

Q14) Is the Kingdom of God literal or spiritual?

Question: Has God had a literal kingdom on earth? Does God have a literal kingdom on earth? Will God establish a literal kingdom on earth? If so, what form will it take? Is it only to be understood in a spiritual sense, or will it be a literal, earthly kingdom? Is the Church the kingdom of God on earth?

Answer: All these questions can be answered from the Word of God. The first thing we find is that the nation of Israel was intended to be God's kingdom on earth. From the very beginning of her history, God declared:

*"Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be **a peculiar treasure unto me above all people**: for all the earth is mine: And ye shall be unto me **a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation**" (Exod.19:5-6).*

God gave the children of Israel a land for an everlasting possession, and He gave them a king whose descendants would reign over them for ever. To David, He said:

*"And thine house and thy kingdom shall be **established for ever** before thee: thy throne shall be established for ever" (2 Sam.7:16).*

Furthermore, God was the king of Israel: *"The Holy One of Israel is our king" (Ps.89:18)*. Samuel told Israel, *"The LORD your God was your king" (1Sam.12:12)*; and the LORD said, *"Yet have I set my king (Christ) upon my holy hill of Zion" (Ps.2:6)*.

By every standard, the nation of Israel was the kingdom of God on earth in Old Testament times, and the LORD was their king.

When Israel served the Lord, they stood apart from the pagan Gentiles and were a light to the nations. Gentiles who turned to the Lord left their country to live as "strangers" among God's people. There were 153,600 in Solomon's day (2Chron.2:17). Israel was not just an exclusive nation, but a haven for repentant sinners. That was the way God intended it to be. Isaiah indicated that the Temple at Jerusalem was to be for *"all people"*:

*"**The sons of the stranger, that join themselves to the LORD, to serve him, and to love the name of the LORD...even them will I bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer: their burnt offerings and sacrifices shall be accepted on mine altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all people**"(Isa.56:6-7).*

Sadly, Israel did not obey her king, and when He came to His nation they rejected Him. On Palm Sunday the crowds unknowingly fulfilled the prophecy of Zechariah:

*"Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, **thy King cometh unto thee**: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass" (Zech.9:9).*

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In the Old Testament Israel was the kingdom of God on earth, or was intended to be. Yet when Jesus addressed the self-righteous Pharisees, He warned them that only those who had genuinely sought the Lord could claim to be a part of the kingdom of God. Jesus told Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews, that unless he was “born again” he could not enter the kingdom of God (John 3:5).

Nicodemus was a Jew, and a leader of the nation of Israel, but he needed to be born again to be a part of the kingdom of God. It was an earthly kingdom but God meant regenerate people to be its members. Paul reinforced this in Romans 2:28-29:

“He is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart...whose praise is not of men, but of God.”

When Jesus saw Nathanael, He said:

“Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!” (John 1:47).

Nathanael was a “born again” Jew, a true Jew, and therefore was a member of the kingdom of God in the Old Testament sense.

The kingdom of God in the Old Testament had an elaborate structure. It had priests and prophets, and a Temple with sacrifices and feasts. Its people were given title to the land according to their tribes and in every way they functioned as an earthly kingdom. Yet Jesus drew a distinction between those who were part of the nation of Israel, and those who were part of the kingdom of heaven. He said:

*“And I say unto you, That many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven. **But the children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth**”* (Matt.8:11-12).

Obviously it was not sufficient to be born to Jewish parents to be in the kingdom of God. One had to have a genuine salvation experience; a change of heart by faith alone, just as *“Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness”*(Rom.4:3).

Notwithstanding the need for a genuine spiritual conversion, the kingdom of God in the Old Testament was intended to operate as **a literal earthly kingdom**, with material blessings for obedience. One only has to read the Palestinian Covenant (Deut 28 to 30) to see that this is true. If the nation obeyed the Lord, then He would bless their flocks, their crops, and their offspring; their enemies would flee before them and the nation would enjoy peace.

When Jesus came to His people they were anything but the objects of divine favour. The Romans ruled over them, and they had lapsed into a religion that was mere tradition without a genuine heart experience. Only

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a remnant were true believers, and **this remnant made up the kingdom of God** in the midst of the nation. When the Pharisees came to Jesus and asked “*when the kingdom of God should come*” (Luke 17:20), Jesus said it would not come “*with observation*” (lit. “*near view*”). **They would not see it.** Then He said, “*...the kingdom of God is within you*”, literally, “*in the midst of you*”. “*You*” is plural. The godly remnant was the true kingdom of God in the midst of an ungodly nation. The Pharisees were not “born again”, and were not part of that remnant. They expected an earthly kingdom, but without repentance, a kingdom where Israel was the head of the nations (Deut.28:13), as promised by God in the Palestinian covenant. An earthly kingdom was God’s plan; Jesus did not deny it. The Pharisees were part of Israel, but not part of the kingdom of God.

Jesus did not deny a future earthly kingdom of God, but simply said that it would not be seen **in the near future**. The establishment of Christ’s kingdom on earth would occur only after Jesus came again, as “*the lightning...shineth unto the other part of heaven*” (Luke 17:24). Even then, it would only be possible because of Israel’s repentance and trust in the Lord. They must first experience conversion, as described by Ezekiel:

“*A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you:..And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes..*” (Ezek.36:26-27).

The nation of Israel and the kingdom of God **will merge** when “*all Israel shall be saved*” (Rom.11:26). Jeremiah tells us that this will occur during the Tribulation, which he calls “*the time of Jacob’s trouble*”(Jer.30:7). The LORD said through Ezekiel,

“*I the LORD build the ruined places, and plant that that was desolate: I the LORD have spoken it, and I will do it. Thus saith the Lord GOD; I will yet for this be enquired of by the house of Israel, to do it for them*” (Ezek.36:36-37).

When Israel turns to the Lord, the blindness that they have experienced will be removed. The vail shall be taken away (2Cor.3:16) and “*all Israel shall be saved*” (Rom.11:26). God will make a New Covenant with Israel (Jer.31:31) and the nation that will not serve them “*shall perish*” (Isa.60:12).

The Kingdom of God in the New Testament

What, then, of the New Testament Church Age? Does the kingdom of God exist in this Church Age?

The Church, unlike Israel, is not structured as an earthly kingdom. We do not have a land, a king, or the promise of earthly blessings. We do not have an earthly temple or animal sacrifices. There are no feast days, and we do not keep the sabbath. Our men are not required to go to Jerusalem three times each year to appear before the Lord; but we “*are come unto mount Sion,*

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*and unto the city of the living God, the HEAVENLY JERUSALEM” (Heb.12:22). The Church is a **heavenly** people. “Our conversation (citizenship) is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour.”(Phil.3:20).*

Christians who practice observance of the Jewish festivals have failed to learn the heavenly character of the Church, which is the Body of Christ and the Bride of Christ (Eph.1:22-23).

Has God’s kingdom ceased since Israel officially rejected her king? Certainly not! However, the relationship between the Church and Christ is not that of a king with his subjects, but of the Bridegroom with His Bride. Just as the husband is the head of the wife, so Christ is the head of His Body, the Church. Christ is nowhere seen in Scripture as the king of the Church, and much of the emphasis currently being given to Christ as King in the Church is unscriptural.

Christ is, nevertheless, the “*blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords...*” (1Tim.6:15), but His relationship with His Church is not that of a king with his subjects, but of a Bridegroom with his Bride. We are “*espoused... to one husband, that*” we might be presented to Christ as a “*chaste virgin*” (2Cor.11:2).

John the Baptist was an Old Testament saint, but he could say:

“He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom’s voice: this my joy therefore is fulfilled” (John 3:29).

John the Baptist was not a part of the Church, but as a part of Israel he was a friend of the Bridegroom. The Church is the Bride.

Having established the unique relationship of the Church with Christ, as first revealed to the apostles (Eph.3:1-9), we nevertheless find frequent mention of the kingdom of God in the New Testament. The Acts of the Apostles states that the apostles preached the “*kingdom of God*”. See Acts 8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23,31.

Every Christian, like the Colossians, has been “*translated...into the kingdom of his dear Son*”(Col.1:13), while warnings are given to those who continue in gross sin that “*they which do (practice) such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God*”(Gal.5:21; See also Eph.5:5 & 1 Cor.6:9-10).

Peter likens the Christians to a number of things: a “*spiritual house*” made up of “*living stones*”; “*a holy priesthood*” which offers up “*spiritual sacrifices*”; “*a royal priesthood*”; “*a holy nation*”; “*a peculiar people*” (2 Peter 5,9).

Although Peter describes the Church as a “*holy nation*”, there is not the slightest suggestion that Christ is king of the Church, or that the Church inherits all the blessings promised to Israel in the Old Testament.

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We should note that the kingdom of God in the New Testament consists only of those who are truly “born again”. The seven letters to the seven churches in Revelation chapters 2 and 3 are a prophetic description of the **professing Church from Pentecost to the Rapture**, and it is obvious that those within each stage of Church history who are described as **“overcomers” are the saved remnant** within Christendom (Rev.3:5; 1John 5:4-5). Christendom, in this Church Age, has become like Israel was; a formal, traditional, religious system generally preaching works for salvation. The Bride of Christ is the remnant within Christendom.

Questions Arising

If one has to be “born again” and enter the kingdom of God in order to get to heaven, doesn’t that automatically assume that we are **subjects** in the kingdom of God and Christ is our King? Why would the Apostles preach the kingdom of God if they did not expect those who were saved to become subjects of the king?

Let us ask another question. Would Christ choose His Bride from those who are not members of His kingdom? Could the bride perform her duties as the wife of the king if her loyalties were to another kingdom? Certainly not.

Every queen must be a member of the kingdom over which her husband rules, however, she is not classed as a subject of the king, but his wife. She shares the throne with her husband, and in the same manner we who are saved in this Church Age are heirs of God and joint-heirs with Jesus Christ. **We reign with Christ!** What an exalted position we occupy! No wonder Paul describes this privilege as the *“dispensation of the **grace** of God”* (Eph.3:2).

Some would argue that the Church has replaced the nation of Israel, and that it is now the kingdom of God and Christ is her king, but this totally ignores the unique relationship that Christ has with His Church. The bride of any king is still part of his kingdom, but the bride’s position is quite different from that of the subjects. They are his servants; she is his wife.

Israel has been put aside in this Church Age, but that is only *“UNTIL the fullness of the Gentiles be come in”* (Rom.11:25). Once the Gentile Bride of Christ is complete, she will be removed by the Rapture, and Israel will turn to the Lord during the Great Tribulation; the *“time of Jacob’s trouble”* (Jer.30:7).

So it is quite true that when souls are saved in this Church Age they become part of the kingdom of God; they submit to Christ’s rule, but they receive far, far more. They are espoused to the King, and one day at the marriage supper of the Lamb will be displayed as the Lamb’s wife to the glory of Christ in His millennial kingdom (Rev.19:7-9).

After the Millennium, when John is offered a glimpse of *“the bride, the Lamb’s wife”*, he is shown the **heavenly Jerusalem** descending out of

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heaven from God. The foundations of the city have the names of the 12 Apostles upon them. It is the Father's house of many mansions which Jesus has gone to prepare for His own. The names of the tribes of Israel are on its gates, and the "*nations of them which are saved will walk in the light of it*".

Obviously, in the eternal kingdom of God the distinction of Jew, Gentile, and Church, will be maintained.

- 1) **The Church is the Bride; the wife of the Lamb in the New Jerusalem.**
- 2) The Jews are the "*servants of God*" (Rev.7:3), and Christ will be **the king of the Jews upon** the everlasting throne of David. The names of the twelve tribes are on the pearly gates of the city, and **they surround the city.**
- 3) The Gentiles from Old Testament and millennial times will serve Christ **in the New Earth. To the Gentile nations, Christ will be the King of kings.**

