

NO, NOT YET: THE CONTINGENCY OF GOD'S PROMISED KINGDOM

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MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN about the millennial/messianic kingdom, but little attention has been given to the contingencies that must be met before the kingdom will arrive. Some writers suggest that such contingencies are untenable. How, they reason, can the work of God be viewed as contingent on the response of mere mortals? Since He is sovereign, His will shall be done, regardless of human response. How can Israel (and others?) have “veto power” over God’s ordained kingdom program? This article seeks to demonstrate that certain contingencies exist for the coming millennial kingdom, contingencies that show that the kingdom is not present today, because when Israel rejected Jesus, the kingdom was postponed. These contingencies include the sovereignty of God, the influence of the Spirit of God, and humanity’s (especially Israel’s) responsibility for repentance. These were detailed by the prophets (especially Ezekiel and Haggai), were confirmed in extrabiblical literature and in the Gospels (especially Matthew), were affirmed in the historical record of the Acts, and are still anticipated as exemplified in Romans. Because these three contingencies have not yet been met, one can affirm the future of the kingdom by the words “No, not yet.”¹ The word “contingency” does not mean that the fulfillment of God’s promise to establish the millennial kingdom is uncertain and may be annulled. Instead “contingency” means that the *timing* of the fulfillment is based on these three factors.

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¹ This phrase is suggested in place of the phrase “Already, not yet,” which is often heard in discussions maintaining that the kingdom has been partially established in the present age but still has a future fulfillment.

THE CONTINGENCY OF GOD'S KINGDOM IN THE PROPHETS

In varying degrees nearly all the writing prophets expressed the Lord's plan of contingency for the coming kingdom. As the prophets each offered pieces of the puzzle portraying Israel's exile and restoration, it became clear that future blessing for the nation would come as a result of the three contingency factors already mentioned (the sovereign blessing by the Lord, through the Spirit of God, on a repentant people). The prophets Ezekiel and Haggai are especially clear in affirming these truths.

EZEKIEL

Affirming the eschatological blessing detailed by his predecessors, the preexilic prophets, Ezekiel's "showers of blessing" (Ezek. 34:26) are guaranteed by God's covenantal promises. The Exile resulted from Israel's disobedience to the Lord's commands. So God must act to render His people capable of enjoying the blessing of His promises.

One example of a cloudburst of blessing to come on the nation is the return of the glory of God in the future millennial temple. This is one of the many blessings Ezekiel said God would bestow on His people (chaps. 34–42). Yet a cautious tone clouds the climax. "Now let them put away their harlotry and the corpses of their kings far from Me; and I will dwell among them forever" (43:9). Stronger language, stated even in simple conditional terms (using the Hebrew conditional particle *תִּשְׁׁבֹ*) closely follows. "As for you, son of man, describe the temple to the house of Israel, that they may be ashamed of their iniquities; and let them measure the plan. If *תִּשְׁׁבֹ* they are ashamed of all that they have done, make known to them the design of the house, its structure, its exits, its entrances, all its designs, all its statutes, and all its laws" (vv. 10–11). Clearly a condition of repentance is affirmed along with the promise of God's sovereign action. Insight into this condition or contingency for the return of God's glory is gained by examining the earlier vision that portrayed the initial condemnation of the iniquities practiced in the temple, which resulted in the Lord's departure (chaps. 8–11).

In this earlier vision Ezekiel described four heinous sins that blatantly violated the Mosaic Law: the Caananite idol of jealousy (8:3–5), animal carvings (vv. 9–12), weeping for Tammuz, the Babylonian fertility hero god (v. 14), and sun worship (v. 16). Significantly these were violations by the leaders, which ended with the elders turning their backs toward the temple (v. 16). Their facing away from God's dwelling portrayed the fact that they had turned the sheep away from the Lord. Their sinful attitude toward

Him resulted in God's disciplining them by the Exile. "Though they cry in My ears with a loud voice, yet I shall not listen to them" (v. 18).² While some see this as merely a word of motivation,³ it is distinct from merely motive language since it has the affirming corollary of the Deuteronomic Covenant. In such language Pratt, for instance, finds this distinction critical. "Yahweh would never react to historical contingencies in ways that transgressed his covenants."⁴

Ezekiel's vision in chapters 8–11 then describes the depth of discipline through the slow and painful departure of the glory of the Lord. With no intervening offers of repentance, the Lord symbolically abandoned the temple. Yet even in this height of discouragement Ezekiel affirmed that the Lord had not abandoned His people and that future blessings will come. But those would occur only because of His sovereignty and the transforming power of His Spirit. The first encouragement is the assurance of the return of the Lord's presence in their midst. "Though I had scattered them among the countries, yet I was a sanctuary for them a little while in the countries where they had gone" (11:16). Although not the usual word for "temple" (תְּמִלְתָּה), the word "sanctuary" here (תְּמִלָּה) still refers "more especially [to] the temple. They had, indeed, lost the outward temple (at Jerusalem); but the Lord Himself had become their temple."⁵

Some say that Israel as a nation will never again enjoy God's blessing in the land.⁶ However, two observations mitigate against this. First, there is a contrast between the Lord being a "sanctuary for a time" while the people were in exile, and His setting His "sanctuary in their midst forever" (37:26) when they will be returned to the land. Second, the encouragement in 11:16 comes not

² Possibly this declaration of "no return" implies a contingency, as with Jonah's unilateral declarations of judgment against Nineveh. See Richard L. Pratt Jr., "Historical Contingencies and Biblical Predictions," in *The Way of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Bruce K. Waltke* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 180–81.

³ A. Cowen sees this kind of motivation in wisdom, especially Proverbs (*Proverbs*, [New York: Soncino, 1980]).

⁴ Pratt, "Historical Contingencies and Biblical Predictions," 191.

⁵ C. F. Keil, *Biblical Commentary on the Prophecies of Ezekiel*, vol. 9 of *Commentary on the Old Testament*, by Franz Delitzsch and C. F. Keil, trans. M. E. Easton (n.p., 1875; reprint [in 10 vols.], Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 151.

⁶ For instance see O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Prophets* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2004), 298–99. He suggests that the future temple of Ezekiel 48 was never intended to be rebuilt, for it is too large, he says, to fit on the temple mount (*ibid.*, 310–13). However, Ezekiel's description of the return of the Lord's glory is in literal terms, even including entrance through the east gate (43:4).

only from God's continued presence with the exiles but also from His promise to restore them from foreign nations. "I will gather you from the peoples and assemble you out of the countries among which you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel" (11:17). Also Israel's sins, described as "detestable things" and "abominations" (v. 18), will be removed. Interestingly these are the same "abominations" and "detestable things" Ezekiel saw in the temple (8:9–10). These sins must be removed in order for the Lord to dwell with His people again. The Lord's presence in a future temple is contingent on the removal of these expressions of sin that led them into exile. While the Lord will bring them back, it is important to observe that it is not the Lord but the people who will remove these things (11:18). But how will the postexilic population be capable of doing this?

God's sovereign transforming action will be involved. Yet the nation's glorious future is contingent on their repentance and commitment to righteousness. These sinful people will be capable of such nobility only because of the transforming work of the Spirit. "I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit [or 'Spirit'] within them. And I will take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in My statutes and keep My ordinances and do them. Then they will be My people, and I shall be their God" (vv. 19–20). Without this inner spiritual transformation Israel (and humanity!) is destined to repeat her sad history. While they are not absolved from personal responsibility, only the Spirit of the Lord can restore them. These are the contingencies Ezekiel set in place at the point of the departure of the Lord's glory (chaps. 8–11) and in anticipation of His return (chaps. 34–42).

Ezekiel's temple visions would have encouraged those living in exile that God was not finished with them. He will once again return to His people and dwell with them in the future millennial temple. Dwelling with them is contingent on their fulfilling their responsibility of putting away their abominations by the transforming power of the Spirit. Ezekiel's voice is added to many others who went before him: God will do this, through His Spirit, to a repentant people.

HAGGAI

The postexilic generation rejoiced when the foundation of the temple was laid (Ezra 3:11–13). But when the people delayed in constructing the temple itself, Haggai gave four messages to encourage them to finish the project. An actual temple was a necessary contingency for Israel to reside in the land as God's people. Dismissing their disconsolance Haggai successfully motivated the

postexilic to finish the temple project. The presentation of the evidence of God's sovereign covenantal displeasure (withholding rain, reducing the harvests, etc., Hag. 1:9–11) motivated their leaders Zerubbabel and Joshua as well as the people to obey "the voice of the Lord" (v. 12), and so the temple project resumed. The blessing these people would experience was conditioned on their obedience.

Noting that their temple was not worthy to be compared to the former, Haggai stated the obvious: "Does it not seem to you like nothing in comparison?" (2:3) Even so, he said that Zerubbabel, Joshua, and the people must "take courage . . . and work" (v. 4) to complete the construction. They were to be encouraged by the presence of the Lord who said, "I am with you" (v. 4), and they were to note that God's Spirit was "abiding" with them (v. 5). The affirmation of the importance of their work, empowered by the Spirit of God, led to Haggai's delivering an encouraging promise from the Lord. "Once more in a little while, I am going to shake the heavens and the earth, the sea also and the dry land. I will shake all the nations; and they will come with the wealth of all the nations, and I will fill this house with glory," says the LORD of hosts" (vv. 6–7). Thus if the nation was to experience this eschatological blessing, they must complete the work, be empowered by the Spirit, and enjoy the sovereign hand of God. Once again, all three contingencies are necessary for these future kingdom blessings to take place.

Some participants in the ceremony that dedicated the temple (recorded by Ezra) may have looked over their shoulder to the east in anticipation of the return of God's glory, as promised by Ezekiel and Haggai. This blessing is yet future, however. The "shaking" of all the nations (vv. 6–7, 21), their being overthrown by God (v. 22), and God's giving peace to Israel (v. 9) will not occur until in the millennium. In His sovereignty God will overthrow all nations and establish His worldwide messianic kingdom. "On that day" He will make Zerubbabel "like a signet ring" (v. 23). Much like a signature on a loan today, the impress from a signet ring would guarantee a future payment. Similarly Zerubbabel, then governor of Judah (1:1), and a descendant of David, would be a guarantee that the Davidic Messiah will come and establish His reign. Only God in His sovereignty can accomplish this.

The future kingdom, then, is contingent on three things: the sovereign action of God, the presence of the Spirit, and a repentant people.

ZECHARIAH

Zechariah 12–14 is a dramatic passage that portrays the same three aspects of the contingency of the arrival of God's kingdom. As

with the other prophets this prophetic assurance also begins with the sovereignty of God. Zechariah launched his hope for Israel by noting God's creation of the material cosmos and earth coupled with the spiritual realm in forming "the spirit of man within him" (12:1). This combination certainly affirms God's comprehensive sovereignty. This divine characteristic is further affirmed through the repetition of the words "I will" or "the Lord will" from verses 2 through 9. After commenting on these verses, Barker concludes, "Perhaps this description is also a means of strengthening the royal and sovereign authority of the message."⁷ But these "I will's" affirm more than Zechariah's message. They also point to the fact that God's kingdom will be fulfilled by His sovereign hand.

The second contingency of God's kingdom is also affirmed in Zechariah 12. The Lord spoke of the critical role of the Spirit of God, who will be poured out "on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem" (v. 10). Some writers and translations suggest that this refers to the human spirit (e.g., "a spirit of grace and prayer," NLT). However, it more likely refers to the Holy Spirit who "conveys grace, and calls forth supplications."⁸ God's sovereign restoration of Israel and the establishment of the kingdom will be initiated through the work of the Holy Spirit, especially on the house of David, that is, on leaders who are David's descendants, and it will be centered in Jerusalem.

Then Zechariah added, "They will look on Me [the Messiah] whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him" (v. 10). "Because of the convicting work of God's Spirit, Israel will turn to the Messiah with mourning."⁹ In repentance Israel will mourn and "weep bitterly over Him" (v. 10). Every family will mourn over their guilt and seek God's forgiveness (vv. 11–14). This final act is necessary for God's kingdom to be established.

Zechariah 12, then, mentions all three requirements for establishing the kingdom, no one of which has yet occurred. Because Zechariah was a postexilic prophet, he could not have been referring to Israel's restoration from Babylon. God has not yet restored Israel to her land, as Zechariah predicted. Nor has the Spirit moved on Israel's Davidic leaders. Neither has the nation mourned and sought forgiveness from the Lord. Clearly then the millennial

⁷ Kenneth L. Barker, "Zechariah," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 681.

⁸ T. T. Perowne, *Haggai and Zechariah*, Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1893), 132–33.

⁹ Barker, "Zechariah," 683.

kingdom will not be established until these contingencies are met. Thus the kingdom is not present today; it is yet future.

THE CONTINGENCY OF GOD'S KINGDOM IN EXTRABIBLICAL LITERATURE

Although extrabiblical literature includes less emphasis on the movement of the Holy Spirit, the play between God's sovereignty and human responsibility is evident. For example *The Assumption of Moses*, a pseudepigraphal work dated A.D. 7–30, states, "His name should be called upon until the day of repentance in the visitation wherewith the Lord will visit them in the consummation of the end of the days" (1:18). Charles makes an interesting comment on this and other passages. "A great national repentance was to usher in the new kingdom of God, and was a necessary condition to its coming. 'If Israel practices repentance, it will be redeemed; if not, it will not be redeemed,' Sanh. 97^b. 'Israel will not fulfill the great repentance before Elijah comes,' Pirke, R. Eliezer, xlivi; cf. Mal. iv.6, and Luke i.16, 17; Matt. xvii.10-12. 'If all Israel together repented for a single day, redemption through the Messiah would follow,' Paskita 163^b."¹⁰

Price says this belief continues to the present day among orthodox Jews. In discussing the location of the ark of the covenant, he states the following about the role of God's sovereignty and Israel's spiritual condition.

They are often indifferent in their response to the questions of curious tourists regarding the Ark since they regard them as not having a true spiritual apprehension of the religious issues involved. For example, Rabbi Chaim Richman of the Temple Institute once said in response to a question as to when the Ark would be found: "The Ark of the Covenant is still hidden. There are things that we as humans must do, and there are things that G-d will do for us at the proper time." The rabbi's reply understood one of the teachings of the late Rabbi Kook, who laid the spiritual foundation for Jews such as those in the Temple movement, that the messianic age will not arrive until the Jewish people collectively attain a higher state of spirituality. Then, in response to the Jewish nation, God, like a bridegroom to a bride, will act upon His prophetic promises.¹¹

¹⁰ R. H. Charles, ed., *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1913), 2:415.

¹¹ Randall Price, *Searching for the Ark of the Covenant* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2005), 194–95.

THE CONTINGENCY OF GOD'S KINGDOM IN THE GOSPELS

MATTHEW 12

Matthew 12 is one of several passages in the Gospels on the contingency of the coming of the kingdom. Three times before Matthew 12 the kingdom was said to be near (3:2; 4:17; 10:7).¹² Then after Jesus' opponents accused Him of casting out demons by the power of Satan (12:24–32; Mark 3:22–30; Luke 11:14–26), the nearness of the kingdom is never mentioned again in the Gospels.

Scholars debate whether *ῆγεικεν* (perfect tense of *ἔγγιζω*) should be translated “has arrived” or “has drawn near.” It seems better to conclude with Lane, “The linguistic objections to the proposed meaning ‘has come’ are weighty and it is better to translate ‘has come near.’ ”¹³ In other words the kingdom had not arrived when John the Baptist, Jesus Christ, and the disciples proclaimed its nearness; it was near in the sense of being ready, but it had not yet been established. If the kingdom had already come, why did Jesus prophesy the future Tribulation in Luke 21:31 and say in connection with that series of events, “When you see these things happening, recognize that the kingdom of God is near”? The implication is clear: This kingdom is not near now. It was near (in the sense that Jesus personally offered it to Israel), but then it ceased being near. Then in the future Tribulation the millennial kingdom will again be near.

Why was the kingdom said to be near and then after Matthew 12 was never again announced as being near in Jesus' ministry? The answer is that Israel rejected Jesus as the Messiah. This refusal to receive Him was true not only of the religious authorities but also of the nation in general. The majority of the Lord's miracles, demonstrations of His sovereignty, were performed in Galilee (11:20) and the people in Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum failed to repent (vv. 21–24). This rejection was then climaxed by the opposition and blasphemy of the religious authorities (12:22–45).

¹² John's Gospel says nothing about the nearness of God's kingdom.

¹³ William L. Lane, *The Gospel according to Mark*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 65 n. 93. For a more thorough defense of the meaning “has drawn near” see A. J. Mattill Jr., *Luke and the Last Things: A Perspective for the Understanding of Lukan Thought* (Dillsboro, NC: Western North Carolina Press, 1979), 70–77. See also Stanley D. Toussaint, “The Contingency of the Coming of the Kingdom,” in *Integrity of Heart, Skillfulness of Hand*, ed. Charles H. Dyer and Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 231–32.

This does not mean Christ stopped presenting Himself to Israel as their Messiah. He did this, particularly in His triumphal entry, but the die had already been cast. The kingdom was no longer near; Israel's tragic decision had been made much earlier. Clearly, then, the coming of the kingdom was conditioned on Israel's response to Jesus.

MATTHEW 13

Whatever view one takes of the kingdom in Matthew, all agree that the parables of Matthew 13 are descriptive of the present age. The first parable (vv. 3–23) serves as an introduction to all the parables and explains why the Lord spoke in parables. This, He said, would conceal the truth from unbelievers and reveal new truth to His disciples (vv. 11–13). The parable of the sower and the soils illustrates this well. The parable of the householder in verse 52 is the concluding parable, in which Jesus was saying that the disciples were responsible to teach these new truths as well as the old truths of the Old Testament.¹⁴

Between these two parables are six parables that reveal new truths about God's kingdom. Jesus called them "the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven" (v. 11). These new truths revealed that a new age would intervene before the millennial kingdom would come; this new age is the present church-age dispensation. Because Israel refused to accept Jesus as their Messiah, a drastic change was made in God's prophetic program. Whereas the kingdom had been proclaimed as near, now a formerly unpredicted period of time would intervene before the kingdom would come. These parables contain truths not seen in the Old Testament. For instance John the Baptist had preached not only the nearness of the kingdom but also the proximity of judgment. He said the axe was already lying at the root of the tree and the winnowing fork was in God's hand (3:10, 12). The Jews knew judgment would precede the arrival of the kingdom (Ezek. 20:33–38).¹⁵ Thus if the kingdom was near, so was judgment! But in Matthew 13 the Lord Jesus explained that a new age would intervene before the coming of that judgment (vv. 28–30, 40–43, 49–50). This contrasts with John's teaching of imminent judgment. Why this change? It was because the Messiah was

¹⁴ For a defense of this arrangement of the parables in Matthew 13 see Stanley D. Toussaint, "The Introductory and Concluding Parables of Matthew Thirteen," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 121 (October–December 1964): 351–55.

¹⁵ Judgment will precede the coming of the kingdom, but that judgment has not yet taken place. This presents a problem for those who say the kingdom is already present.

being rejected by Israel. The coming of the kingdom is contingent on Israel's acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah (Zech. 12:10–14:9). Because of their rejection the kingdom could not come then.

Another new revelation Jesus gave in the parables is the co-existence of good and evil in this age (Matt. 13:30, 47–49). This differs from the fact that in the millennium righteousness will prevail and sin will be judged swiftly (Isa. 11:1–5; 16:5; 32:1; 54:14; 60:17–18; Jer. 33:14–15).

When Jesus explained in Matthew 13:36–43 His parable of the tares among the wheat (vv. 24–30), He said “the sons of the kingdom” and “the sons of the evil one” are represented by the good seed and the tares, respectively (v. 38). The latter are obviously unbelievers, and the former are sons of the kingdom not in the sense that the kingdom is present but in the sense that as believers they will inherit the millennial kingdom.¹⁶

THE PARABLES OF REJECTION

The parables about Christ's rejection by the nation also show the conditionality of the coming of the kingdom. This is seen in a parable that is so crucial to the arguments of the Synoptics that it is included in all three (Matt. 21:33–46; Mark 12:1–12; Luke 20:9–18). This parable of the vineyard and the landowner reveals that because of Israel's rejection the kingdom was taken from Israel (Matt. 21:43; Mark 12:9; Luke 20:16). That the hearers understood the significance of the story is seen in their response. When Jesus said that the landowner “will come and destroy these vine-growers and will give the vineyard to others,” the people who heard these words said, “May it never be!” (Luke 20:16). They had rejected Him as their foundation “stone” (v. 17). The kingdom was no longer near for that generation of Israel.

However, Israel's rejection does not mean the kingdom is canceled. Jesus' parable of the spurned invitation to a wedding feast (Matt. 22:1–10; cf. Luke 14:16–24) is another case in point. This marriage feast is an illustration of the kingdom (cf. Matt. 8:11; Isa. 25:6) prophesied in the Old Testament.¹⁷ Jesus told this parable in

¹⁶ Jesus referred to scribes who became disciples of the kingdom of heaven (v. 52), that is, they had learned (*μαθητεύθης*, “having become a learner”) of the truths pertaining to the coming kingdom.

¹⁷ R. V. G. Tasker, though not a premillennialist, agrees that the banquet is an analogy of the kingdom. “The present parable is concerned with the extension of the offer of the kingdom of God, here thought of as a royal wedding feast, to others than those who were originally invited, because the latter when the moment arrived were unwilling to come” (*The Gospel according to Matthew*, Tyndale New Testament

response to someone who said, “Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!” (Luke 14:15). When the feast was almost prepared, the call to those who had been invited was issued (Matt. 22:3). This call probably portrays the ministries of John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus. But Israel was “unwilling to come” (v. 3). The next invitation to the nation (v. 9) was given by the apostles both before and after the Lord’s crucifixion, and their invitation too was rejected by many. The call to go to the “main highways” refers to the message going to the Gentiles.

This parable of the spurned invitation teaches several crucial truths with regard to the kingdom’s contingency. First, if Israel had responded favorably to the invitation, the banquet would have taken place. In other words the kingdom had been near. Second, because Israel rejected the call to come, the kingdom was no longer near and it was postponed. The call to Gentiles is going on during the present time of postponement. The filling of the banquet hall and the judgment described in verses 10–14 looks at the conclusion of the age. The expression “weeping and gnashing of teeth” is normally used of the judgment preceding the kingdom’s coming (see 8:12; 13:42, 50; 24:51; 25:30).

Luke 19:11–27, a parable about the investment of the minas by ten of the king’s slaves, addresses the same issue. In 10:9, 11 the seventy were told to preach that the kingdom of God had drawn near. But in 19:11 the disciples thought the kingdom was close at hand, but it was no longer near. This contrasts with 10:9, 11. Again Israel’s rejection of the Lord is seen in the words of the citizenry, “We do not want this man to reign over us” (19:14). But this parable teaches more than Jewish rejection; it also affirms that the Lord’s followers have responsibilities to fulfill *in the interim* while He is gone. Because Israel had rejected the King, the kingdom was postponed; it was no longer “at hand.” One day the King will return to judge and to establish His kingdom on earth. These parables point up the offer of the Davidic kingdom, the rejection by Israel, and the postponement of that kingdom.

THE CONTINGENCY OF GOD’S KINGDOM IN ACTS AND THE EPISTLES

ACTS 3:19–21

This passage is part of Peter’s sermon to a Jewish audience that had assembled after the spectacular miracle of the healing of the

Commentaries [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961], 206). On the other hand Leon Morris writes that “the application to the end time must be seen as uncertain” (*The Gospel according to Matthew* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991], 548).

man born lame (vv. 1–10). After accusing Israel of rejecting their Messiah (vv. 14–15), who is now glorified (v. 13), Peter called on them to repent (v. 19). Repentance is emphasized by his use of two synonymous aorist imperatives, “repent” (*μετανοήσατε*) and “return” (*έποιτρέψατε*). The words *εἰς τὸ*¹⁸ followed by the infinitive *έξαλειφθῆναι* probably indicate purpose, although result is also possible.¹⁹ Whether this refers to purpose or result, those who repented, Peter said, would have their sins “wiped away” or removed.²⁰

The significant issue in this discussion is the meaning of the next clause—“in order that times of refreshing may come . . . and that He may send Jesus”—and its relationship to the imperatives “repent” and “turn.” The words *ὅπως δὲ* (“in order that”) almost certainly indicate purpose.²¹ Do the following two subjunctive verbs, “may come” (*ἔλθωσιν*) and “may send” (*διποστελλη*), refer to simultaneous acts or are they sequential? That is, was Peter saying the “times [or ‘seasons,’ *καιροί*] of refreshing” would occur with the arrival of the Messiah or would those times precede the return of the Messiah?

The way the sentence is constructed implies that the coming of “times of refreshing” and the sending of the Messiah are simultaneous. Peter commanded Israel to repent for the remission of their sins in order for “times of refreshing” to arrive and so that the Lord might send the Messiah to them. This is the contingency of human responsibility. The removal of Israel’s sins will precede the “times

¹⁸ Manuscripts K and B have *πρός*, but the difference in meaning is inconsequential.

¹⁹ F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 207; and Nigel Turner, *Syntax: A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1963), 3:143. Moulton says the use of *εἰς τὸ* with the infinitive in this case is “with final force fairly certain” (James Hope Moulton, *Prolegomena: A Grammar of New Testament Greek* [Edinburgh: Clark, 1908], 1:218). Green says that in Acts 3:19 *εἰς τὸ* can indicate only purpose (Samuel S Green, *Handbook to the Grammar of the Greek Testament*, rev. ed. [New York: Revell, n.d.], 322). Green’s work is old and shows no awareness of *εἰς τὸ* and the infinitive as it relates to the Hebrew infinitive construct. See also Nigel Turner, *Grammatical Insights into the New Testament* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1965), 11–12; and William Douglas Chamberlain, *An Exegetical Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1941), 108.

²⁰ Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., rev. Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 344.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 718; Blass and Debrunner, *Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 186–88; Chamberlain, *Exegetical Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, 186; and C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 138.

of refreshing" and the return of Jesus. If the coming of the Messiah were to follow the "times of refreshing" at a later time, a separate clause would have introduced the coming of Christ.²² Thus Peter intended to relate the "times of refreshment" with the return of the Lord Jesus, and not with the present age. The two form a hendiadys reflecting the sovereign activity of God.

The phrase "times of refreshment" looks ahead to the promised eschatological Davidic kingdom on this earth. However, not everyone agrees with this interpretation. Actually five views are held. First, some say it looks at present-day spiritual blessings, and the coming of Christ takes place in a person's heart when that person trusts in Him.²³ Second, others say Peter was stating that the times of refreshment will be fulfilled in the present age.²⁴ Third, others say the times of refreshment refer to blessings for present-day believers but that the sending of the Messiah refers to the second coming of Christ when He will bring great spiritual blessings.²⁵ A fourth view is that the times of refreshment refer to present-day blessings whereas the sending of the Messiah is yet future when the Old Testament prophecies regarding a literal earthly kingdom will be fulfilled.²⁶

A number of writers take a fifth position, maintaining that the times of refreshment and the sending of Jesus are both eschatological and refer to the coming of the promised Davidic kingdom.²⁷ A

²² The second purpose clause *καὶ ἀναστάση* seems to be subordinate to the first clause, rather than to be a separate, independent clause.

²³ Joseph Addison Alexander, *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1956), 115; and Kirsopp Lake and Henry J. Cadbury, *The Beginnings of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1965), 37.

²⁴ J. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 93–94. Marshall sees this as a fulfillment of Old Testament promises.

²⁵ William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1955), 32; and Robert J. Karis, *Invitation to Acts* (Garden City, NY: Image, 1966), 52–53.

²⁶ Darrell L. Bock, "The Reign of the Lord Christ," in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 55–61. See also William Neil, *Acts*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 85–86.

²⁷ Charles F. Baker, *Understanding the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Grace Bible College, 1981), 29–32; Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 38; Hans Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 7, 29; W. A. Criswell, *Acts: An Exposition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 1:140; Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), 208; Everett F. Harrison, *Acts* (Chicago: Moody, 1975), 76; Mattill, *Luke and the Last Things*, 50–51; John B. Polhill, *Acts*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 134–35; Richard Belward Rackham, *The Acts of the Apostles*

number of important factors support this view.

The two clauses that follow *ὅτις* go together. In other words the clause “that the times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord” must be taken with the words “and that He may send Jesus.” As Haenchen puts it, “The two promises are complementary statements about one and the same event.”²⁸ Nothing grammatically separates the promises; in fact they are joined together by the connective *kai*.

The noun *ἀναψυξέως*, translated “refreshing,” is a New Testament *hapax legomenon*. It is used in Greek literature in various forms to refer to “cooling by blowing, refreshing, relieving, resting.”²⁹ It occurs in the Septuagint only in Exodus (Eng., 8:15; LXX, v. 11), where it refers to relief from the plague of frogs. Schweizer correctly observes, “The context makes sense only if the ‘times of refreshing’ are the definitive age of salvation. The expression is undoubtedly apocalyptic in origin. . . . The reference, then, is to the eschatological redemption which is promised to Israel if it repents.”³⁰

Furthermore the plural *καιροί*, “times,” in Acts 3:19, parallels the plural noun *χρονῶν*, “seasons” or “times,” in verse 21 (which is translated “period” in the NASB). The two terms refer to the same era, and the plural forms simply emphasize duration. The context makes it clear that the synonyms refer to the future kingdom, with *καιροί* emphasizing the quality of time and *χρονῶν* emphasizing the duration of the time.

Therefore it is concluded that in Acts 3:19–21 Peter was discussing the eschatological age promised in the Old Testament. But was he saying that if Israel repented, the kingdom would come? Was the coming of the kingdom contingent on Israel’s response? The answer must be in the affirmative. Peter had just said that removal of their sins was contingent on their repentance (v. 19). If contingency exists here, then it is certainly also present in verses 20–21.

Furthermore Israel knew that if they would repent, the promised eschatological era would arrive. As already noted, God’s

(London: Methuen, 1901), 53–54; Charles C. Ryrie, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Chicago: Moody, 1961), 31; and Edward Schweizer, “*ἀναψυξής*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 664–65. This list is partial, but it represents a wide spectrum of views, from ultradispensationalism to critical scholars.

²⁸ Haenchen, *Acts of the Apostles*, 208; cf. Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles*, 29.

²⁹ Albert Dihle, “*ἀναψυξής*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 9:664.

³⁰ Eduard Schweizer, “*ἀναψυξής*,” 9:664–65.

blessings on Israel were contingent on obedience with a proper heart attitude. The fact that the coming of the Messiah will be associated with national repentance is clearly seen, as noted, in Zechariah 12:10; it is also implied in Malachi 4:5–6. Peter's commands with the promises attached fit well with Jewish expectations of that time. Peter was saying that if Israel repented, the Messiah would come and the kingdom would arrive.³¹ His statement is consistent with others before him.

ROMANS 1:16

In this verse Paul wrote that the gospel was given “to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” Similar words occur in 2:9–10. These phrases are commonly taken to refer to historical order, meaning that the gospel went first to Jews and then to Gentiles.³²

Lenski links Jews and Greeks together and translates the phrase “first of all for both Jew and Greek” and then makes a distinction between Greek and barbarian as verse 14 does.³³ Cranfield simply says this is “quite unlikely.”³⁴

Although “first” (*πρῶτον*) may refer to time, it is better here to see it as referring to rank. As Moo states, “However much the church may seem to be dominated by Gentiles, Paul insists that the promises of God realized in the gospel are ‘first of all’ for the Jew. To Israel the promises were first given, and to the Jews they still particularly apply.”³⁵

³¹ Obviously Peter was not aware of how much time would elapse between Jesus' first and second advents before the kingdom would arrive. And so he could make a legitimate offer to the nation. J. Sidlow Baxter, who strongly defends the idea of a kingdom offer in Acts 3, believes the entire Book of Acts revolves around the kingdom's contingency. This offer, in Baxter's view, comes to a climax and conclusion in Acts 28. He of course also believes Matthew described the same contingency of the kingdom (*Explore the Book* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960], 5:161–62; 6:17–35).

³² Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Man's Ruin* (Wheaton, IL: Van Kampen, 1952), 1:177; Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 29–30; William R. Newell, *Romans, Verse by Verse* (Chicago: Moody, 1951), 22; and William G. T. Shedd, *A Critical Doctrinal Commentary on the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans* (1879; reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1967), 16. However, C. E. B. Cranfield says that Romans 9–11 disproves this view (*The Epistle to the Romans*, International Critical Commentary [Edinburgh: Clark, 1975], 1:91).

³³ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (Columbus, OH: Wartburg, 1945; reprint, Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961), 76.

³⁴ Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 1:91.

³⁵ Douglas Moo, *Romans*, Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1991), 1:64. See also John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 1:28.

But why should “first” be understood as a reference to priority in rank? The answer may be found in Acts 13:46. After the Jews of Pisidian Antioch rejected the message of Paul and Barnabas, they boldly asserted, “It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles.” This action is repeated three other times in Acts (18:6; 19:9; 28:28). Why then was it necessary to go to the Jews first? Because the coming of the kingdom is conditioned on Israel’s response. The kingdom was promised to Israel, and the Gentiles would participate in it only when they worshiped Israel’s God. However, the promises to Israel cannot be fulfilled until Israel repents (Zech. 12:10; Matt. 23:39).

ROMANS 11

Israel will be saved (Rom. 11:26) in the millennium when the Old Testament promises to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, and the prophecies by the prophets of the Old Testament will be fulfilled. But this will occur only when Israel repents. Paul spoke of this as a grafting in by God. “And they also, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again” (v. 23).

As Cranfield explains, “Not only are the Gentile Christians to beware lest they themselves fall from faith. They are also to recognize that, if the unbelieving Jews desist from their unbelief, they will be restored—grafted back into that holy stock from which they have been broken off. The Gentile Church is not called upon to pass judgment on them, but rather to expect this miracle with eagerness.”³⁶ Stifler says, “Here again there is a contingency. God does all, but He acts also on the human conscience and will meditately. He would influence the Gentiles by fear lest he be broken off; He would move Israel by hope, the hope of regaining its lost standing. His rejection is not absolute and final.”³⁷

Paul affirmed that this can happen only because of God’s work. He “is able [δύνατος] to graft them in again” (v. 23). That is, Israel will repent because of God’s grace working in their hearts. Zechariah 12:10 will then be fulfilled. “I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only

³⁶ Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2:570.

³⁷ James M. Stifler, *The Epistle to the Romans* (New York: Revell, 1897; reprint, Chicago: Moody, 1960), 193.

son, and they will weep bitterly over Him, like the bitter weeping over a firstborn."

A FINAL NOTE

Why focus on the coming kingdom while many believers today in the present age are overwhelmed by the millions of people who are killed by civil warfare, AIDS, malaria, and famine? Why be concerned about the coming kingdom when 250,000 lives were lost in a single day in the tsunami of December 2004, when the world faces the threat of the pandemic Asian bird flu, when the lives of many people are lost in hurricanes, and people are dying in wars and terrorist attacks? True, the world has been beset by sin, wars, and disease ever since Adam's sin. This is man's day and Satan is the god of this age. The conclusion is obvious—this is not God's promised kingdom. Jesus is not now exercising absolute regal authority. However, someday the world will be blessed by the fulfillment of His Davidic inheritance. May that day come soon!



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