




The New Dictionary of Theology

• Editors •

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through which major dimensions of Jesus' teaching and ministry are to be understood.

While the centrality of this metaphor is recognized by practically every interpreter of the NT, its precise meaning is the subject of much debate. The notion of "God's reign" was not invented by Jesus or the early church; it has deep roots within the theology and history of Israel. To gain some idea of its meaning in the NT, therefore, we should begin by tracing the origin of this concept within the Hebrew Scriptures.

1. Old Testament and Jewish Background of the "Reign of God"

While the specific term "kingdom" or "reign" of God is a NT formulation, the notions underlying this concept of God's ultimate sovereignty have deep roots within biblical history and the Hebrew Scriptures. The full concert of motifs that will merge in the NT metaphor are to be found only in post-exilic Judaism but most of the basic elements reach back to the earlier stages of Israel's history. It should not be assumed, however, that the notion of God's Reign underwent a smooth evolutionary development. In this, as in most matters, OT thought is pluralistic and non-systematic in its expression.

A number of strands of OT theology underlie the "Reign of God" motif:

1) God's Salvific Power in the History of Israel. God's reign or sovereignty over Israel is experienced first and foremost in Israel's own history of salvation. The events of deliverance from slavery in Egypt, protection and guidance during the wilderness wandering, the forging of the covenant, the gift of the land, protection from surrounding enemies, the establishment and continuation of the monarchy, the return from exile—all of these and more were viewed as acts of God's salvific power on behalf of Israel. There are many metaphors used to

REIGN OF GOD

The coming of God's reign was used by Jesus of Nazareth as the keynote of his mission. In the Synoptic Gospels it remains a central theological symbol

express such salvific acts: God is seen as Shepherd (Psalm 23), as *Go'el* or redeemer (Is 44:6), as Father (Jer 3:19), as Mother (Is 49:15), as Warrior (Ex 15:3) and so on. Within this array of images that of "king" takes its place.

It is difficult to determine if the explicit use of "king," or the more frequent active designation of God's "reign" or "rule," predates the period of the monarchy. (Because the biblical uses of this metaphor emphasize the dynamic character of God's relationship as "king" [*melek* in Hebrew; *basileus* in Greek] the preferred translation of the Hebrew word *malkut* [kingdom] and the Greek *basileia* [kingdom] is that of "reign" or "rule" rather than the more static term "kingdom.") But preparation for this use is surely found in the constant acknowledgements of God's saving power on behalf of Israel and the allegiance Israel owed God because of this. This is, in fact, a fundamental motif of the entire Pentateuch. The famous creed in Deuteronomy 26 is typical: "A wandering Aramean was my father; and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. Then we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice, and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror, with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey" (Deut 26:5b-9). Much of Deuteronomistic theology centers on the active memory of God's saving deeds on behalf of the people.

Use of the kingly metaphor is found in the famous "canticle of sea" (Exod 15:1-18) which praises the warrior God who delivered Israel from the Egyptians: "I

will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea. The Lord is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him. The Lord is a man of war; the Lord is his name. . . ." (Exod 15:1-3).

At its conclusion the hymn moves explicitly to speak of God's "reign," an idea implicit in the entire recital of God's protective power; "Thou wilt bring them in, and plant them on thy own mountain, the place, O Lord, which thou hast made for thy abode, the sanctuary, O Lord, which thy hands have established. The Lord will reign for ever and ever" (Exod 15:17-18). This text probably dates from the period of the monarchy, although it is coupled to what is one of the oldest traditions in the Pentateuch (see the song of Miriam in Exod 15:21 which praises God as delivering warrior).

2) *God as Creator and Cosmic Ruler.* Some have suggested that another source for the later notion of Yahweh as ruler is to be found in ancient Near Eastern mythologies which exerted their influence on Israel by way of Canaanite culture. These creation myths depicted God exercising royal power in the primeval struggle to create the world and in the continual cycle of fertility and renewal that sustained creation. Such myths were celebrated in cult where the primeval combat between good and evil and the renewal of the fertility of the earth were reenacted. The gods would be acclaimed as kings because of their exercise of sovereignty and protection over the life of the people.

It is difficult to determine the exact extent to which such myths influenced the worship of Israel, but it is probable that Israel was not immune to its surrounding culture. What is clear is that especially in Israel's cult are the notions of Yahweh as cosmic king to be found. The enthronement psalms are the most

forceful example of this. Psalm 93 merges creation motifs with acclamation of Yahweh as king: "The Lord reigns; he is robed in majesty; the Lord is robed, he is girded with strength. Yea, the world is established; it shall never be moved; thy throne is established from of old; thou art from everlasting" (Ps 93:1-2).

Cosmic motifs are also found in Psalm 96: "O sing to the Lord a new song, sing to the Lord, all the earth. . . Say among the nations, 'The Lord reigns! Yea, the world is established, it shall never be moved. . .'" (Ps 96:1, 10).

Similarly Psalm 97 presents Yahweh as reigning from a cosmic throneroom and moving all the earth to offer awed homage: "The Lord reigns; let the earth rejoice; let the many coastlands be glad! Clouds and thick darkness are round about him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne. Fire goes before him, and burns up his adversaries round about. His lightnings lighten the world; the earth sees and trembles. The mountains melt like wax before the Lord, before the Lord of all the earth" (Ps 97:1-5).

The same motif is found in Psalms 98 and 99: "The Lord reigns; let the peoples tremble! He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake!" (Ps 99:1).

The Psalms are a distillation of many currents of OT thought and that is the case here. Besides the introduction of cosmic and creation motifs, the Psalms also blend in two other aspects of God's sovereignty or reign: 1) the extension of God's rule to all nations; 2) and the motif already discussed above—God's saving actions on behalf of Israel. Psalm 97, for example, stresses that Yahweh is "Lord of all the earth" and acclaims ". . . thou, O Lord, art most high over all the earth; thou art exalted far above all gods," a universal sovereignty that is echoed in creation itself ("The heavens proclaim God's righteousness") and in God's

particular deliverance of Israel (" . . . God preserves the lives of the saints; God delivers them from the hand of the wicked"). A similar blend is found in Psalm 47: "For the Lord, the Most High, is terrible, a great king over all the earth. God subdued peoples under us, and nations under our feet. God chose our heritage for us, the pride of Jacob whom he loves." Psalm 136 is a recital of God's kingly deeds that moves from God's cosmic lordship and rule over creation through the story of the exodus deliverance to the donation of the land—the whole span of motifs subsumed under the notion of God's reign.

Such a blend is implicit in much of the theology of the OT but comes to its most exuberant expression in Israel's cult. Here is most clearly seen how foundational and expansive are the OT roots for the later metaphor of "The Reign of God."

3) *The Experience of the Monarchy.* While some explicit use of the metaphor of Yahweh as king may have preceded the establishment of the monarchy in Israel, there is no doubt that a major impulse to the use of this symbol came with Israel's own experience of centralized government. The adopting of a monarchical system came slowly and with some reluctance. Israel's more independent tribal or clan system ultimately gave way to a centralized monarchy under the pressures of outside threat, particularly from the threat of the coastal Philistines to the west attempting to retrieve the hill country absorbed by the Israelite tribes, but also from the perennial incursions of desert marauders from the east and southeast.

Although the monarchy would eventually be established under Saul and David, the Bible still contains wry comment on the dangers of centralized rule. The curious fable in Judg 9:8-15 about the olive tree, the fig and the vine all reluctant to rule and then allowing the

useless brambles to be the ruler seems to imply that only the unproductive and the useless are willing to be king. In 1 Samuel 8 this anti-monarchical strain comes to the surface. The failure of the judges leads the elders to ask Samuel to appoint a king over them (1 Sam 8:1-6). Yahweh's response interprets this request as a rejection of his own reign over Israel: "Hearken to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. According to the deeds which they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt even to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are also doing to you" (1 Sam 8:7-8).

Samuel is then instructed to tell the people "the ways of the king who shall reign over them," which leads to a catalogue of the abuses of centralized authority which exploits the people for the aggrandizement of the king (see 1 Sam 8:10-18). Despite such warnings the people persist in asking for a king and Yahweh concedes. The process of selecting Saul then begins.

Such wry warnings and reluctance about the monarchy help temper the divine sanctions ultimately ascribed to the Davidic monarchy. While the King is given God's blessing and is promised divine protection and even an enduring dynasty, this authority was clearly understood to be limited by God's own sovereignty. Yahweh's ultimate reign over Israel is not relinquished in the presence of an earthly king. The earthly king is empowered by God and through coronation becomes "son of God" (see Ps 2:7). As God's "son" the king is both imbued with divine authority and responsible to act in God's name and in the manner of God's own saving and compassionate care for Israel.

The encounters of David and Nathan illustrate well both the scope and limits of

monarchy in Israel. The prophet's oracle brings divine sanction to the monarchy which is now established, not reluctantly, but in order to protect Israel: "And I will appoint a place for my people Israel, and will plant them, that they may dwell in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and violent people shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies" (2 Sam 7:10-11).

David and his offspring will be the means by which God establishes an everlasting dynasty: "When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son" (2 Sam 7:12-14).

But the limits of the earthly king's authority are immediately set: "When he commits iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men..." (2 Sam 7:14). That chastisement quickly comes in David's own sin in having Uriah killed so that the king could take his wife. The prophet Nathan becomes the oracle of judgment just as he had been the oracle of blessing (see 2 Sam 12:1-15).

This exalted role for the king stood in obvious contrast to the actual history of the monarchy. Even David, who is presented in ideal terms, failed and exploited the weak. Solomon's wisdom was tainted by his idolatries. And the subsequent history of the kings is a seemingly endless parade of failures and compromises, leading to weakness and division, and ultimately to the demise of the north and exile for the south. The prophetic critique of the injustices perpetrated by the monarchy and the eventual failure and destruction of the monarchy set the

stage for the final element leading to the post-exilic theology of the reign of God.

4) *Eschatological Hope for God's Rule.* Disillusionment with monarchy would give shape to a renewed theology of God's definitive reign over Israel. The destruction of the Northern Kingdom and the Babylonian exile were viewed by the prophets as judgments against the sins of Israel. Likewise, return from exile was seen as an act of God's forgiveness, a powerful act of salvation that itself was an exercise of God's reign over Israel. **Deutero-Isaiah presents Cyrus, the King of Persia who allowed the exiles to return, as an instrument of Yahweh:** "Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer . . . who says of Jerusalem, 'She shall be inhabited,' and of the cities of Judah, 'They shall be built, and I will raise up their ruins' . . . who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all of my purpose'; and of the temple, 'Your foundation shall be laid.'" (Isa 44:24, 26-28).

The return to Israel is seen as act of God's powerful reign: "Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! . . . The Lord has taken away the judgments against you, he has cast out your enemies. **The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear evil no more.** On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: 'Do not fear, O Zion; let not your hands grow weak.'" (Zeph 3:14-16).

Israel's hopes for restoration also fuel its vision of final salvation. At this point the notion of Yahweh's reign takes on eschatological tones, an aspect of capital importance for the NT use of the metaphor. Jeremiah foresees a new Davidic ruler, the messiah who will restore the fortunes of Judah: "Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved

and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness'" (Jer 23:5-6).

Deutero-Isaiah speaks in exultant and expansive terms of Yahweh's liberation of Israel from exile and of a future hope for salvation: "Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: 'For your sake I will send to Babylon and break down all the bars, and the shouting of the Chaldeans will be turned to lamentations. I am the Lord, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King. Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings forth chariot and horse, army and warrior. . . Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild beasts will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself that they might declare my praise'" (Isa 43:14-21).

The famous text of Isa 52:7-10 breathes a similar eschatological tone: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good tidings, who publishes peace, who brings good tidings of good, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.' . . Break forth together into singing you waste places of Jerusalem; for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God."

While the return to Jerusalem is the immediate referent for these songs of praise, their scope extends to God's final, eschatological salvation. Subsequent post-exilic history added more force to this projection of future hopes. Israel's

political fortunes continued to wane, ruled first by Alexander, then by the Ptolemaic and then the even more repressive Seleucid dynasties. A brief respite of freedom under the Hasmoneans fell apart because of internal corruption and division as well as pressure from the Romans—who eventually seize power over Israel. Frustrated hopes for freedom and peace gave further impetus to the eschatological dimension of God's rule. What had not and could not be achieved by human effort would be finally accomplished by God's own intervention.

This aspect of the reign of God is attested in apocalyptic works like Daniel ("And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed, nor shall its sovereignty be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand for ever." Dan 2:44) and in non-biblical works such as the *Assumption of Moses* and *The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*. Radical reform movements such as Qumran withdrew from the corrupt environment of Hasmonean Jerusalem and its Temple system to await the final days which would be the definitive combat between good and evil and end with the establishment of God's reign.

Conclusion: God's reign or rule in the OT catches up major dimensions of biblical theology. It is a metaphor expressing God's sovereignty over every aspect of Israel's life. God's saving acts in history, God's creation and sustaining of the world, God's lordship over the nations, God's promise of ultimate salvation and peace—all of these are expressed in the metaphor of God's reign. The experience of monarchy provided the existential referent for such a theology: like the ideal king God was the cohesive and identifying force of the people, protecting them from destruction, sanction-

ing justice and befriending the weak and defenseless. At the same time, the historical failure of the monarchy projected Israel's hopes to the eschaton: in the final days Israel's impotent attempts to establish peace and justice would be swept aside and God's own reign would come.

How that was to be accomplished was not always clear nor was it projected in a single consistent way. Some traditions such as *The Psalms of Solomon* have a decisively this-worldly focus while others are more eschatological in tone (e.g., *The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*). Some traditions envisaged a Davidic messiah, others a priestly ruler (in the Qumran materials both expectations seem present) who would be the means by which the rule of God would be established. In other traditions God acts directly. The Zealot movement apparently believed that direct political and military action on their part against the Roman occupation would precipitate God's reign. For later rabbinic traditions, the acceptance of God's reign was equivalent to acceptance of the yoke of the Torah. In all cases Israel's hopes for salvation were firmly grounded in their memory of **God's continuing fidelity to his people** **Jesus' own interpretation of this metaphor, while not unrelated to apocalyptic and rabbinic thought, has its own characteristics.**

II. *The Reign of God in the New Testament*

The term the "reign of God" occurs more than 150 times in the NT, almost two thirds of these in the Synoptic Gospels (this includes Matthew's use of a similar term, the "kingdom of heaven"; the word "heaven" is probably a euphemism for "God" so that the metaphor has little difference in meaning). There is little doubt that the coming of God's reign was a keynote of Jesus' own ministry. Both Mark and Matthew cite

this as an inaugural summary of Jesus' preaching: "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel'" (Mk 1:14; similarly Mt 4:17). Although Luke formulates the beginning of Jesus' ministry in a different fashion, he, too, stresses the importance of this motif early in the gospel: "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose" (Lk 4:43). The reign of God is also a consistent subject of Jesus' parables and is linked to his healings and exorcisms (Mt 12:28; Lk 11:20). Claims to kingship seem to have been a contention of Jesus' trials before the Sanhedrin and Pilate and may reflect the use of this metaphor in his preaching. And all four of the gospels identify Jesus as the Davidic messiah.

In spite of the frequent reference to the "reign of God" there is no clear definition of its meaning in the ministry of Jesus or as it is used by the later NT traditions. This may be due in part to the very nature of this motif. As Norman Perrin and others have insisted it is less a "concept" or idea than it is a "symbol" whose meaning is rich and not capable of being exhausted by this or that definition or formulation. Speaking of the reign of God as a symbol rather than a clear cut concept does not imply it is without content or that attempts to decipher its meaning are invalid. Rather, the meaning of the coming "reign of God" for Jesus must be culled from the overall character of his ministry. It is to that task we now turn.

a) *The Reign of God as experience of salvation.* All of the gospels present Jesus as God's messiah, as the one who effects salvation. In the Synoptic Gospels this is interpreted as an experience of God's reign. Jesus calls Israel to repentance and

to acceptance of the approaching reign of God (Mk 1:14-15); such conversion opens one to an experience of new life. In the past the poor and the defenseless had been exploited by the kings and ruling classes; such would not be the case under God's reign. The reign of God would be "good news for the poor" (Mt 11:5; Lk 4:18).

The Gospels of Matthew and Luke explicitly link Jesus' exorcisms and healings with the experience of the Kingdom; it is implicit in the gospel of Mark as well: "...if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Mt 12:28; see Lk 11:20). The healings and exorcisms are stories of salvation. The sick and disabled are not only physically cured but, equally important, are given access to the community (e.g., Mk 2:1-12). Leprosy, a disease symbolic of mortality itself in the Bible, is cleansed (Mk 1:40-45). The Gadarene demoniac who dwells in the tombs, wails incessantly, is self-destructive and isolated from family and clan, is, through the power of Jesus, liberated from his demons, restored to his family and empowered to become a missionary of the gospel to the Decapolis (Mk 5:1-20). The woman bent double is not only cured of her infirmity but, over the protests of the synagogue manager, has her dignity as a "Daughter of Abraham" affirmed (Lk 13:10-17).

To the healings and exorcisms can be aligned the reports of Jesus' association with marginal people: "Behold a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" (Mt 11:19; Lk 15:1). Jesus' relationships with social and religious outcasts are a type of "healing" in that he draws such people into the circle of acceptance and dissolves their alienation. A similar case could be made about Jesus' significant association with women (e.g., Lk 8:1-3) and occasional Samaritans

(Lk 17:11-19) and Gentiles (Mk 7:24-30; Mt 8:5-13). As with the healing stories such actions proclaim the inclusive and salvific nature of God's impending reign.

These stories define the reign of God as an experience of salvation. The community of Israel is restored on a just and inclusive basis. This aspect of the reign of God as defined by Jesus' ministry of salvation has obvious links with OT expectations. The gospel of Matthew evokes Isaiah 29:18-19 and 35:5-6 when Jesus lists the "deeds of the Christ" for John's emissaries: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them" (Mt 11:4-5). The programmatic text of Isaiah 61 (enriched by Isa 58:6) fulfills a similar function in Luke's presentation of Jesus in the synagogue of Nazareth (see Lk 4:18-19). Jesus, as the Davidic Messiah, ushers in the longed for reign of God, a reign characterized by forgiveness and reconciliation, by universal justice and peace. To establish that reign means the transformation not only of the human heart but of the oppressive social structures that dehumanize and exclude the poor and defenseless from participation in the family of Israel.

Jesus' teaching and parables, along with his actions, proclaim this same message. The parables have been the focus of enormous interest in the past few decades; much of their message is related to Jesus' proclamation of the reign of God. Some recent interpreters resist boiling down the meaning of the parables to certain key ideas or motifs. The parables are a word event in themselves, inviting transformation of one's world through insertion into the new world created by the story or parable. While an overly analytical approach to the parables should be avoided, it is still legitimate,

however, to translate the meaning of the parables into discursive language. The evangelists reinterpreted and developed the parables, highlighting motifs important to their own theological perspective, but the link of the parables to the proclamation of the reign of God is attributable to Jesus himself.

The parables stress that the reign of God comes as "grace," that is, salvation is a gift of God to which one must respond (Mt 20:1-16, the householder who hires laborers and pays them as he will). That grace comes as gratuitous forgiveness (Lk 15:11-31; 7:41-43; Mt 18:23-35). Because salvation is rooted in God the establishment of God's reign is sure, even when its effects seem uncertain or hidden (Mk 4:3-9; 4:26-29; 4:30-32). The offer of salvation provokes crisis because it compels humans to change their lives and respond to grace (Mt 13:44; 13:45-46). Coupled with this are parables of judgment: failure to be alert for the coming of God's reign or to adequately respond to it leads to condemnation and death (Mt 13:47-50; 25:1-13; 31-46).

Much of this same teaching is found in Jesus' sayings. Here, too, there is proclamation of salvation as a gift of God (Mt 5:3-10), a consequent call for repentance (Mt 18:3), for response to the reality of God's reign expressed in mutual forgiveness (Mt 6:12, 14-15; 5:43-48) and justice (Mt 25:31-46). One must "enter into" the reign of God, an expression that connotes the necessity of the transformation and commitment demanded by the urgent reality of the reign (Mt 5:20; 7:21; 18:3; 19:23, 24; Mk 9:47; 10:23-25; Lk 18:25; Jn 3:5).

b) *The Reign of God as eschatological event.* The "timing" of the coming reign of God is perhaps the most controverted aspect in all discussions of this subject. Since the publication of Johannes Weiss's *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God* in 1892 biblical scholarship has had

to confront the strongly eschatological nature of Jesus' preaching. As noted above, the longing for God's definitive salvation of Israel had already taken root in OT theology in the post-exilic period, especially in the wake of the failure of the monarchy.

The problematic aspect of Jesus' message is that the longed-for end time is declared to be imminently present in Jesus' own ministry. The reign of God is "at hand" (Mk 1:14-15). The disciples are promised that they will not taste death until the reign of God has come in power (Mk 9:1; Mt. 10:23). Material like this led Weiss, A. Schweizer and others to conclude that Jesus himself expected the imminent arrival of the endtime.

But that "imminence" verges on presence in some sayings: e.g., "... if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the reign of God *has come upon you*" (Mt 12:28; Lk 11:20); "The reign of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, 'Lo, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the reign of God is *in the midst of you*" (Lk 17:20; see also Lk 10:7, 11). In sayings like these the reign of God is identified with Jesus' own ministry; the experience of salvation proclaimed by Jesus and enacted in his liberating healings and exorcisms is the eschatological reign of God now present. This present aspect led C.H. Dodd (*The Parables of the Kingdom*) to formulate his notion of "realized eschatology."

However, the problem is further complicated by other sayings and parables which seem to present the reign of God as still future event. In the Lord's prayer, Jesus prays for the *coming* of the reign of God (see Luke 11:2-4; Mt 6:10). Judgment parables such as Mt 13:24-30 (see also 13:36-43 and 24-25) project the consummation of the reign of God as future event. So, too, does the whole complex of Son of Man material; in the so-called apocalyptic discourses of the Synoptic

Gospels, only the future coming of that exalted figure, beyond a series of crises within history and subsequent to the completion of the community's mission, will usher in the eschatological reign of God (see Mk 13:5-37).

Neither Weiss's or Dodd's solutions have proved convincing. Inevitably some dialectical approach seems necessary. Jesus, as a first century Jew, did view the reign of God as an urgent eschatological event. That reign could be identified with no particular political expression or point in time; Jesus proclaimed the definitive reign of God, the ultimate experience of salvation, that transcended every human effort to achieve peace and justice. At the same time, however, Jesus did have a peculiar sense of his own authority, as one sent by God to proclaim and effect salvation. In his own words and actions the experience of God's reign was present and accessible even if the consummation of that reign was yet to come. Thus there is an "already now but not yet" character to Jesus' proclamation of the reign of God. The compromise nature of such a solution is lessened if one keeps in mind that the biblical notion of the reign of God cannot be reduced to temporal and spatial categories. While salvation deals with genuine human pain and hope—and therefore is inevitably tied into political and social aspirations—it is not to be confused with some Camelot-type realm. The reign of God is "qualitative" as much as it is "quantitative"; in the experience of healing and reconciliation effected through the grace of God one anticipates and is already immersed in the eschatological reign of God. While the future coming of the reign of God means a profound transformation of all human reality and is a transcendent experience beyond space and time, the inbreaking of that transcendent reality through the mission of Jesus enables people to respond to God's offer of

salvation and to be affected by it now, within history.

c) *The Reign of God as Theological Revelation.* Discussion of the reign of God as salvific and eschatological must also be connected with its fundamentally "theological" character; that is, the reign of God metaphor is ultimately an expression of Israel's *longing to experience God*. Because all human institutions proved impotent and because Israel hungered for peace, it looked to the coming of God as its only hope for salvation. This returns us to the starting point of our discussion; the "reign" metaphor is validated in God's sovereignty over the life of all humanity and all creation.

The gospels testify to Jesus' vivid sense of God's presence. His own piety, expressed in his characteristic address of God as *abba* (Mk 14:36), reflects a deep conviction about God's intimate presence. His teaching also emphasizes the closeness of God to creation and even more so to the human person (Mt 6:25-33; 10:25-29), particularly to the weak and insignificant whose angels behold the face of God (Mt 18:10). Several of Jesus' parables, such as the Lost Sheep (Lk 15:3-7) the Lost Coin (Lk 15:8-10), and the Lost Son (Lk 15:11-32), as well as saying something about the importance of the "little ones" (Mt 18:10), extend that providence to the individual, a peculiar emphasis of Jesus' ministry born out in his call of isolated tax collectors and disabled beggars to the company of his disciples (e.g., Mk 2:13-17; 10:46-52). God's own compassion and gracious forgiveness become the model for love of enemies and reconciliation within the community (Mt 5:43-48; 18:21-35). The disciples are to be "perfect" or "complete" (*teleios*) as God is "perfect" (Mt 5:48; Lk's parallel, 6:36, uses the term "merciful").

In short, if the reign of God is "at hand" one must ask what kind of a God

and what will be the nature of God's reign? Here all of the various facets of this metaphor converge. The proclamation of Jesus reveals that God is a saving God whose coming will effect personal and social transformation. A God whose reign will mean "good news," particularly for those who have experienced oppression (Lk 6:20-23). A God whose coming will, therefore, call for decisive response and whose appearance will create crisis and provoke judgment for those whose way of life is not in accord with the reality of that reign.

III. Interpretation of the Reign of God

As with all biblical concepts and symbols, the "reign of God" proclaimed by Jesus became subject to reinterpretation by subsequent generations. This is already apparent in the NT itself. Resurrection faith concentrated on the unique identity and role of Jesus within the history of salvation. Each of the Synoptic Gospels adds its own emphasis and perspective in its presentation of Jesus and his mission. But the slogan—"Jesus preached the reign of God and the early church preached Jesus"—is not entirely accurate. The Synoptics proclaim Jesus, but a Jesus who proclaims the reign of God. There is, therefore, a credible sense of continuity between what one can deduce about the teaching of the historical Jesus and the post-Easter portrayals of Jesus' teaching and ministry in the gospels.

The gospel of John refers to the reign of God only twice (see Jn 3:3,5); apparently other symbols, such as "eternal life," function in place of the "reign" metaphor. Paul refers to the "reign of God" some 10 times, usually with a strong eschatological sense. Those who are "unjust" will not "inherit the reign of God" (see 1 Cor 6:9, 10; 15:50; Gal 5:21). In 1 Cor 15:24 Paul depicts an eschatological scenario in which Christ hands over the "reign to God the Father after

destroying every rule and every authority and power." But Paul can also refer to the reign of God in a manner that suggests it is also a present reality: "For the reign of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom 14:17; see also 1 Cor 4:20).

The Apocalypse uses the metaphor of "throne" and "reign" as major symbols of its entire theology. The Roman Empire is depicted as a dehumanizing and demonic rule that is opposed to and will be destroyed by the Lordship of the Risen Christ. This apocalyptic combat is future but the reign of the triumphant Lamb will be over a "new heavens and new earth" (Rev 21). In the climactic chapter 19 when the vassals of Rome mourn its loss, the heavenly court offers homage to Christ who is exalted as "King of kings and Lord of lords" (Rev 19:16).

Therefore in most of the subsequent NT uses of this metaphor some of the tension between present and future already found in Jesus' proclamation remains.

Throughout Christian history various interpretations of the "reign of God" have held sway. Key issues have been whether and in what way the church is to be considered coextensive with the reality of God's reign. Augustine, for example, identified the reign of God with the church triumphant. Some later medieval theology would identify the reign of God with the historical church on earth. Interpretation of this symbol is also closely bound with one's understanding of eschatology. For those who see God's salvation as mainly future and other worldly, the reign of God is primarily an individual and spiritual experience. For those who see God's salvific power at work in the present, the reign of God is more closely tied to social and political reform.

Renewed contact with the eschato-

logical tone of Jesus' and early christian thought offers an opportunity to restore this key metaphor to more of its biblical force. The "reign of God" is not an abstract, individualistic, ethical concept as some nineteenth century theologians presumed. Nor, as liberation theologians have rightly insisted, can it be divorced from social and political transformation. The key to proper interpretation of this symbol is to maintain in tension the full scope of its biblical elements: it is a metaphor expressing the impact of God's gracious and decisive act of salvation; it reveals the quality of human existence defined in the person and ministry of Jesus; it is a corporate experience to be revealed in fullness at the end of human history and yet, already now, in the light of faith, impinges on human action and human institutions. So defined the metaphor of God's coming reign found in the NT has profound continuity with its OT roots; the fundamental difference is the decisive impetus and peculiar character given to this symbol by Jesus Christ.

See *Eschatology, Parable*

Bruce Chilton (ed.), *The Kingdom of God* (Issues in Religion and Theology 5), Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984. G. Klein, "The Biblical Understanding of 'The Kingdom of God'," *Interpretation* 26 (1972) 387-418. Norman Perrin, *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom: Symbol and Metaphor in New Testament Interpretation*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976. Rudolf Schnackenburg, *God's Rule and Kingdom*, New York: Herder & Herder, 1963. Johannes Weiss, *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971.

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RELICS

Relics are best understood theologically in terms of the place they occupy in christian memories and hope. Although the latter have first and foremost to do with what God's grace accomplished once and for all in Jesus of Nazareth, they do not stop there. As witnessed by