubt if there is more awe-inspiring music in the whole world. It resonates with truth, hope and reverence for the living God and his Christ. The hope of mankind – towards which the whole biblical record marches - is here announced in anticipation of its imminent fulfillment. Few believing listeners can fail to be impacted at the deepest level of emotion.

Not surprisingly, this has been the reaction of listeners from the very beginning as the brochure in my CD of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir’s rendition of *Messiah* makes clear:

One of the greatest works ever conceived by man is *Messiah*, by George Frederick Handel (1683-1759). In its pages can be found music that is, at the same time, the simplest human utterance and the most complex religious statement – all expressed in terms of the highest inspirational beauty ...

Messiah, based on texts from the New Testament, was composed in just 24 days, between August 22 and September 14, 1741...

For the first public concert, on April 13, ladies were requested not to wear hoops in their skirts and gentlemen to refrain from sporting swords, so

great was the expected crowd. The event was a huge success, and Faulkner’s “Dublin Journal” reported the pleasure of all who heard the “Sacred Grand Oratorio”:

“Words are wanting to express, the exquisite Delight it afforded to the admiring crowded Audience. The Sublime, the Grand, and the Tender, adapted to the most elevated, majestic and moving Words, conspired to transport and charm the ravished Heart and Ear.”

When *Messiah* received its London premier, legend has it that Handel’s old patron, King George II, was so moved by the Hallelujah Chorus that he rose and remained standing until its very conclusion. Protocol demanded, of course, that everyone remain on his feet when the King stood, so thus was born the custom of the audience standing during the singing of this most inspired chorus.

The famous words above from the Hallelujah Chorus are found, of course, in the eleventh chapter of the Book of Revelation in the second part of verse fifteen. They express the fulfillment of the hope and goal of the entire biblical record from Genesis to Revelation:

*The kingdom of the world has
become the kingdom of our
Lord and of his Christ,
and he will reign for ever and ever
(Rev. 11:15b NIV).*

When these words finally come to pass believers from all ages will be “caught up” to meet our Lord Jesus Christ in the air. From that point on we will “be with him” and “reign with him” in God’s kingdom -

“for ever and ever”

(I Thess. 4:13-18; I Cor. 15:20-28, 50-58; Rev. 22:5; cp. Rom. 5:17; II Tim. 2:12; etc.). This, is the ultimate biblical hope!

The Christian Hope: Reigning with Christ For Ever and Ever

Let it be stated clearly: the ultimate biblical hope is not for a disembodied life in heaven after death; nor is it for a bodily life in heaven after a secret rapture of the church; nor is it for a life in an imperfect world in the millenium after Christ's return. Any of those could debatably be intermediate stages along the way. But the simplicity of the Christian hope for the future is clear: it is the personal return of our Lord Jesus Christ at which time believers – whether dead or alive - will be caught up and transformed so as,

“to be with the Lord forever” (I Thess. 4:13-17).

It is the simplest logic to conclude that if we are going to be “with him forever” then our final home is the “new heaven and new earth, the home of righteousness” towards which all biblical revelation points and culminates (e.g. II Pet. 3:13 and Rev. 21:1ff). In other words, it is in “the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ” - in a renewed and glorious earth – that Christian believers will live and reign with Christ,

“for ever and ever” (Rev. 22:5)!

It is of course common for sincere Christian believers to speak of spending “eternity” in heaven. But this is simply based on misunderstandings of biblical language that have been caused by importing Greek ideas about salvation and eternal life into the Bible. Though the New Testament was originally written, at least for the most part, in Greek, the ideas behind the Greek words that are used are not Greek but Hebraic, i.e., based on the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament. Older translations of the Bible such as the King James Version have helped to propagate these ideas widely in the thought of the common churchgoer, indeed, in the common man at large.

The Bible does of course speak of the Christian hope being “stored up” or “kept” in heaven. However, in biblical the thought this doesn't mean that believers will go there to get it. Instead, with Christ's return, God's kingdom will come, so that God's will is finally done “on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). New Testament scholar George Eldon Ladd explains about the NT concepts “heaven” and “eternity”:

In popular Christian idiom, we often contrast the life of the present with that of the future by use of

the words earth and heaven. We live our bodily life here on earth, but the future salvation will be consummated in heaven. A more philosophical approach contrasts time and eternity as though they represented two different modes of existence. Our present life is lived “in time” while the future will be “beyond time” in eternity. This concept is reflected in our popular religious idiom in the song:

“When the trumpet of the Lord shall sound
and time shall be no more, When the
morning breaks eternal, bright and fair ...”

One of the most brilliant recent discussions in Biblical Theology is that of Oscar Cullman in which he successfully demonstrated that such concepts are foreign to the Biblical view. His book, *Christ and Time*, has shown that the Biblical world-view involves a *linear concept*, and that “eternity” as it belongs to redemptive history is simply *unending time*. [*The Gospel of the Kingdom*, p. 25, Eerdmans].

Throughout the entire Bible, the ultimate destiny of God's people is an earthly destiny. In typical dualistic Greek thought, the universe was divided into two realms: the earthly or transitory, and the eternal spiritual world. Salvation consisted of the flight of the soul from the sphere of the transitory and ephemeral to the realm of eternal reality. However, biblical thought always places man on a redeemed earth, not in a heavenly realm removed from earthly existence.

The New Testament conceives of a heavenly Jerusalem as the dwelling place of God, the true homeland of the saints, and the dwelling of “the spirits of just men made perfect” (Heb. 12:22; see Gal. 4:26; Phil. 3:20) ... In the consummation after the resurrection ... the heavenly Jerusalem will descend from heaven to take up its permanent location in the new earth. [*A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, p. 275, 276, Eerdmans].

In short, whenever the Bible speaks of eternal life in “the Kingdom of God” it is *always* speaking of life in the coming reign of God – through his Messiah - in a renewed and glorious *earth* which lasts “for ever and ever.”

The common practice of speaking of “the kingdom of heaven” as the place where a believer will enjoy “life in heaven after death” is simply erroneous. The term “kingdom of heaven” is simply a Jewish way of avoiding uttering the (over) revered name of “God” when speaking of the “kingdom of

God". The terms "kingdom of heaven" and "kingdom of God" are synonymous – as any competent biblical research work will confirm.

But, it is also true that the terms "kingdom of heaven" or "kingdom of God" (and similar terms) never refer specifically to the millenium which the Book of Revelation places immediately after Christ's return. No other biblical writer shows any knowledge whatsoever of a *millennial* reign of Christ with his saints and it is a travesty of biblical interpretation to pretend that they do. It may very well be that the millenium will be the first stage of God's kingdom on earth but this is only mentioned in the Book of Revelation and even there it is not the final goal. The term "the kingdom of God" – as used everywhere in the Bible in its future sense - always refers to the coming reign of God and his Messiah that will last "for ever and ever."

This truth is not hard to see if we would allow the Bible to speak for itself instead of reading things back into it. Let's look first at the vivid Old Testament background to the concept of "the kingdom of God." Examples can be found in the Old Testament Books of Isaiah and Daniel. Isaiah spoke of a coming ruler whose righteous kingdom would reign *forever*:

For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever (Isaiah 9:6-7).

The prophet Daniel also spoke of a coming everlasting kingdom. A kingdom to be brought to pass by "one like a son of man" and which would replace all other kingdoms and rule so as to establish God's righteous rule *forever*:

In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed ... it will crush all those kingdoms

and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever (Daniel 2:44).

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven ... He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed (Daniel 7:13-17).

Nothing could be clearer than that the Old Testament hope for God's future reign on earth through his Messiah would be "forever"! Recognition of this truth would remove a lot of confusion from biblical studies.

But does the New Testament confirm this same understanding? Absolutely, as the angel's announcement of the Messiah's birth in the first chapter of Luke vividly shows:

"Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end" (Luke 1:30-33).

This Old Testament background together with the announcement of the birth of Christ are *prima facie* evidence for what the New Testament means by the term "the kingdom of God." It should be built into our understanding of what the term means. In short, no amount of exegetical gymnastics can escape the clearness of the biblical words "forever" and "never end" which are associated with the term "the kingdom of God".

This should bring pause to those who teach that Jesus' teaching about "the kingdom of God" in the Gospels is in reference to a millenium as well as to those who teach that the believer's ultimate destiny is life in heaven. As we have seen, there is no biblical proof whatsoever for these positions. Instead, the ultimate biblical hope about which Jesus, Peter, Paul and John constantly speak, is "the universal restoration of all things" (Acts 3:21

NRSV). It is not for “life in heaven” or “life in a millennium”; instead, it is the restoration of man to his intended rule over God’s created and restored earth (Acts 3:17-21; cf. Gen. 1:26-27; Psalm 8; Heb. 2:5-8). In short, it is the culmination of the entire biblical plan which is for man to “reign in life” (Rom. 5:17),

... for ever and ever (Rev. 22:5)

“in a new heaven and new earth, the home of righteousness”(II Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1ff).

For, as Handel’s Messiah echoes, the day is coming when it can truly be said:

*The kingdom of the world has
become the kingdom of our
Lord and of his Christ,
and he will reign for ever and ever.*

Hallelujah!!

[For a precise study on the meaning of the terms: “the kingdom of God,” etc., I highly recommend chapter two “The Kingdom is Tommorrow” of George Eldon Ladd’s book The Gospel of the Kingdom or his A Theology of the NT. Both are published by Eerdmans and can be ordered from CBD.]