

The Kingdom of God and the Glory of the Cross

Patrick Schreiner

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The Kingdom of God and the Glory of the Cross

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The Law

Reviving Hope in the Kingdom

The closing lines of Norman Maclean's celebrated novel *A River Runs Through It* are known for their beauty but also their mystical and enigmatic meaning:

Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world's great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of those rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs. I am haunted by waters.¹

Water and Words

The two key symbols in Maclean's work merge in this passage: water and words. The river is the backdrop to his narrative, but Maclean

1. Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 161.

understands that under the watery rocks are words. Words shape the reality of the river of his life.

In a similar way, the Hebrew Scriptures start with water and words. God as the King, through his words, separates the water from the dry land, setting up a place to put his people to form his kingdom. The water feeds the tree of the kingdom in Genesis, eventually spilling over into Revelation. All things merge as the river flows out from the throne of God and the Lamb and nourishes the trees of the land (Rev. 22:1). But underneath this water lie words, words from the Creator to shape the ebb and flow of the growth and decline of the kingdom.

My aim in this chapter is to show you that Jesus did not invent the concept of kingdom. Rather, it started in the garden and has always concerned people, place, and power. The earth was divinely designed to serve as the place of the kingdom for the people of the kingdom. Beginning the first act of this narrative is the Law (Pentateuch), which voices how kingdom hope thrives, is corrupted, and then revives; stories of failure, hope, swindling, faithfulness, murder, and trust gather momentum as the tapestry of God's drama for all of creation unfolds.

The Kingdom Story in the Law	
Creation	Establishing the kingdom
Fall	Corrupting the kingdom
Call of Abraham	Reviving hope in the kingdom

Kings and Queens

In the beginning God creates people and place by his power.² God separates the heavens and the earth, bringing order out of chaos. He

2. As Merrill writes, "The kingdom story begins with the first sentence in the Bible: 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.' By this simple but majestic affirmation, both king and realm are introduced; and in the six days that follow, the citizens of the kingdom, inanimate and animate, appear in their course until mankind, the crowning glory of the Creator, takes center stage. . . . The stage has been set, the players are ready, and the drama may now begin." Eugene H. Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion: A Theology of the Old Testament* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2006), 278.

populates the earth with animals, but the crown of his creation is humankind. Man and woman are formed from the dust of the earth, establishing an enduring connection between the ground and mankind. Adam and Eve are given tasks to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth and subdue it, and to have dominion over it. Humankind enjoys the presence of God and is to extend the blessings of God's fellowship to all of creation.

Adam and Eve are made to be king and queen. While God is the definitive King, because he is the Creator and his kingly rule is universal, he makes Adam and Eve to be those who carry out his rule. They are also to rule the earth and bring order as God has done. God includes them in his world-forming, kingdom-creating plan. Although the early narratives of Adam and Eve do not explicitly label them as king and queen, at least two hints in the text give that effect.

First, Adam and Eve are created in the image and likeness of God. The idea of image and likeness communicates two main ideas: (1) kingship and (2) sonship. In the ancient world, kings were depicted as representing or constituting the image of God, so they ruled on behalf of God. These ancient kings were characterized as images of the gods, and as living images they maintained or destroyed cosmic harmony. The kingdom concept began with Adam and Eve in the garden; they were God's subjects made to rule the world.

The second hint that they are to be kings and queens is that God placed Adam and Eve in the garden, the temple of God's presence, and tells them to "work" and "keep" the garden (Gen. 2:15). These same Hebrew terms, rendered here in Genesis as "work" and "keep," are combined elsewhere in the Old Testament to explain the priests' role in the temple (see Num. 3:7-8; 8:26; 18:5-6). Adam and Eve are to maintain the created order of the sacred space of the sanctuary, filling and subduing the world (Gen. 1:28). Garden and temple expansion is the King's plan to conquer the outer chaotic sphere with order and

goodness. Adam and Eve are to administrate the kingdom under God's authority, forming the earth and bringing flourishing to all nations.

In a tragic twist, Adam and Eve seek to usurp God's authority. They reject God's kingdom and eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. There were two trees in the garden: the tree of life and this tree of death. Adam and Eve chose the tree of death and were cast from the place where God's presence dwelt.

The kingdom plan was *corrupted* when a rival kingdom slithered into the ear of Eve and Adam. The vice-regents, who were to carry out God's blueprint for all of creation, chose to follow the Serpent and personally offend the King of the universe. Now chaos and sin frustrate the desire to rule the earth and subdue it. False kingdoms are instantly part of the picture. Every generation afterward will face the same choice: which kind of kingdom will they construct?

God's judgment on Adam and Eve is displacement from the garden; his redemption will have to include re-placement. This re-placement can come only through a new king. Adam and Eve have failed as king and queen, and a new king is needed to set things right in creation.

God promises Eve that one of her children will be this new king (Gen. 3:15). Only through this enigmatic "seed" will God bring restoration to all of creation, but the offspring of Adam and Eve will continually war against the Serpent until the promised child crushes the head of the Serpent. As Dempster says, "This battle will determine who will have dominion over the created order."³

The rest of the book of Genesis—indeed, the whole canon—is set up to fulfill this promise of a coming King. Genesis is structured around genealogies of the progress of the seed. Humanity is to bring place into being by living according to the rules of their king. They

3. Stephen Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), 69.

are, in some sense, to construct the kingdom. Unfortunately, the Old Testament shows that all of Adam's offspring fail in this task.

The Downward Spiral of Genesis 3–11

Adam's commission to be the king to rule the earth and expand the temple is passed onto his offspring. But so is his rebellious nature. God gives the kingly commission to Noah and his sons (Gen. 9:1, 7), to Abraham (Gen. 12:2; 17:2, 6, 8, 16), to Isaac (Gen. 26:3–4, 24), to Jacob (Gen. 28:3–4, 14), and to the nation of Israel (Deut. 7:13), indicating that each successive generation is conceived of as royalty. The genealogies in Genesis chart both the progress and regress of the seed and show God's faithfulness to his promises despite the mutiny of his children. Some of Adam's seed are chosen to bring blessings; others are not: it is Seth, not Cain; Shem, not Canaan; Abraham, not Nahor; Isaac, not Ishmael; Jacob, not Esau.⁴

Because God endowed humanity with royal authority, that authority could also be warped. While the people of God seek to bring the kingdom to earth, their striving only compounds their plight. Genesis 3–11 pictures the downward spiral of Adam's children. They become autonomous kings with selfish rather than selfless desires, and the people-to-people strife affects the locale of the kingdom, as it always does.

Cain murders his brother Abel in Genesis 4. God curses Cain from the very ground that received his brother's blood. Cain is made to wander and flee his home, the opposite of a king dwelling in safety in his palace. Reliving his parents' fall, Cain's sin triggers an avalanche of chaos that fills the earth. Therefore, God decides that the time has come to clear the earth and start over with a righteous man.

God sends the flood in Genesis 6 as a sign of his judgment upon

4. Bruce Waltke, "The Kingdom of God in the Old Testament: Definitions and Story," in *The Kingdom of God*, Theology in Community (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 62.

the kingdoms of the earth who have turned to their own ways. There is a righteous seed left—Noah and his family are saved on a boat and called to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth, just as Adam was (Gen. 9:1, 7). Noah and his family are the new rulers on the earth.

The cycle of creation and de-creation continues. God creates; God's people destroy; he restores. Just as Adam and Eve's garden was on a mountain (Ezek. 28:14), so too Noah's new creation begins on Mount Ararat. Afterward the people attempt to establish a kingdom of their own. Noah eats of the vine instead of the tree. His children endeavor to build a tower with its top to the heavens so that they can make a name for themselves (Gen. 11:4). Unified but rebellious, humanity seeks to build a kingdom without God—in defiance of their King.

God's plan to dwell with humanity, and with humanity serving as stewards of his kingdom, has been warped. The fruit of Adam and Eve's rebellion is that people are in strife, and the places they seek to establish are frustrated by overgrown weeds. The ground works against them, and the bearing of children comes with pain. However, God's kingdom purpose will be not thwarted. God's plan will continue in those who believe he will work all things for their good and bring them into a good place.

Kingdom Hope Revived in Abraham

The miserable backdrop of the Tower of Babel is not the final gasp of the good kingdom. In Genesis 12 the kingdom hope is *revived* as God's covenant with Abraham sets into motion the fulfillment of the promise made in the garden about a King who will come and conquer the Serpent. The Serpent killer will come through the seed of Abraham. Through this covenant relationship God will establish his rule, resulting in blessings to people and places. So Abraham, like Adam, is cast as a kingly figure (Gen. 12:2–3; 17:2, 6, 8, 16; 22:18),

and he will bear royal descendants (“Kings shall come from you,” Gen. 17:6).

God promises to make Abraham into a great nation, to bless him, to make his name great so that he will be a blessing (Gen. 12:1). The parallels with Adam leap off the page.⁵ Just as Adam was to extend the blessings of God to all people across the whole earth, so Abraham is going to be made into a great nation to bless all people. In Genesis 3–11 the word *curse* is used five times to portray the effects of sin. Now in Genesis 12:2–3 the word *bless* returns five times to make clear that God intends to reverse the curse. Abraham is to leave his land, but he will obtain more land; he is to leave his kindred, but God will make him into a great nation; he is to leave his Father’s house, but he will become a blessing to all people. Abraham will be a blessing to all nations by being a kind, just, and fair ruler like God. God revives the kingdom hope through the covenant he makes with Abraham.

Concepts	Power	People	Place
Abraham leaves his father’s house	his kindred	his country
Abraham obtains blessing to all people = ruler	great nation	land

The narrative continues to portray Abraham as a kingly figure. Abraham goes out and fights for Lot and conquers other kings. Even the king of Salem (Melchizedek) comes out to meet him and blesses him, calling him the possessor of heaven and earth (Gen. 14:19). But before Abraham can be made into a great kingdom, he must have his first child. The seed, the people of the king, must continue.

5. The same commission that is given to Adam, Noah, and Abraham is passed down to Isaac (Gen. 26:3–4, 24), Jacob (Gen. 28:3–4, 14; 35:11–12; 48:3, 15–16), and corporate Israel (Gen. 47:27; Deut. 7:13). Gordon Wenham says, “What Abram was promised was the hope of many an oriental monarch.” Gordon John Wenham, John D. W. Watts, and Ralph P. Martin, *Genesis 1–15*, ed. David Allen Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, Word Biblical Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 275.

Although God makes his promise to Abraham in Genesis 12, not until nine chapters (and twenty-five years!) later is Isaac born. Isaac is given the same promise that God had made to Abraham (Gen. 26:3–5). The text explicitly says that the whole earth will be blessed as a result of Abraham's obedience. God was searching for a righteous steward of his kingdom, and because Abraham believed God, it was counted to Abraham as righteousness (Gen. 15:6).

If one figure, beyond Adam and Eve, serves as a focal point upon which the rest of the kingdom story expands, it is Abraham. The rest of the Scriptures detail how the promise to Abraham springs to life through the wandering, disobedience, and victory of the people of Abraham. Joined with this emphasis is the journey of the seed toward the Promised Land, their occupation of the land, and their eventual exile from the land.

The reason Abraham is so important is that, like Adam, he is a kingly figure and the instrument through which God will establish his kingdom upon the earth. God's desire is to bring harmony to all things. What Adam disrupted, Abraham's family will mend.

Preservation of the Seed

The hope of the kingdom was revived with the promises made to Abraham. The rest of Genesis consequently concentrates on the preservation of Abraham's seed through various tragedies, mistakes, and sins. The greatness of Abraham's family is not in their wealth, strength, cunning, or even their faithfulness. No, Abraham's family becomes great because God is loyal to his promises—*he* safeguards the lives of Jacob and Joseph. Joseph's story, in particular, is about the conservation of the sons of Abraham despite the evil actions of Joseph's brothers selling him into slavery (Gen. 50:22). Joseph finds himself in Egypt and eventually rises to second-in-command.

However, God's immediate purpose is for Joseph to provide food

for the sons of Abraham when a seven-year famine hits the whole earth. As a result of the famine, the people of Abraham move to Egypt to be sustained. Before Genesis ends, we see Jacob gather his children and bless them. He singles out his son Judah and promises him kingship in the last days. “The scepter shall not depart from Judah, / nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, / until tribute comes to him; / and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples” (Gen. 49:10). A new king is coming, and he will come from the loins of Judah.

Exodus begins by noting how great and numerous the people of Abraham had become in Egypt, and because of that, the Egyptians begin to fear the people of Israel and thus mistreat them. The sword of the Serpent and the sword of the seed clash against one another. The kings, from each respective line, will war with one another until the last great battle. In the grand narrative, Egypt was a pit stop for Israel; the promise to Abraham was that his descendants would have their land, and to have their land, they needed to get out of Egypt.

So God releases them from slavery in Egypt by his great redemption and takes them on a journey to their land. Although the land was an end, it was not the end in itself. The land was to be a place of rest and security, ensuring that the people could worship their God and also be a blessing to other nations. The story of the garden kingdom had not been dropped from the narrative. On the contrary, it had just begun.

The Law of the King

When God rescues the people out of Egypt, he first leads them to Mount Sinai to give them the law (*torah*). Readers regularly begin to lose the kingdom story here. What is the point of this law in relationship to the kingdom?

Ancient Near Eastern kings regularly gave their people legal treaties or laws to sanctify the people and encourage justice with their

neighbors. In the same way, God gave covenantal instruction to his people so that they would serve as subrulers of his kingdom on earth, as they ought. God's objective was always to establish his kingdom on the earth, and the law was meant to form not only personal ethics but also a community.

The Mosaic covenant demonstrates God's determination to advance his kingdom on the earth through his people. The law given at Sinai directs, guides, and instructs the people in their spread of justice and peace (*shalom*) and worship of him. Thus, Moses commands parents to teach their children the Torah, because their retention of the land is dependent upon it (Deut. 6:1–9).

The people are designated as a “kingdom of priests” and a “holy nation” (Ex. 19:6). Readers should immediately think of God's instruction to Adam and Eve as kings and priests. This description is both a reality and a goal that the people are to strive for. With the language of kingdom here, it is clear: the law coheres with what God will do on the grand scale. By obeying the law God's people will become a true “kingdom of priests,” thereby serving God and all of creation. “Israel will thus redefine the meaning of dominion—service.”⁶

They will also be a holy nation. The term *nation* is parallel to the term *kingdom* and thus an economic and political term. A *holy* nation is one set apart and consecrated for God. His people are consecrated to act as his stewards in the kingdom by following the law. The law does not suspend or halt the kingdom narrative; it advances the kingdom promises to both Adam and Abraham.

Law and kingdom are twin siblings; the law pushes readers to connect what was happening at Sinai with the rest of the narrative. God was constructing a community, a nation, through which he would reign, and his people would govern with him, bringing order

6. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*, 101–2.

to a disordered world. If the people followed the law, then the kingdom of heaven would disrupt the kingdoms of this earth and reestablish Eden. The Torah was the King's instruction manual to his vice-regents. If the kingdom was a tree, then the Torah watered its roots. But how specifically was this weak, failing nation to disrupt the kingdoms of this earth?

Leviticus answers that question, giving in-depth instructions about what it means to be a holy people of a holy God. The book divides into two sections: (1) laws of the tabernacle (Lev. 1:1–16:34), and (2) laws of the community (Lev. 17:1–27:34)—in other words, laws concerning *place* and laws concerning *people*. The people are to keep the place of tabernacle in such a way as to mirror God's dwelling, and they are to act amongst themselves so as to reflect a holy King. Communing with God is to be the means to bless all nations.

Although Leviticus divides into two parts, the two parts are related. If the tabernacle is not prepared, the nation will not be fit to meet God. If the nation is not suitable, then the tabernacle will be defiled. As L. Michael Morales notes, "Life with God in the house of God—this was the original goal of the creation of the cosmos, and which then became the goal of redemption."⁷ If this was the goal, Leviticus specifies the means of that goal: prepare the house, prepare the nation. Dwelling with God also means ruling with God. The book of Leviticus expresses how the people can be holy and thus rule with their holy God. The specifics of the Torah, given from their true King, are explained in marvelous detail because God would construct his kingdom through his people.

But the narrative about the Torah is not all positive. Again and again it is clear that the people *could not* keep the law, so a partial solution is provided. At the very center of Leviticus is the Day of

7. L. Michael Morales, *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord? A Biblical Theology of the Book of Leviticus* (Nottingham, UK: IVP Academic, 2015), 17.

Atonement. If the aim of Leviticus is to point the people toward dwelling with God, then the means by which that will happen is the Day of Atonement. The life of the flesh is in the blood, and it is by the blood, by the life of another life, that one makes atonement (Lev. 17:11). Through the life of another the divine presence of God is enjoyed. Once atonement has been made, God's people can enter into the Most Holy Place, which represents fullness of life.⁸

The kingdom includes people, but they must be *remade people*, different from their forefathers who rejected God's kingship. God remakes his people through the Torah and sacrifice. Unfortunately the law also points to how they fail to be kings and queens. To enter the presence of God, to be the people of God, to be in the place of God, to be the kingdom of priests and the holy nation, blood must be poured out, for they cannot keep his precepts.

Sacrifice is the center of the kingdom plan.

Seeking Their Home

Leviticus depicts the details of God's kingdom plan, but Numbers continues where the narrative of Exodus leaves off. Numbers is framed with the theme of "generations," which recalls Genesis and the progress of the seed. It begins with a generation that should have entered the Land of Promise but has failed to do so because of unbelief. Numbers closes with a census of a new generation poised to inherit the land. Thus, the book of Numbers is about the people of Israel and their journey to occupy their kingdom.

However, that is not all the book is about. "The strength of Israel did not ultimately come from its army. Israel's uniqueness and power came from the presence of the Lord in their midst."⁹ The power and

8. *Ibid.*, 31.

9. Thomas R. Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 68. Can I quote my dad? Yes, I can. I just did.

presence of their King is central to the story, but it is a power operating for the nation if they obey the covenant.

Unfortunately, as in Genesis and Exodus, Numbers develops the theme of the disobedience of the seed of Adam. They complain about their circumstances (Num. 11:1–3), they grumble about eating manna all day (Num. 11:4–10), they are paralyzed by fear (Num. 13:28–29, 31–34), and they turn against their leaders. In sum, they fail to believe the Lord despite all he has done for them.

So the Lord threatens to destroy the people and raise up a new generation, but Moses intercedes for the people. Sparing the people from utter destruction, God's judgment on them is obstruction from the Promised Land (Num. 14:21–23). Longing for their land is a theme woven throughout the Pentateuch. Adam was displaced from the garden, Jacob's family was displaced in Egypt, and here Israel is made to live in the wilderness.

However, the disobedience of the people does not nullify the kingdom promises God had made to his people. While the wilderness generation is judged, a new generation is coming that will occupy the land (Numbers 21–36). Moses intercedes for them by lifting up a bronze serpent, and all who look upon the serpent are healed. The odd symbol implies that the way to the land is through death. Only through looking death in the face will people be able to enter the kingdom. Life comes by passing through death.

Numbers begins with the people sitting on the edge of the land. Yet only those who obey, albeit imperfectly, will inherit what the Lord has promised. The land is reminiscent of Eden, with palm groves that stretch afar, like gardens beside a river, like cedar trees beside the waters (Num. 24:6).

The disobedience of the people does not ultimately cancel out the promises God had made to both Adam and Abraham, although there are immediate consequences. Even the pagan prophet Balaam