

## THE KINGDOM OF CHRIST IN THE APOCALYPSE

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*In spite of admitted limitations in knowledge about the future, a fairly good understanding of the kingdom of Christ as it is portrayed in the last book of the Bible is possible. Though allowance is made for a present aspect of the kingdom, the time of the kingdom in its ultimate form is clearly future. The location of the kingdom is fixed in the earthly sphere rather than a heavenly one. The nature of the kingdom is political and outward in the common understanding of the terms and not merely spiritual and hidden. This is seen from its OT roots, the means by which it is established, and the internal conditions with which it must cope. The span of the kingdom covers the period between Christ's second coming and the creation of the new heavens and new earth—a period of one thousand years on earth as it is now known—and then an unlimited phase after the new creation.*

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Any approach to the predictive portions of the Apocalypse must be with a full sense of limitations imposed on human comprehension of future events, even those spelled out in Scripture in nonapocalyptic terminology (cf. 1 Pet 1:10-11). Yet recognition of the impossibility of comprehending enough details to satisfy human curiosity must be balanced with a determination to know as much as the Inspirer of Scripture intended by way of doctrinal motivation for intelligent Christian life and responsibility. Basic data about the future *are* discernible if care is exercised to avoid foregone conclusions.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Contrary to many current opinions on hermeneutics, preunderstanding is not an element to be factored into the hermeneutical process. It is rather the goal of the interpreter to repress personal bias and to let the text speak for itself.

The text of John's Apocalypse yields satisfactory answers to at least four questions regarding one of its very prominent themes,<sup>2</sup> the kingdom of Christ: What are the time, location, nature, and duration of this kingdom? Too often studies related to the kingdom in Revelation have come only from a limited part of the book, Rev 19:11-20:10 or some comparable smaller context.<sup>3</sup> Answers to the above questions should arise from a consideration of the whole book as the following discussion will propose.

## THE TIME OF THE KINGDOM

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<sup>2</sup>McClain furnishes impressive statistical data that demonstrate the prominence of kingdom-related terminology in Revelation by itemizing the frequency of *urnow* (*thronos*), *basilea* (*basileia*), *dihma* (*diadma*), *sifanow* (*stephanos*), *basileu* (*basileu*), *joysa* (*exousia*), *poimanv* (*poimain*), *krnv* (*krin*), *krsiw* (*krisis*), *krma* (*krima*), *uymw* (*thymos*), and *rg* (*org*) (Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959] 442-43).

<sup>3</sup>E.g., R. Fowler White, "Reexamining the Evidence for Recapitulation in Rev 20:1-10," *WTJ* 51 (1989) 319-36.

John speaks of being a "fellow partaker in the affliction and kingdom and endurance" with his readers (1:9). A common explanation of this expression has been that the present experience of tribulation is what brings in the kingdom (cf. Acts 14:22), but endurance is mentioned to remind the readers that the kingdom in its fullness has not arrived. A struggle yet remains.<sup>4</sup> Because of the governance of the three words by  $\eta \tau$  (*en t*) in 1:9, perhaps a better view of the expression is to see the three as a *hendiatriis*, i.e. the use of three words with only one thought intended. The major element is "affliction" and the other two words characterize that affliction as being not what the world experiences, but what is particularly connected with the kingdom (Acts 14:22; 2 Tim 2:12; Rev 20:6) and one which requires "endurance" or "patient waiting" (Rev 3:2, 3, 19; 3:10; 13:10; 14:12).<sup>5</sup> No matter which explanation is adopted, with little or no dispute "kingdom" in 1:9 refers to the millennial kingdom described more fully in Revelation 20<sup>6</sup> the future kingdom spoken of by Christ (e.g., Luke 12:32; 22:29), Paul (e.g., 1 Thess 2:12; 2 Thess 1:5), and James (e.g., Jas 2:5). Anticipation of this kingdom is an integral part of present Christian experience,<sup>7</sup> as is seen in the mention of "endurance" motivated by an expectation of coming deliverance (cf. "endurance of hope," 1 Thess 1:3).

Yet the kingdom in Revelation is not only future. An isolated reference to the "kingdom" as a collective designation for believers in Christ during the present era occurs in the introductory doxology in 1:6. Such a corporate designation recalls a continuing NT theme traceable to the beginning of Jesus' parabolic teaching regarding the mysteries of the kingdom (cf. Matt 13:1-52). This present kingdom is a theological entity noticed occasionally by other NT writers (e.g., Col 1:13), but the present kingdom pales into minor significance in the rest of the Apocalypse and may be construed as essentially negligible, since it serves only as a foreshadowing of the future kingdom.<sup>8</sup> *Basileia* (*Basileia*, "Kingdom") in the LXX and the NT speaks most often of the Messianic rule and kingdom,<sup>9</sup> an emphasis which most vividly carries

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<sup>4</sup>Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament* (4 vols.; London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1903) 4:553; Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John* (London: Macmillan, 1906) 12; Isbon T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John* (New York: Macmillan, 1919) 443.

<sup>5</sup>E. W. Bullinger, *The Apocalypse or "The Day of the Lord"* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, n.d.) 149.

<sup>6</sup>R. H. Charles, *The Revelation of St. John* (2 vols., ICC; New York: Harper, 1920) 21.

<sup>7</sup>Swete, *Apocalypse* 12.

<sup>8</sup>Fiorenza describes the present and future kingdoms in the Apocalypse this way: "The Kingdom of God, which in the eschatological future will be realized in the entire cosmos, is now through the reality of the Christian community present on earth in the midst of the worldly demonic powers" (Elisabeth Fiorenza, "The Eschatology and Composition of the Apocalypse," *CBQ* 30/4 [Oct 1968] 559-60).

<sup>9</sup>G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T.

over into John's Revelation. It reaches its climax in chapter 20 where the future share of the saints in Christ's earthly rule is expressly described (Rev 20:4; cf. 5:10; 11:15). The song of the elders in 11:16-18 is a proleptic anticipation of the millennial reign (20:6), the wrath of the nations (19:19; 20:8), the wrath of God (19:11-21; 20:10), the judgment of the dead (20:12), and the reward of the faithful (chaps. 21:1`22:5).<sup>10</sup> It expands the comparable announcement of 11:15 that the kingdom of God and of His Christ will have arrived at the point anticipated. This end-time event is not to be confused with the progress of the kingdom of God on earth following Christ's incarnation.<sup>11</sup>

Other indicators of a dominant focus on the kingdom's futurity in the Apocalypse include the following:

(1) To the overcomers in Thyatira and elsewhere, Christ promises a future "authority over the nations" (2:26) based on their future destruction of them "with a rod of iron" (2:27).<sup>12</sup> This is a clear promise of a share in Christ's future rule over the nations (cf. 17:14; 19:14).<sup>13</sup>

(2) To the overcomers in Laodicea and elsewhere, Christ promises the future privilege of sitting with Him on His throne (3:21). As with the rest of the promises to overcomers in Revelation 2-3, this one too points forward to conditions described in Revelation 19-22. Christ's throne is distinguished from the Father's throne in 3:21. The latter is in heaven, and the other is on earth, belonging to Christ as the son of David in the future millennial reign.<sup>14</sup> Because He is David's son, He will inherit David's throne (cf. Ps 122:5; Ezek 43:7; Luke

Clark, 1950), p. 77.

<sup>10</sup>Lee, "Revelation" 4:645.

<sup>11</sup>Cf. Lee, "Revelation" 4:645. It can hardly be accurate to conclude that the resumption of God's direct rule began at the birth of Jesus as Sweet assumes (J. P. M. Sweet, *Revelation* [Pelican; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979] 192).

<sup>12</sup>Some have preferred a milder meaning "shepherd" or "rule" for *poimane* (*poimane*) in 2:27 (William Lee, "The Revelation of St. John," in *The Holy Bible* [F. C. Cook, ed.; London: John Murray, 1881] 4:530; John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* [Chicago: Moody, 1966] 77), but this is hardly strong enough to match the shattering of clay containers mentioned later in the verse (James Moffatt, "The Revelation of St. John the Divine," in *The Expositor's Greek Testament* [W. Robertson Nicoll, ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.] 5:363; George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972] 54). The same verb refers to actual destruction in 19:15 (Charles, *Revelation* 1:76), and in the LXX rendering of Ps 2:9 it translates the Hebrew *š* (*r#a#*) which means to "break" in the sense of "devastate" or "destroy" (BDB, 949; Alford, *Greek Testament* 4:578; R. H. Charles, *The Revelation of St. John* [2 vols., ICC; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920] 1:75-76). Charles points out how the translators of the LXX erred at Ps 2:9, but how John avoided their error by rendering the Hebrew text independently.

<sup>13</sup>Beckwith, *Apocalypse* 470.

<sup>14</sup>Bullinger, *Apocalypse* 209-10; John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1966) 99.

23:42).<sup>15</sup> Some reject this possibility. Bruce has written, "In all his [Jesus's] recorded teaching there is not one reference to the restoration of David's kingdom . . . ,"<sup>16</sup> but on the contrary, the gospels and the rest of the NT are full of references to Christ's Davidic lineage. Christ emphasizes His own Davidic lineage and His role as David's Lord (Matt 22:42-45; Mark 12:35-37; Luke 20:41-44), and Gabriel explicitly states that Jesus will occupy David's throne when He comes in His future glory (Luke 1:32; cf. Dan 7:13-14; Matt 25:31; Acts 2:30; Heb 2:5-8; Rev 20:4). The gospels use "David" thirty-nine times, once calling him "David the king" (Matt 1:6; cf. Acts 13:22; 15:16).

Likewise, from beginning to end, Revelation in particular emphasizes Christ's assumption of the Davidic throne (cf. 1:5, 7; 3:7; 5:5; 22:16). He promises the overcomer a share in this earthly throne.<sup>17</sup>

(3) Revelation 5:10 refers to the future kingdom again: "You have made<sup>18</sup> them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth." The redeemed people of God will not only be a people over whom He reigns, but also share in God's rule in the coming millennial kingdom (cf. 1 Cor 4:8; 6:3).<sup>19</sup> The future tense of *basileusousin* (*basileusousin*) in 5:10 shows this kingdom to be the goal toward which the program of God is advancing (cf. 20:4, 6). The present kingdom serves only as a faint preview of the ultimate kingdom that is future insofar as the Apocalypse is concerned, with only one reference in the entire book pointing to it (1:6). That believers will serve as reigning powers means that they will be the equivalent of kings in this forecast epoch.<sup>20</sup> Spelled out more particularly regarding the millennium in 20:4 and the new heavens and new earth in 22:5, this means their joining with Christ in His millennial and eternal reign

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<sup>15</sup>Bullinger, *Apocalypse* 210.

<sup>16</sup>F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 170.

<sup>17</sup>The opinion based on Acts 2:32-35 that Jesus took His seat on David's throne at His resurrection (I. Howard Marshall, *Commentary on Luke* [NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978] 68) rests on one of several interpretations of the Acts text. A preferable interpretation is that Peter's statement views Christ's resurrection as a necessary step to facilitate His ultimate assumption of the Davidic throne, but does not say He assumed that throne at the time of His resurrection. He is presently at the Father's right hand, not on David's throne, *until* His enemies become His footstool. Then He will ascend David's throne (McClain, *Greatness* 400-1).

<sup>18</sup>Consensus is that  $\rho\omicron\eta\varsigma\alpha\omega$  is a proleptic aorist: "you will have made them" (Swete, *Apocalypse* 81; Beckwith, *Apocalypse* 512-13). As is commonly the case in heavenly songs of this book, this tense anticipates the culmination of the process that is in progress at the point the song is sung. Another possibility could be a constative aorist, in which case it would be a reference to the present kingdom as in 1:6. In this unlikely case, it would show the inseparability of the present kingdom and the future kingdom.

<sup>19</sup>Charles, *Revelation* 1:148; George Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 91-92.

<sup>20</sup>Charles, *Revelation* 1:16-17; Beckwith, *Apocalypse* 429.

following His second advent.

The futurity of the kingdom is a foregone conclusion for John. It was future not only for him, but also for the entire period of the representative churches whom he addresses in the last decade of the first century.<sup>21</sup> Its futurity is expressed in all three types of literature in Revelation the narrative (1:9), the epistolary (2:26-27), and the visionary or apocalyptic (5:10). Raber's peremptory dismissal of futurism in the book's treatment of the kingdom<sup>22</sup> is oblivious to overwhelming evidence in the text. So thoroughly imbedded in John's words is this perspective that Ladd has written, "This is the central theme of the book of Revelation: the establishment of the Kingdom of God on the earth."<sup>23</sup> In light of the prevailing focus of the book, the kingdom can hardly be dated anytime but in the future. If Rev. 20:1-10 is that "ultimate institution" or a part of it, as subsequent discussion in this essay will verify, this fact in essence rules out any theory that Rev 20:1-10 is in any sense a recapitulation of a previously described period before and including the personal return of Christ.<sup>24</sup>

#### THE LOCATION OF THE KINGDOM

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<sup>21</sup>A recently revived theory of dating the Apocalypse in the A.D. 60's seeks to limit the period covered by the Apocalypse to only the very beginning of the church era. This date is suggested in lieu of the traditional date of the A. D. 90's. The early-date preference has characterized one element of the Theonomist movement (i.e., Reconstructionism) (David Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance, an Exposition of the Book of Revelation* [Fort Worth, TX: Dominion, 1987] 4; Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation* [Fort Worth, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989] 1-353). This movement's postmillennial perspective and consequent optimism about Christianity's success in gaining control of secular society necessitates this dating because of Revelation's acknowledged pessimism about society's increasing hostility toward Christians. An early dating of the Apocalypse allows the Reconstructionist to seek fulfillment of its prophecies in the events culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, but leaves him to face an uphill battle forging a convincing argument that the book was written this early. Testimony of early Christianity opposes such an early date by putting the book's composition in the 90's (cf. G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* [HNTC; New York: Harper & Row, 1966] 6; G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Revelation* [NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978] 37-38; Sweet, *Revelation 27*; Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* [NICNT, F. F. Bruce, gen. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977] 36; Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament* [2 vols.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982] 2:250-51). Besides, an early date would create the unlikely probability of John's being side-by-side with Paul in simultaneous personal ministry to the churches of western Asia Minor. According to extant sources, John could not have arrived in this area in time to have written the Apocalypse from there during the 60's.

<sup>22</sup>Rudolph W. Raber, "Revelation 21:1-8," *Int* 40/3 (July 1986) 297.

<sup>23</sup>Ladd, *Revelation* 161. In essence, Fiorenza agrees with Ladd's assessment when she writes, "This main theme of the Apocalypse is shortly but precisely expressed in the hymn in 11,15-19" (Fiorenza, "Eschatology and Composition" 569), since the theme of this hymn is the future establishment of the kingdom of God on earth.

<sup>24</sup>Contra White, "Evidence for Recapitulation" 319-20, 343-44.

The existence of God's kingdom in heaven cannot be questioned. When Jesus offered a model for the disciples' prayer "Your kingdom come . . . as in heaven, [so] also on earth" (Matt 6:10) He verified the existence of such a kingdom in heaven, but in so doing, also gave notice of a future kingdom upon the earth to be modelled after it.<sup>25</sup>

Revelation is not a mythical or other-worldly book. Of eighty-two NT occurrences of *g* (*gē*), the word for "earth," fifty come in Revelation, far more than in any other book. The key throne-room scene in 4:1-11 portrays God as creator of the earth, with the creation motif incorporated into other scenes as well (e.g., 10:5-6; 14:7). The Apocalypse is not other-worldly or dualistic. "The historical this-worldliness of this [i.e., Revelation's] entire schema, including its extremities, should be clearly seen."<sup>26</sup>

The Apocalypse in a number of ways focuses on the earth in its expectation for the future:

(1) The explicit promise to the Thyatiran overcomer cited above (Rev 2:26-27) is the exercise of authority over the nations after crushing them. The locale of the subjugated nations is the earth.

(2) The explicit promise to the Laodicean overcomer cited above is to join Christ in sitting on David's throne on earth (Rev 3:21; cf. 3:7). Only by an unwarranted hermeneutical lapse can David's throne be said to be a heavenly one.<sup>27</sup> David ruled the first time on the earth,

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<sup>25</sup>G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 151-52; idem, "The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus" and "Comments on Craig Bloomberg's Response to 'The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus,'" *JETS* 35/1 (March 1992) 23-24, 37. To understand a kingdom to be established on earth is not contrary to Jesus' statement to Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36a), a statement not intended to designate the location of the kingdom, but rather the origin of it. To debate whether the kingdom referred to in John 18:36 is spatial or temporal (Robert Hodgson, Jr., "The Kingdom of God in the School of St. John," in *The Kingdom of God in Twentieth Century Interpretation* [Wendell Willis, ed.; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1987] 164) misses Jesus' point here. The preposition *k* conveys nothing about time or space. Immediately after those words about His kingdom, Jesus verified that His intended reference was to the source of the kingdom by adding "My kingdom is not *from this place* (*nteuēn*)" (John 18:36b). The consummated kingdom of Christ *on earth* was the constant anticipation of early Christians (Mounce, *Revelation* 358; Donald K. Campbell, "The Church in God's Prophetic Program," in *Essays in Honor of J. Dwight Pentecost* [ed. by Stanley D. Toussaint and Charles H. Dyer; Chicago: Moody, 1986] 155).

<sup>26</sup>M. Eugene Boring, "The Theology of Revelation: 'The Lord Our God the Almighty Reigns,'" *Int* 40/3 [July 1986] 268).

<sup>27</sup>Herbert W. Bateman IV ("Psalm 110:1 and the New Testament," *BSac* 149/596 [October-December 1992] 438-53) apparently locates the Davidic throne in heaven on the basis the words of the LORD in Ps 110:1, "Sit at My right hand. . . ." Elliott E. Johnson ("Hermeneutical Principles and the Interpretation of Psalm 110," *BSac* 149/596 [October-December 1992] 428-37) details the weaknesses of this conclusion

and His descendant will do so in the same place in the future (2 Sam 7:12-16).

(3) The song of four living beings and twenty-four elders in 5:10 explicitly verifies that the redeemed "will reign *upon the earth*." Words could hardly be plainer regarding the place of this future rule.

(4) According to the song of the heavenly voices and the twenty-four elders in 11:15-18, the future rule of God with His Christ will have as its subjects the nations, whose habitat is planet earth.

(5) The scene of the final battle resulting in the establishment of Christ's future kingdom is an earthly one. In 16:12 the drying up of the great river Euphrates, a specific geographical spot in this world, has a part in preparing the way for the kings from the East to be involved in this battle. Whether "east" means the territory currently known as Iraq and Iran or areas of the Far East with their heavy population, these are spatial designations in this world as currently known. Nor is it necessary to determine whether these kings from the East are distinct from or included among the kings of the whole earth in 16:14. The fact remains that *okoumnh (oikoumen)* (16:14) throughout Revelation denotes this world order as presently identified (cf. 3:10; 12:9).

Perhaps further evidence of the earthly location of the kingdom is unnecessary. An additional note regarding the kingdom of Christ extending into the new creation (22:5) must complete the picture, however. The passing of the old heaven and earth are a matter of record in 20:11 and the introduction of a new heaven and earth comes in 21:1. The presence of the throne of God and of the Lamb in this new order (22:3) dictates that the kingdom carry over into the new conditions also. Further confirmation of this extension is the participation of God's servants in His eternal reign in the new creation (22:5).

## THE NATURE OF THE KINGDOM

The nature of the future kingdom on the earth according to the Apocalypse is discernible by several means: from the OT roots of the kingdom, from the means by which the kingdom is established, and from internal conditions with which it must cope.<sup>28</sup>

### *OT Roots of the Kingdom*

Revelation never quotes directly from the OT, but it has many

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by pointing out distinctions between God's heavenly throne and David's earthly throne.

<sup>28</sup>In his discussion of the nature of the kingdom in the Apocalypse, McClain uses Rev 20:4, 6 to conclude that the three governmental functions in the kingdom will be judicial, sacerdotal, and regal (McClain, *Greatness* 497).



allusions and much imagery that are thoroughly permeated with OT thought. Of the 404 verses in the book, 278 contain about 550 allusions to the Jewish Scriptures.<sup>29</sup> An investigation of several key OT passages provides insight regarding the nature of the kingdom in Revelation.

Of particular importance are the words

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<sup>29</sup>Swete, *Apocalypse* cxl; McClain, *Greatness* 443.