

# The Kingdom of God in the Old Testament

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Rather than start with the kingdom of God in the Old Testament, it seems appropriate first to direct our attention to the King of that kingdom. For the Old Testament, as the Bible as whole, has a primary interest in relationships, and, most importantly, the relationship between human beings and God.

## Yahweh, The King of the Kingdom

Yahweh is presented in the Old Testament as King. He is identified explicitly as such. Appropriately enough the term *melek* [מֶלֶךְ] used of Yahweh is first recorded as in the mouth of the foreign and false prophet, Balaam. Compelled by Yahweh to bless those whom, for money, he wished to curse, he pronounces:

No misfortune is seen in Jacob,  
no misery observed in Israel.  
Yahweh their God is with them;  
the shout of *the King* [מֶלֶךְ] is among them. (Numbers 23:21)<sup>46</sup>

More than twenty times the Psalm designate Yahweh as *melek* [מֶלֶךְ], as king.

Yahweh is *King* for ever and ever;  
the nations will perish from his land. (Psalm 10:16)<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> All references are from the New International Version except that the tetragrammaton is usually translated as Yahweh, and “LORD Almighty” as “:Yahweh of Armies”.

In Psalm 48 Jerusalem is designated as the “city of the Great King”. (Psalm 48:2) In Psalm 145 the Psalmist confesses:

I will exalt you, my God *the King*;  
I will praise your name for ever and ever. (Psalm 145:1)

### ***Yahweh as “my/our King”***

Seven times in the Psalms<sup>48</sup> a possessive pronoun, usually the first person singular,<sup>49, 50</sup> is attached to the title “King”, thereby making explicit the relationship between the worshipper and Yahweh almost stated in Psalm 145.

Listen to my cry for help,  
*my King* and my God,  
for to you I pray. (Psalm 5:2)

You are *my King* and my God,  
who decrees victories for Jacob. (Psalm 44:4)

But you, O God, are *my King* from of old;  
you bring salvation upon the earth. (Psalm 74:12)

Twice a plural is used:

Sing praises to God, sing praises;  
sing praises to *our King*, sing praises. (Psalm 47:6)

Let Israel rejoice in their Maker;  
let the people of Zion be glad in *their King*. (Psalm 149:2)

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<sup>47</sup> The verse numbering of the Psalms follows the English version where it differs from the Hebrew.

<sup>48</sup> Yahweh is designated as King in the following Psalms: 5:2; 10:16; 24:7, 8, 9, 10x2; 29:10; 44:4; 47:2, 6, 7; 48:2; 68:24; 74:12; 84:3; 95:3; 98:6; 99:4; 145:1; 149:2.

<sup>49</sup> In some cases the first person singular pronoun may be the “communal use of the singular pronoun.” (*NIV Study Bible* on Psalm 74:12)

<sup>50</sup> A personal pronoun is attached to the noun in the following Psalms: 5:2; 44:4; 47:6 (1<sup>st</sup> pl.); 68:24; 74:12; 84:3; 149:2 (3<sup>rd</sup> pl.)

The significance of the possessive pronouns will be considered below. Here we note that in the Psalms, as with Balaam, Yahweh is designated as *melek* [מֶלֶךְ], King.

### ***Yahweh Ruling [mlk]***

As well as being designated *melek* [מֶלֶךְ] Yahweh's kingship is presented variously. He is said to rule [mlk], the earliest confession of this appropriately at the time of that great Old Testament salvation event, the exodus. Concluding Moses' song, he and the Israelites, after contemplating the miraculous destruction of their pursuers as well as their own expected placement, by Yahweh's powerful arm, in the Promised Land, confessed or rather celebrated:

Yahweh will *reign* for ever and ever. (Exodus 15:18)

Again the Psalms pick up the theme, using the verb form in six Psalms.<sup>51</sup> For example:

God *reigns* over the nations;

God is seated on his holy throne. (Psalm 47:8)

Say among the nations, "Yahweh *reigns*."

The world is firmly established, it cannot be moved;  
he will judge the peoples with equity. (Psalm 96:10)

Yahweh *reigns* forever,

your God, O Zion, for all generations.

Praise Yahweh. (Psalm 146:10)

Clearly Yahweh is presented in the Old Testament as King.

### ***Yahweh's Throne, Tabernacle/Temple.***

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<sup>51</sup> Psalms 47:8; 93:1; 96:10; 97:1; 99:1; 146:10.

Of course, even where the terms “king” (*meleḵ* [מֶלֶךְ]) and “to rule” ([*mlk*]) are not used, Yahweh is shown to be King. In Micaiah’s vision Yahweh is seen presiding over his heavenly council as King. That independent prophet recounts:

I saw Yahweh sitting on his *throne* with all the host of heaven standing around him on his right and on his left. (1 Kings 22:19)

Similarly Isaiah in his call vision:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. (Isaiah 6:1)

So Yahweh is shown to be King by his position and role. So Psalm 99 tells us:

Yahweh reigns,  
let the nations tremble;  
he sits *enthroned between the cherubim*,  
let the earth shake. (Psalm 99:1)

This recalling of Yahweh’s position of enthronement, “between the cherubim,” directs our attention to the ark of the covenant on which were the models of the cherubim and where Yahweh said he would meet with Moses to give him commands, as a king would from his throne. So the tabernacle, where the ark was housed, and later the temple, was the earthly residence of the heavenly King. Hence Paul R. Williamson notes: “The tabernacle was set up in the middle of the Israelite encampment – traditionally in the ancient Near East the place of the king’s tent. Moreover, when on the move, the ark (located in the Holy of Holies) led the way, analogous to a Near Eastern king leading his army into battle.”<sup>52</sup>

So ark, tabernacle and, later, temple, are further indicators that Yahweh is King. Whenever we read of them the concept of Yahweh’s kingship should not be far from our minds.

So Yahweh is the Great King of the kingdom. He is designated as such by noun and verb. He is shown to be such in vision, tabernacle and temple.

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<sup>52</sup> Paul R. Williams, *Sealed with an Oath* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 2007), 104.

Yahweh is the Great King. But then we might be led to ask, What sort of King is Yahweh?

### *Yahweh's absolute power*

In a democracy we don't understand the concept of absolute power. If we don't like a ruler we vote him or her out of power at the next election. If the government is formed in the lower house often, if not usually, there is an upper house of review to keep the government of the day in check. The power of the government is limited by the constitution. Its legislation can be appealed against should it be deemed unconstitutional and the courts might strike it down. Even the lower courts do not have absolute power. One convicted of a crime may appeal and eventually be acquitted. The power of our rulers has checks and balances. Yet that was not so in the ancient Near East, or, we might add, even in parts of the Middle East today.

Such limitations were foreign to many an ancient Near Eastern king. He had absolute power. Expectations of such kingship are seen in many of the Proverbs. So,

A king's wrath is a messenger of death,  
but a wise man will appease it. (Proverbs 16:14)

A king's wrath is like the roar of a lion;  
he who angers him forfeits his life. (Proverbs 20:2)

Or more positively:

A king's rage is like the roar of a lion,  
but his favor is like dew on the grass. (Proverbs 19:12)

In the ancient Near East, the world of the Old Testament, the king had power of life and death. Such power went with the territory, the office, the role – and note, there was no court of appeal, no constraining constitution. The king's word was law.

It should be no surprise, with such a background, to see Yahweh's kingly power being presented in a similar way. Yahweh might use his power in anger, justified anger, as his would always be. If the human king had such power how much more Yahweh? And if the human king could exercise his

power in anger so, we would expect, could Yahweh – and on a larger scale. So Jeremiah confesses:

But Yahweh is the true God;  
    he is the living God, the eternal King.  
When he is angry, the earth trembles;  
    the nations cannot endure his wrath. (Jeremiah 10:10)

Ezekiel also, prophesying of the return from the exile:

As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Yahweh, I will rule over you with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with outpoured wrath. (Ezekiel 20:33)

Using the language of judging, the prerogative of the king, the Asaphic psalmist warns of such power of Yahweh.

But it is God who judges:  
    He brings one down, he exalts another.  
In the hand of Yahweh is a cup  
    full of foaming wine mixed with spices;  
he pours it out, and all the wicked of the earth  
    drink it down to its very dregs. (Psalm 75:7-8)

Yahweh, as King, had absolute power. This, in the ancient Near Eastern context, was an expectation and implication of him being designated King. Just as the human king, Yahweh could exercise this power in anger, though, with Yahweh, always justified and righteous anger. The result was severe consequences for those against whom it was directed.

On the other hand Yahweh might use his power beneficently. It was expected that a king's absolute power would be used for the good of his subjects.

When a king's face brightens, it means life;  
    his favor is like a rain cloud in spring. (Proverbs 16:15)

Kings should rule with justice, noting especially the needy, as king Lemuel's mother instructed him.

Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves,  
    for the rights of all who are destitute.

Speak up and judge fairly;  
defend the rights of the poor and needy. (Proverbs 31:8-9)

Again, if such beneficent use of power was expected of the human king so also of Yahweh. As King over his people he was expected to use his power for their protection.

For Yahweh is our judge,  
Yahweh is our lawgiver,  
Yahweh is our king;  
it is he who will save us. (Isaiah 33:22)

This positive and just use of Yahweh's power, then, is celebrated.

The King is mighty, he loves justice –  
you have established equity;  
in Jacob you have done  
what is just and right.  
Exalt Yahweh our God  
and worship at his footstool  
he is holy. (Psalm 99:4-5)

So Yahweh as King could and would exercise his absolute power beneficently and savingly. For Yahweh was the all-powerful King.

Yahweh, as a powerful King had armies at his disposal. In his vision in the temple Isaiah sees the King. Clear signs of his royalty are evident. He is seated on a throne. He has attendants standing ready to serve. Isaiah hears their reverent call:

Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty;  
the whole earth is full of his glory. (Isaiah 6:3)

The rendering of the *NIV* "LORD God Almighty" is probably correct in principle. But it masks in the abstract the more powerful and suggestive "Jehovah/Yahweh of hosts". Of course we are familiar with the common practice of rendering the tetragrammaton YHWH by LORD (using upper case) so that the personal covenant name of God is replaced with an impersonal title. But maybe, if we use the *NIV* as many do, we might miss the implications of the title "Yahweh of hosts" or "Yahweh of Armies" – and its connotations for kingship, and the power associated with it.

The *NIV Study Bible* comments at 1 Samuel 1:3, where the designation is first used:

The Hebrew term for “host(s)” can refer to (1) human armies (Ex 7:4; Ps 4:9); (2) the celestial bodies such as the sun, moon and stars (Ge 2:11; Dt 4:19; Isa 40:26); or (3) the heavenly creatures such as angels (Jos 5:14; 1 Ki 2:19; Ps 148:2). The title, “the LORD of hosts,” is perhaps best understood as a general reference to the sovereignty of God over all powers in the universe.... In the account of the establishment of kingship in Israel it became particularly appropriate as a reference to God as the God of armies – both of the heavenly army (Dt 33:2; Jos 5:14; Ps 68:17; Hab 3:8) and of the army of Israel (1 Sa 17:45).<sup>53</sup>

So Yahweh had at his disposal the armies of heaven, as well as the army of Israel. As Psalm 103 points out, they are “his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding, who obey his word.” (v. 20) They are made visible to the servant as a protective force around Elisha as “horses and chariots of fire.” (2 Kings 6:17) The Stranger who meets Joshua before the battle of Jericho identifies himself as “commander of the army of Yahweh.” (Joshua 5:14) So Yahweh the King is Yahweh of Armies – not least of all the angelic Armies that fight for and protect his people. As such he is to be celebrated.

Who is this King of glory?

Yahweh strong and mighty,

Yahweh mighty in battle....

Who is he, this King of glory?

Yahweh of Armies –

he is the King of glory. *Selah* (Psalm 24:8, 10)

### ***Yahweh approachable***

In Israel citizens had access to their king – at least to those kings who acted fairly towards their subjects. Citizens had access to the king so that they might obtain justice and have wrongs righted. The wise woman of Tekoa, at Joab’s bidding, brought her supposed unresolved and pressing problem to David with the cry, “Help me, O king.” (2 Samuel 14:4) She was heard. As a citizen in distress she had access to the king who had the power to settle

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<sup>53</sup> *The NIV Study Bible*, gen. ed. Kenneth Barker (Grand Rapids; Zondervan, 1995), 372.



her case. Also Absalom seeks this royal position of problem-solver and justice-dispenser. "If only I were appointed judge in the land! Then everyone who has a complaint or case could come to me and I would see that he gets justice." (2 Samuel 15:4) The way to justice was by access to the king. Two prostitutes can approach Solomon to settle their dispute. (1 Kings 3:16-28) They also had access to the king. Later, in the northern kingdom of Israel, "the woman whose son Elisha had brought back to life came to beg the king for her house and land." (2 Kings 8:5) She too had access to the king.

Similarly Yahweh as King also is approachable. His subjects have access to him. If the human king could solve problems and dispense justice in his kingdom, how much more Yahweh in his? This is the nature of prayer. Prayer is not therapy. Prayer is not self-help. Prayer is coming before the King, before Yahweh, the ultimate, absolute and all-powerful King and asking him to solve problems in his kingdom – to solve problems for his subjects.

Give ear to my words, O Yahweh,  
consider my sighing.  
Listen to my cry for help,  
my King and my God,  
for to you I pray. (Psalm 5:1-2)

You are my King and my God,  
who decrees victories for Jacob....  
Awake, O Lord! Why do you sleep?  
Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever....  
Rise up and help us;  
redeem us because of your unfailing love. (Psalm 44:4, 23, 26)

But you, O God, are my king from of old;  
you bring salvation upon the earth....  
Rise up, O God, and defend your cause;  
remember how fools mock you all day long.  
Do not ignore the clamor of your adversaries,  
the uproar of your enemies, which rises continually. (Psalm  
74:12, 22-23)

Now only Psalms where Yahweh's kingship is explicit have been used in the above examples of his approachableness as King. Yet it should be maintained that Yahweh's kingship is the understood context of all appeals

to him. He is the all-powerful King. He can dispose of things in his kingdom as he pleases. His subjects can come before the throne and plead for him to act on their behalf. And he, the King, is able and willing to help them.

### *So What?*

If Yahweh is such a King what response or responses were, and are, appropriate?

First, Yahweh was to be entreated, prayed to, appealed to, asked for help and the righting of wrongs. This we have clearly seen.

Second, behind this was the fact that Yahweh was to be trusted. Why? Because he is constantly faithful to his covenant relationship with his people.

I Yahweh do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. (Malachi 3:6)

So, in the face of the Assyrian threat, Isaiah can proclaim:

For Yahweh is our judge,  
Yahweh is our lawgiver,  
Yahweh is our king;  
it is he who will save us. (Isaiah 33:22)

Yahweh is the King who can always be trusted to act on behalf of his subjects.

Third, Yahweh, the King, was to be praised. Such praise was not just the formal adulation associated with artificial pomp. Yahweh was to be praised out of recognition of who he was, and that he had done significant, marvelous things and that he had done these for and on behalf of his subjects. So Jeremiah:

No one is like you, O Yahweh;  
you are great,  
and your name is mighty in power.  
Who should not revere you,  
O King of the nations?

This is your due.  
Among all the wise men of the nations  
and in all their kingdoms,  
there is no one like you....  
But Yahweh is the true God;  
he is the living God, the eternal King.  
When he is angry, the earth trembles;  
the nations cannot endure his wrath. (Jeremiah 10:6, 7, 10)

Also the Psalmist:

I will exalt you, my God the King;  
I will praise your name for ever and ever.  
Every day I will praise you  
and extol your name for ever and ever.  
Great is the LORD and most worthy of praise;  
his greatness no one can fathom.  
One generation will commend your works to another;  
they will tell of your mighty acts.  
They will speak of the glorious splendor of your majesty,  
and I will meditate on your wonderful works.  
They will tell of the power of your awesome works,  
and I will proclaim your great deeds.  
They will celebrate your abundant goodness  
and joyfully sing of your righteousness. (Psalm 145:1-7)

Yes, Yahweh was and is to be praised for who he is – and for what he has done, and does, for his subjects. Without their King's actions on their behalf they would be nothing and worse than nothing.

But lastly, Yahweh was to be owned. The Old Testament presents Yahweh as a King with subjects. Those subjects were to recognize him as their King and themselves as his people. They were not to contemplate Yahweh's person and works disinterestedly. He was *their* God. He was *their* King. They were *his* people and subjects. So in praise:

I will exalt you, *my* God the King.... (Psalm 145:1)

Also in petition:

Listen to my cry for help, *my* King and *my* God, for to you I pray.  
(Psalm 5:2)

In confession:

You are *my* King and *my* God  
Who decrees victories for Jacob. (Psalm 44:4)

In longing for fellowship:

Even the sparrow has found a home,  
and the swallow a nest for herself,  
where she may have her young—  
a place near your altar,  
O Yahweh of Armies, *my* King and *my* God. (Psalm 84:3)

And in exuberant corporate celebration:

Sing praises to God, sing praises;  
sing praises to *our* King, sing praises. (Psalm 47:6)

All this leaves us with the challenge and encouragement: Will we serve Yahweh, the Great King? Will we preach Yahweh, the Great King?

### **The Kingdom of Yahweh the Great King:**

We now turn to the kingdom of Yahweh. What does the Old Testament say of it? What is its character? What are its aspects? What will be its duration?

#### ***The Universal Extent of Yahweh's Kingdom***

Over what was Yahweh King? What is the extent of his reign and realm?

Rightly the Jews bless God: *Barukh 'atah 'adoi 'eloheinu melek ha'olam*. "Blessed are you, O LORD our God, King of the universe." King of the universe. Yahweh's kingdom is universal. Therefore Yahweh must be King over the nations. Hence Jeremiah confesses:

Who should not revere you, O King of the nations? (Jeremiah 10:7)

Yahweh is King of the world. The sons of Korah sing:

How awesome is Yahweh Most High, the great King over all the earth! (Psalm 47:2)

The seraphs' cry is, "Holy, holy, holy is Yahweh of Armies; the whole earth is full of his glory." (Isaiah 6:3)

Yahweh is King of the universe:

For the LORD is the great God,  
the great King above all gods. (Psalm 95:3)

The *NIV Study Bible*, commenting on this verse, explains:

“[T]here is no corner of the universe that is not in his hand. The ancient pagan world had different gods for different peoples, different geographical areas, different cosmic regions... and different aspects of life....”<sup>54</sup>

Hence, since Yahweh is the Great King above *all* gods, he is King of the universe. He is *melekh ha'olam*, King of the universe.

### ***The Eternal Duration of Yahweh's Kingdom***

The kingdoms of this world rise and fall. The Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek and Roman. All gone. So too the Islamic Empire of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, stretching from India in mid-Asia to Western Europe and Spain. Or the Mongol Empire of the 13<sup>th</sup> century spreading right across the vast continent of Asia from the Korean peninsula to Asia Minor. And the British Empire, on which the 19<sup>th</sup> century sun never set, has in our life times disintegrated and shrunk to a mere shadow of its former glory.

Not so with Yahweh's kingdom. It did not rise on the ruins of a previous empire.

Your throne was established long ago;  
you are from all eternity. (Psalm 93:2)

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<sup>54</sup> *NIV Study Bible*, 880.  
*Vox Reformata*, 2007

Nor will it be superseded by another. Listen to God's people singing at the Red Sea.

Yahweh will reign for ever and ever. (Exodus 15:18)

This they confirm in their temple liturgy.

Yahweh reigns forever,  
your God, O Zion, for all generations.  
Praise Yahweh. (Psalm 146:10)

Yahweh's kingdom is an eternal kingdom

## **The Two Aspects of Yahweh's Kingdom**

It is clear that Yahweh rules over all that there is – earth and heaven. “Blessed are you O LORD our God, King of the Universe.” Again in Psalm 99:

Yahweh reigns,  
let the nations tremble;  
he sits enthroned between the cherubim,  
let the earth shake.  
Great is Yahweh in Zion;  
he is exalted over all the nations. (Psalm 99:1-2)

He rules over all that there is.

Yahweh has established his throne in heaven,  
and his kingdom rules over all. (Psalm 103:19)

Yet in the Old Testament there are indications that Yahweh's kingdom is yet to come; that it, in some way, is still future. Looking at a future situation when the fortunes of Israel and Edom would be reversed, Obadiah prophesies:

Deliverers will go up on Mount Zion  
to govern the mountains of Esau.  
And the kingdom *will be* Yahweh's. (Obadiah 1:21)

Isaiah also, setting the future context with an eschatological formula, pronounces:

In that day....  
The moon will be abashed, the sun ashamed;  
    for Yahweh of Armies *will reign*  
on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem,  
    and before its elders, gloriously. (Isaiah 24:21, 23)

Zechariah, similarly, to discouraged returnees from exile:

Yahweh *will be king* over the whole earth. On that day there will be one Yahweh, and his name the only name. (Zechariah 14:9)

All this suggests that in Old Testament times, in some way, Yahweh's kingdom, kingship or rule was less than complete. How is the universal rule of Yahweh and the incompleteness of his rule to be put together?

D. A. Carson, in his volume on the Sermon on the Mount, makes the distinction between these two aspects of God's kingdom in this way: "Indeed, in the universal sense, God's kingdom – his reign – is eternal and all embracing. No one and nothing can escape from it...." This we have seen in the Old Testament. Yahweh does rule over all that there is. But Carson continues: [T]he kingdom of heaven<sup>55</sup> in [the] narrower sense is that exercise of God's sovereignty which bears directly on his saving purposes."<sup>56</sup>

Yes, there is the kingdom in its universal sense and also in its narrower sense. There are two aspects to Yahweh's kingdom. We see this narrow sense also in the Old Testament. A distinction can be made between Yahweh's universal rule over all:

Great is Yahweh in Zion;  
    he is exalted *over all the nations*.  
Let them praise your great and awesome name –  
    he is holy.

and his narrower saving rule over his people:

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<sup>55</sup> I.e. the kingdom of Yahweh, in Old Testament terms.

<sup>56</sup> D. A. Carson, *Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World* (Toronto: Global Christian Publishers, 1999), 12.

The King is mighty, he loves justice –  
you have established equity;  
*in Jacob* you have done  
what is just and right. (Psalm 99:2-4)

And Micah, aware of the reality in which he lives, confesses:

All the nations may walk  
in the name of their gods;  
we will walk in the name of Yahweh  
our God for ever and ever. (Micah 4:5)

So there is a narrower, or perhaps better, a more specific sense of Yahweh's rule which, in Old Testament times, is narrower than his universal rule. This more specific sense of kingdom has to do with his saving purposes. It has to do with a relationship established by Yahweh with a specific group of people – Abraham's offspring, the children of Israel. In Goldsworthy's terms the kingdom of God, in its more specific sense, is God's people, in God's place, under God's rule.<sup>57</sup> In this sense the kingdom of God in the Old Testament is narrower than his universal rule.

### ***The Prophesied Fullness of Yahweh's Kingdom***

It is clear, then, that in the Old Testament the kingdom of Yahweh, in its sense of God's people, in God's place, under God's rule was narrower than his universal rule. Yet we hear in the prophets of a future situation where the general and the specific, the wider and the narrower aspects of Yahweh's kingdom, will be coextensive. Yes, says Zechariah, "Yahweh will be king over the whole earth." (Zechariah 14:9) Also Micah's commitment to follow Yahweh regardless of the nations' present disregard for Yahweh does not flow from demoralized despair but rather from confident hope. For he has just seen something of the future shape of Yahweh's future kingdom. "In the last days," he has just said,

In the last days  
the mountain of Yahweh's temple will be established  
as chief among the mountains;  
it will be raised above the hills,

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<sup>57</sup> Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1981), 47



and peoples will stream to it.

Many nations will come and say,  
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of Yahweh,  
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 Yahweh 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.  
Every man will sit under his own vine  
and under his own fig tree,  
and no one will make them afraid,  
for Yahweh of Armies has spoken. (Micah 4:1-4)

So we have the nations no longer rebellious but seeking out Yahweh, wanting to submit to the law of his kingdom; an unprecedented peace amongst the nations as Yahweh's just rule is exercised and accepted; and also a corresponding peace and provision for the citizens of the kingdom. As Zephaniah announces:

Then will I purify the lips of the peoples,  
that all of them may call on the name of Yahweh  
and serve him shoulder to shoulder. (Zephaniah 3:9)

In the Old Testament then there is a prophesied fullness for Yahweh's kingdom – prophesied, hoped for, yet to come. But, at the end of the Old Testament, we are left with the question: When will this be?

### ***The Law of Yahweh's Kingdom***

Every kingdom has principles or laws by which the behaviour within is directed and regulated. In the Old Testament Yahweh, the Great King over his people Israel, set down laws to direct their living – to direct it for living in proper relationship with him, and for living in proper relationship with one another. These laws, as we all know, are found in the Pentateuch, the

Torah, especially in Exodus 20-23, Leviticus, parts of Numbers and in Deuteronomy.

Old Testament laws, the laws of Yahweh's kingdom, cover a wide range of issues: property rights, slavery, sexual relationships, agricultural practices, worship, education, homicide and violence, family relationships, occupational health and safety, theft, compensation, money lending, false witness, cruelty to animals, blasphemy, and others. Not only is this list not exhaustive, but the laws themselves cover less than every possible situation in the areas to which they belong. Rather they encapsulate principles that could and should have been applied more widely. Yahweh's kingdom law was for directing the lives of his people. Life was to be lived, guided by his law.

There is neither time nor space to explore the laws of the Pentateuch and their Old Testament applications, let alone any contemporary relevance. But we can ask, Are there broader and more basic principles behind the laws, principles which were to direct behaviour in Yahweh's kingdom, especially in the relationships of the citizens of that kingdom with one another? And such there are. They are justice and righteousness.

### *Characteristics of Yahweh*

Justice and righteousness are characteristics of Yahweh himself.

The King is mighty, he loves *justice*—  
you have established equity;  
in Jacob you have done  
what is *just* and *right*. (Psalm 99:4)

Or again:

Clouds and thick darkness surround him;  
*righteousness* and *justice* are the foundation of his throne.  
(Psalm 97:2)

Yahweh's actions are just and right. The basis of Yahweh's rule is justice and righteousness. Naturally these are the principles for living in Yahweh's kingdom.

### *Principles for kingdom citizens*

Justice and righteousness were the principles to direct the behaviour of the citizens of Yahweh's kingdom. From the time of Abraham this had been explicit. Before judging Sodom, where injustice and unrighteousness were characteristic, Yahweh speaks of Abraham's offspring, just promised to a doubting Sarah. Yahweh had chosen Abraham, he said, "so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of Yahweh by doing what is *right* and *just*, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him." (Genesis 18:19)

So the prophets, the spokesmen of the Great King, called God's people to this very standard.

But let *justice* roll on like a river,  
*righteousness* like a never-failing stream! (Amos 5:24)

At times the focus was on the leaders.

'Hear the word of Yahweh, O king of Judah, you who sit on David's throne – you, your officials and your people who come through these gates. This is what Yahweh says: Do what is *just* and *right*. (Jeremiah 22:2-3)

The same message was conveyed to the returned exiles, through Zechariah.

"This is what Yahweh of Armies says: 'Administer true *justice*; show mercy and compassion to one another. (Zechariah 7:9)

Justice and righteousness were the principles for the behaviour of Abraham's offspring, God's people and their leaders, whatever their circumstances.

### *Definitions of Justice and Righteousness*

What are justice and righteousness? What do they look like "on the ground"? Hubbard puts it this way:

The coupling of *justice*... and *righteousness*... is repeated by Amos... as the best summary available to define the covenant responsibilities of God's people. Just because justice... and righteousness... are essential activities of Yahweh, they must become prime duties of his people, especially the leaders.... Justice and righteousness in the Old Testament carry us beyond strict adherence

to law, as central as law is.... Both terms have to do with covenantal responsibilities and are close to being synonyms, especially when they are paired.... If there are shades of difference to be discerned, *justice* puts some slight emphasis on establishing and preserving order in society by righting wrongs and punishing wrong doers, while *righteousness* emphasizes the relationships that covenantal society entails and insists that each partner in the covenant do all that is necessary to keep the covenant working right.<sup>58</sup>

So justice is directed at preserving order; righteousness, at maintaining relationships. Also in Yahweh's kingdom none was to be left out of experiencing the benefits of justice and righteousness. As Hubbard points out: "Both actions centre in action on behalf of the poor, the underrepresented and the oppressed...."<sup>59</sup>

So it was with Yahweh. His kingly justice and righteousness extended to the lowest in his kingdom.

He upholds the cause of the oppressed  
and gives food to the hungry.  
Yahweh sets prisoners free,  
Yahweh gives sight to the blind,  
Yahweh lifts up those who are bowed down,  
Yahweh loves the righteous.  
Yahweh watches over the alien  
and sustains the fatherless and the widow,  
but he frustrates the ways of the wicked. (Psalm 146:7-9)

Yahweh, the Great King, acts with justice and righteousness – for all. So it should have been also with the human ruler over Yahweh's people. He too should have ensured justice and righteousness of the weak.

One of the few kings of whom this was true was the godly Josiah. Jeremiah, in castigating the apostate Jehoiakim, points to Josiah his father.

"Does it make you a king  
to have more and more cedar?  
Did not your father have food and drink?"

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<sup>58</sup> David Allan Hubbard, *Joel and Amos* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1989), 167-68.

<sup>59</sup> Hubbard, *Joel and Amos*, 168.

He did what was right and just,  
so all went well with him.  
He defended the cause of the poor and needy,  
and so all went well.  
Is that not what it means to know me?"  
declares Yahweh. (Jeremiah 22:15-16)

Josiah cared for the poor and needy. Josiah acted with justice and righteousness even for, especially for the weakest. (And might we not add, that this is what people in societies around the world need still today – to be dealt with justly and righteously – especially the poor, the oppressed and the disenfranchised?)

So we see the principles for behaviour in Yahweh's kingdom, at least the behaviour between citizens of that kingdom. They are summed up in the terms justice and righteousness. Perhaps we could be even more concise and see them encapsulated in the words of the second great commandment, "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Leviticus 19:18)

### *Old Testament Failure and Future Hope.*

This is how the Old Testament citizens of Yahweh's kingdom were to live – but they did not. Some did, at times. But as a whole Yahweh's Old Testament people, Abraham's offspring, did not live as he wanted. A change was needed. And a change, a future change, was prophesied. For Yahweh's kingdom, in its specific, narrower sense – God's people, in God's place, under God's rule, and willingly and happily obeying that rule – would not fail to be realized. So we hear the needed promise.

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. (Ezekiel 36:26-27)

So Yahweh spoke through the exilic prophet Ezekiel. And, of course, there are the words of his contemporary, Jeremiah.

"The time is coming," declares Yahweh,  
"when I will make a new covenant  
with the house of Israel  
and with the house of Judah....  
"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 neighbour,  
or a man his brother, saying, 'Know Yahweh,'  
because they will all know me,  
from the least of them to the greatest,"

declares Yahweh.

"For I will forgive their wickedness  
and will remember their sins no more." (Jeremiah 31:31-34)

Yet with the Old Testament we are left with the burning question, When will this be?

### **Yahweh's Representative King for his Kingdom:**

We come now to one last but most significant feature of the kingdom of God, Yahweh's kingdom, in the Old Testament – Yahweh's representative king. In much of the Old Testament Yahweh, the Great King, exercised his rule through a representative human king. What was this king to be like?

First, he was to be from Abraham's family. This had been foreshadowed in Genesis. At first Yahweh spoke in general terms. To Abraham he said: "I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you...." (Genesis 17:6) Similarly, with respect to Sarah, he promised: "I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her." (Genesis 17:16) Yahweh's representative king was to be from Abraham's family.

Second, this representative king was to be from the tribe of Judah. Jacob, on his deathbed, prophesied:

The scepter will not depart from Judah,  
nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,  
until he comes to whom it belongs  
and the obedience of the nations is his. (Genesis 49:10)

Third, Yahweh's representative king was ultimately to defeat the enemies of Yahweh's people. Hear the Yahweh-compelled Balaam:

I see him, but not now;  
    I behold him, but not near.  
A star will come out of Jacob;  
    a scepter will rise out of Israel.  
He will crush the foreheads of Moab,  
    the skulls of all the sons of Sheth.  
Edom will be conquered;  
    Seir, his enemy, will be conquered,  
    but Israel will grow strong.  
A ruler will come out of Jacob  
    and destroy the survivors of the city. (Numbers 24:17-19)

Yahweh's king would defeat the enemies of Yahweh's people.

Fourth, Yahweh's king was to be chosen by and obedient to Yahweh. The characteristics of such a king are set out in Deuteronomy 17. Here we are told that the king must be Yahweh chosen (v. 15). He must be from amongst Yahweh's people (v. 15). He must not multiply cavalry, concubines or cash (vv. 16-17). Above all he must write for himself a copy of Yahweh's law, and to read it and so learn to fear Yahweh, to obey him and remain humble (vv. 18-20).

How vividly we see this last and most essential characteristic displayed in the contrast between Saul and David. Both were chosen by Yahweh. Both had the characteristics of leadership demonstrated in the judges who preceded them – Spirit empowered and victorious in battle against the enemies of Yahweh's people. But there was one difference. When the pressure was on, the chips were down, when push came to shove, Saul disobeyed Yahweh. He sacrificed instead of waiting; he saved alive when he should have destroyed. So the prophet Samuel, Yahweh's official mouthpiece, announces:

"You acted foolishly.... You have not kept the command Yahweh your God gave you; if you had, he would have established your kingdom over Israel for all time. But now your kingdom will not endure; Yahweh has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him leader of his people, because you have not kept Yahweh's command." (1 Samuel 13:13-14)

And later: "Because you have rejected the word of Yahweh, he has rejected you as king." (1 Samuel 15:23) Yes. Yahweh's representative king was to be Yahweh selected, but also, most importantly, to be Yahweh obeying.

Fifth, Yahweh's king was needed by Yahweh's people to lead them in his ways. The book of Judges shows the need for such a king. This is summed up in the closing words of the book; In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit. (Judges 21:25) As John H. Stek has written: "Israel needed the mediatorial rule of an earthly king, not so much because of international conditions but because of her own internal state and the stubbornness of her own heart."<sup>60</sup>

Sixth, Yahweh's king was to be subordinate to Yahweh. This was the natural implication of the need for such a king to be obedient to Yahweh. Yet it was a lesson that even David needed to learn. His bringing the ark to Jerusalem, recorded in 2 Samuel 6, may have been motivated by genuine piety. But David had to learn that piety still required obedience – practical submission to Yahweh, the Great King. It was not for the human king to make up the rules of the kingdom. The Ark of the Covenant, the footstool of the Great King, was to be transported as he directed. Yahweh's representative king was always to be subordinate to Yahweh himself.

Seventh, the representative king was to be from David's family. In the well-known promise to David, Nathan announces:

"Yahweh declares to you that Yahweh himself will establish a house for you: 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.... Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever." (2 Samuel 7:11,12,16)

Yahweh's representative king was to be from David's family – but, eighth, he needed to be better than David. It is clear that when the representative king disobeyed Yahweh it was not only bad for him but also for his people. David was a good king. He loved Yahweh. He trusted Yahweh. He served Yahweh. But David was not perfect. So we see the effect of his sin with Bathsheba – civil war. See the effect of his proud numbering of his fighting men. The scourge of the angel of death on his people. Yahweh's people need Yahweh's king to experience the peace and fullness of kingdom blessing, but one that is better than David – and than Solomon, and better than any of the kings that followed.

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<sup>60</sup> John H. Stek, "The Former Prophets: A Syllabus" (Grand Rapids: Calvin Theological Seminary, 1985), 38



So, ninth, in the Old Testament, the representative king for Yahweh's kingdom was a hoped for king. Listen to Isaiah:

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;  
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.  
The Spirit of Yahweh will rest on him—  
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,  
the Spirit of counsel and of power,  
the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of Yahweh—  
and he will delight in the fear of Yahweh.

He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,  
or decide by what he hears with his ears;  
but with righteousness he will judge the needy,  
with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.  
He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;  
with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.  
Righteousness will be his belt  
and faithfulness the sash around his waist.

The wolf will live with the lamb,  
the leopard will lie down with the goat,  
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;  
and a little child will lead them.  
The cow will feed with the bear,  
their young will lie down together,  
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.  
The infant will play near the hole of the cobra,  
and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest.  
They will neither harm nor destroy  
on all my holy mountain,  
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of Yahweh  
as the waters cover the sea.

In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples;  
the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious.  
(Isaiah 11:1-10)

From the stump of Jesse, and so from Abraham's people, Judah's tribe, David's family. Spirit endowed, like the judges, like Saul, and especially like David. Delighting in the fear of Yahweh – obedient, willingly obedient

to Yahweh's law. With righteousness judging the needy; with justice giving decisions for the poor. This, in the Old Testament, is the hoped for, and prophesied, king.

As J. A. Motyer comments: "Inwardly, he delights..., outwardly he commits himself to *righteousness, etc....* In David's line, king after king had failed, whether by character defect or administrative maladroitness. In this king character and rule are in total harmony."<sup>61</sup>

This king, Yahweh's future representative king, will have an extended rule – a world-wide rule. "...with justice he will give decisions for the poor *of the earth*" (v. 4). In his reign the specific, once narrower, aspect of Yahweh's kingdom will be co-extensive with the general or universal aspect for "the earth will be full of the knowledge of Yahweh as the waters cover the sea" (v. 9). And the nations? "In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him..." (v. 10).

Not only the eighth century Isaiah, but also the later Jeremiah, as Judah is about to be crushed by the Babylonian juggernaut, prophesies:

"The days are coming," declares Yahweh,  
"when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch,  
a King who will reign wisely  
and do what is just and right in the land.  
In his days Judah will be saved  
and Israel will live in safety.  
This is the name by which he will be called:  
Yahweh Our Righteousness. (Jeremiah 23:5-6)

Then the post-exilic Zechariah exhorts to the insignificant and easily demoralized returned remnant.

Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion!  
Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem!  
See, your king comes to you,  
righteous and having salvation,  
gentle and riding on a donkey,  
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.  
I will take away the chariots from Ephraim  
and the war-horses from Jerusalem,

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<sup>61</sup> J. A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), 123

and the battle bow will be broken.  
He will proclaim peace to the nations.  
His rule will extend from sea to sea  
and from the River to the ends of the earth. (Zechariah 9:9-10)

And what of the Psalms? Psalm 110 points to one to be seated at Yahweh's right hand, a victorious priest-king after the order of Melchizedek; one to whom priestly-clad youth would willingly come like the dew of the morning. Or Psalm 2, which speaks of one whom Yahweh would call his son; one who would break the rebellious nations like pottery, and yet of whom it would be said, "Blessed are all who take refuge in him" (v. 12d)

Then perhaps the jewel in the crown, Psalm 72, magnificent Psalm 72.

He will judge your people in righteousness,  
your afflicted ones with justice....  
He will rule from sea to sea  
and from the River to the ends of the earth....  
May his name endure forever;  
may it continue as long as the sun.

But above all, the nations:

All nations will be blessed through him,  
and they will call him blessed. (vv. 2, 8, 17)

This is Yahweh's representative king, the hoped for king of the Old Testament.

But where is this king? When will he come? When will he bring in the kingdom, Yahweh's kingdom?

## **Conclusion**

Now this is a preaching conference. So I ask, Could you preach, from the Old Testament, Yahweh, Yahweh of Armies, the Great King of the kingdom? And could you preach the kingdom of Yahweh, the kingdom of God, to use the New Testament term, from the Old Testament? I suspect you may need some further input, but I trust a start has been made. But most importantly, could you preach, or at least begin to preach, from the

Old Testament, the king, the representative king, of Yahweh’s kingdom, for so much was connected with him?

Now I have been forbidden by my colleagues from straying into their territories, especially the New Testament. And I will continue to respect their desires. So I stand in the Old Testament. Yet I call, as it were, to you who live on the other side of the great events which from my perspective I can see only dimly. And I ask you privileged ones, Has the coming one come or do you wait for another? Has one come, from the people of Abraham, from the tribe of Judah, from the family of David? Has he come, “righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey”? Has one come whose name is *Jehovah Tsidkenu*, Yahweh our Righteousness, come to deal with his people’s sins?

Tell me, as I stand, longing, in the shadows of the Old Testament, do you know of one who is sitting at Yahweh’s right hand, sitting until all his enemies are made a footstool for his feet? One whom Yahweh would call his son, whom the nations and world leaders must kiss or perish – one of whom it could be said, “Blessed are all who take refuge in him”? Are the nations rallying to him? Is his kingdom spreading from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth?

Do you know of such a one? Has the king come? Could you preach him from the Old Testament?

(An Appendix is given on the next page.)

## Appendix

Occurrences in the Old Testament of the Hebrew terms connected with Yahweh based on the root *mlk* [מֶלֶךְ].

### 1. Yahweh as *melek* [מֶלֶךְ]

Num 23:21; Deu 33:5; 1 Sam 8:7; 12:12; Isa 6:5; 3:22; 41:21; 43:15; 44:6; Jer 8:19; 10:7, 10; 46:18; 48:15; 51:57; Zep 3:15; Zec 14:9, 16, 17; Mal 1:14.

Psa 5:2; 10:16; 24:7, 8, 9, 10; 29:10; 44:4; 47:2, 6, 7, 8; 48:2; 68:24; 74:12; 84:3; 93:1; 95:3; 97:1; 98:6; 99:1, 4; 145:1; 149:2.

2. Yahweh ruling/*mlk* [מֶלֶךְ]

Exo 15:8; 1 Chr 16:31; Isa 24:23; 52:7; Eze 20:33; Mic 4:7

Psa 47:8(9); 93:1; 96:10; 97:1; 99:1; 146:10.

3. Other *mlk* [מֶלֶךְ] terms connected with Yahweh.

a. *m<sup>a</sup>lûkâ<sup>h</sup>* [מְלֹכָה] – **kingship, royalty** (BDB<sup>62</sup>574); I. position or rank of king, **kingship** (Holl<sup>63</sup>197)  
1 Sam 11:14; Psa 22:8; Oba 21.

b. *malkût* [מַלְכוּת] – **royalty, royal power, reign, kingdom** (BDB574); #7. of Y.: **dominion** (Holl198f)  
Psa 103:19; 145:11, 12, 13.

c. *mamlākâ<sup>h</sup>* [מַמְלָכָה] **kingdom, sovereignty, dominion, reign** (BDB575); 1. **kingdom, dominion**; 2. **royal power** or **dignity**; 3. **king**; 4. theol. *l<sup>e</sup>kā yhw<sup>h</sup> hammamlākâ* IC 29<sub>11</sub>(Holl199)  
1 Chr 29:11; 2 Chr 13:8.

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<sup>62</sup> Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1907, 1972).

<sup>63</sup> William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971).