

AUTHOR:

Jacob J Scholtz

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3560-0204>**AFFILIATION:**

Discipline Group Old and New
Testament Theology
University of Stellenbosch

CORRESPONDENCE TO:

Jacojanscholtz@gmail.com

DATES:

Published: 24 November 2022

HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Scholtz, J.J., 2022. A Critique of Ladd's 'Already but not Yet' View of the Kingdom. *KOERS — Bulletin for Christian Scholarship*, 87(1). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.19108/KOERS.87.1.2531>

COPYRIGHT:

© 2022. The Author(s).
Published under the Creative
Commons Attribution License.

A Critique of Ladd's 'Already but not Yet' View of the Kingdom

ABSTRACT

The kingdom of God is an important subject for theology and for a Christian worldview. As one of the most influential theologians of the twentieth century, George Eldon Ladd is arguably the father of the widely held 'already but not yet' view of the kingdom. Ladd contends that the kingdom can be both present and future at the same. The key to Ladd's theory is his definition of the kingdom. If the kingdom can be present and future at the same time, Ladd realises that logically it cannot *also* be so in the same sense. Therefore, he postulates that Jesus offered a new and unexpected form of the kingdom, arguing that the New Testament radically reinterprets the Old Testament and calling this the mystery of the kingdom. This article critiques Ladd's definition of the kingdom. The kingdom cannot logically be present and future at the same time. Moreover, Jesus did not offer a new 'form' of the kingdom. Regarding the mediatorial kingdom of God, the missing key is the word 'conditional'.

Key Words: George Eldon Ladd; 'already but not yet'; kingdom of God; mystery

Opsomming

Die koninkryk van God is 'n belangrike onderwerp in teologie en vir 'n Christelike wêreldbeskouing. George Eldon Ladd is een van die invloedrykste teoloë van die twintigste eeu en in alle waarskynlikheid die vader van die "alreeds-maar-nog-nie" siening van die koninkryk. Ladd voer aan dat die koninkryk tegelykertyd teenwoordig én toekomstig kan wees. Die sleutel tot Ladd se teorie is sy definisie van die koninkryk. Ladd beseft dat as die koninkryk gelyktydig teenwoordig én toekomstig is, kan dit logieserwys nie so in dieselfde sin wees nie. Daarom stel hy voor dat Jesus 'n nuwe en onverwagte vorm van die koninkryk aangebied het, die Nuwe Testament herinterpreteer skynbaar die Ou Testament radikaal – en hy noem dit die geheimenis van die koninkryk. Hierdie artikel kritiseer Ladd se definisie van die koninkryk. Logieserwys kan die koninkryk nie gelyktydig teenwoordig en toekomstig wees nie. En Jesus het nie 'n nuwe vorm van die koninkryk aangebied nie. Wat die mediatoriale koninkryk van God betref, die sleutel-insig lê opgesluit in die woord "voorwaardelikheid".

Sleutelwoorde: George Eldon Ladd; "alreeds-maar-nog-nie"; koninkryk van God; geheimenis

1. Introduction

The kingdom of God is a subject of such vital importance that Peters (1972:31) confers on it the 'first place in Biblical and the first place in Systematic theology.' Vlach (2017:21) believes the 'kingdom of God is the grand central theme of Scripture that encompasses all other biblical themes.' Whether the doctrine of the kingdom should carry such freight is debatable; suffice to say that focusing on the kingdom of God is a 'key element that gives

biblical theology its coherence' (Goldsworthy, 2008:4). An understanding of the kingdom undoubtedly influences one's worldview. Although the kingdom of God is a central theme of Scripture, yet it may be 'on the whole underemphasised in the church and in theology' (Van Wyk, 2015:1).

Seventy years ago, George Eldon Ladd advanced a theory known as the 'already but not yet' view of the kingdom of God. Ladd's model of the kingdom has been very influential. For example, a-millennialist Riddlebarger (2013:37) follows an 'already/not yet' view of the kingdom and describes Ladd as the 'most articulate and influential historic premillennialist on the American scene during the twentieth century.' Storms (2015:335-336), another a-millennialist, likewise understands the kingdom as 'now and not yet' and acknowledges that Ladd 'greatly helped' him to understand 'God's purpose in redemptive history'. According to Vlach (2017:38), '[f]ew theologians of the twentieth century have been as influential as George Eldon Ladd in their kingdom beliefs.'

Ladd's model of the kingdom is so dominant that many theologians in all three millennial camps - a-millennialists, post-millennialists and pre-millennialists alike—accept it. That is surprising, because supporters of this kingdom idea do not, and indeed *cannot*, mean the same when they use the phrase 'already but not yet'. For example, a-millennialists and post-millennialists understand the words 'but not yet' to refer to the eternal state, but pre-millennialists employ this phrase to refer to a millennial kingdom that will merge into the eternal state. When the kingdom is said to be 'already but not yet', is the universal kingdom of God in view, or is the mediatorial kingdom being referenced—or perhaps both?¹ What specifically is 'already' and what is 'not yet'? As Ladd (1974:39–40; cf. 1952:77–78; 1959:18; 1994:61) readily and repeatedly admits, the question of a basic definition of the kingdom is 'all-important', even 'fundamental'.² It certainly is key.

This article has three purposes: First, the purpose is to summarise Ladd's 'already but not yet' view of the kingdom as documented in *Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God* (1952), *The Gospel of the Kingdom* (1959), *The Presence of the Future* (1974),³ *The Pattern of New Testament Truth* (1968), and *A Theology of the New Testament* (1994). Second, to define the kingdom of God. Third, by focusing mostly on the Synoptics, critique Ladd's 'already but not yet' view of the kingdom.

2. The Kingdom of God According to Ladd

Salient features of Ladd's 'already but not yet' view of the kingdom of God are summarised.

2.1 The problem as well as the key to the solution

When Ladd (1952:21) starts his investigation into understanding the kingdom of God, straightaway he asks: 'Is the kingdom present or future? ... Is it the present reign of God in the hearts of men, or is it a future reign of Christ on earth? Can it be both?' This question reverberates throughout his work (1959:24–51; 1968:47). A *key* is needed to provide 'an essential unity between the two concepts' of 'whether the Kingdom of God is both present and future' (1952:59). Ladd (1974:120–121; cf. 1994:61) summarises the issue: 'One of the most important tasks of modern biblical theology has been the search for the key to this problem of how the Kingdom can be both future and present.'

In *Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God*, he (1952:60) states: 'The New Testament requires a view of the kingdom which involves both a present spiritual reign of Christ within

1 These terms are defined in section 3.

2 Henceforth references are to works by Ladd, unless otherwise noted.

3 First published in 1964 under the title *Jesus and the Kingdom*.

the lives of God's people, and a future glorious reign on earth.' In *The Gospel of the Kingdom*, he (1959:27) describes 'this age' as a period when 'we are to expect hostility to the Gospel', and the 'age to come' is viewed as a time when believers 'will be freed from all opposition and sufferings and will enjoy eternal life.' These two ages will be separated by the second coming of Christ and the resurrection of the dead (1959:27). And yet, Ladd (1959:42) adds that we live 'between the times', a time when this age and the age to come presently overlap: The 'Kingdom of God belongs to The Age to Come. Yet The Age to Come has overlapped with This Age.' Matthew 12:28 and Hebrews 6:5 are frequently used to substantiate the claim that the powers of the age to come have already invaded or penetrated this age (1952:86–91; 1959:41, 47–49; 1968:55; 1974:139–145; 1994:63). In *The Presence of the Future*, Ladd (1974; emphasis added) provides a detailed summary of the problem and his proffered solution:

If the Kingdom of God, by definition, is the eschatological realm of redemption, the age to come, and if Jesus proclaimed simply the imminence of this new age, it is difficult to see how the insuperable difficulties mentioned above [that the kingdom is also present] can be avoided. On the other hand, if the Kingdom is primarily an experience of God in the human heart, a personal relationship between the individual and God, then perhaps the eschatological and apocalyptic elements have no real place in Jesus' teaching and are to be sloughed off as views which he shared with his contemporary first-century Jewish kinsmen but which lack relevance either for his real message or for the modern man. If, however, the Kingdom is the reign of God, not merely in the human heart but dynamically active in the person of Jesus and in human history, then it becomes possible to understand *how the kingdom can be present and future*, inward and outward, spiritual and apocalyptic (pp. 41–42).

2.2 The nature of the kingdom offered

Ladd (1952:83) understands the kingdom of God as 'primarily a soteriological concept.' The "history" of the kingdom of God is therefore the history of redemption, viewed from the aspect of God's sovereign and kingly power' (1952:84; cf. 1959:132). According to Ladd (1959:107), it 'cannot be denied that Jesus offered the Kingdom to Israel.' But Jesus 'did not offer them the kingdom they wanted' (1952:113). Ladd says the offer of the kingdom of God to Israel was neither for a political kingdom involving national and material blessings, nor for a 'national restoration of Israel' (1959:109, 111). Instead, the kingdom of God was 'first to come to men in a spiritual sense' (1952:114). Apparently, 'Jesus reinterpreted the prophetic hope in terms of a spiritual rather than a military conflict' (1974:150). Jesus 'addressed Himself to the individual; and the terms of the new relationship were exclusively those of personal decision and faith' (1959:109; cf. 1974:109–110). Even though a few Israelites responded, the 'Jews as a whole refused this new relationship' (1959:109). The kingdom in 'its new manifestation was taken away from Israel and given to a new people'—the church (1959:114). Nevertheless, Ladd (1959:119–121) envisages a future salvation of Israel: a 'repentant Israel' will welcome Christ 'when he comes at the end of history to carry out God's judgment and final redemption' (1994:200–201). If the nature of the kingdom offered to Israel was *only* spiritual, how does Ladd understand a Biblical 'mystery', specifically the mystery (or mysteries) of the kingdom?

2.3 The mystery of the kingdom

The Biblical idea of a mystery is 'something which has been kept secret through times eternal but is now disclosed', even a 'divine purpose, hidden in the counsels of God for long ages but finally disclosed in a new revelation of God's redemptive work' (1959:52; cf. also 1974:222–225). Ladd (1959, my emphasis) describes the mystery of the kingdom as follows:

God's Kingdom is to work among men in *two different stages*. The Kingdom *is* yet to come in the form prophesied by Daniel when every human sovereignty will be displaced by God's sovereignty. The world will yet behold the coming of God's Kingdom with power. But the mystery, the new revelation, is that this very Kingdom of God has now come to work among men but in an utterly unexpected way. ... It

has come quietly, unobtrusively, secretly. (p. 55)

Although Ladd (1959:110) says the mystery is an utterly unexpected 'form' of the kingdom, he (1974:225; 1968:60; 1994:91) also connects the mystery to the Person and mission of Jesus. But how can the kingdom be both present and future? Ladd's key to the solution lies in his definition of the kingdom of God.

2.4 The definition or meaning of the kingdom

After starting philologically in the New Testament—not the Old Testament—Ladd (1952:78; cf. 1959:19) states that the 'primary meaning of the New Testament word for kingdom, *basileia*, is "reign" rather than "realm" or "people".' An emphasis on the authority of the king, the kingly rule, is said to be an 'abstract meaning' of the word *basileia* (1952:79–80). The central meaning of 'kingdom' is 'the abstract or dynamic idea of reign, rule, or dominion rather than the concrete idea of realm' (1974:130). God's authority to rule with kingly power is emphasised, for the realm is of *secondary* importance when defining the kingdom (1952:83; 1968:53; 1974:133). Ladd (1952:97) understands the kingdom of God to be a 'single concept, the rule of God, which manifests itself in a progressive way and in more than one realm.' Importantly, he (1968:52) connects the kingdom to God's eternity: 'Since it is God who acts—God who is the eternal one—his present acts in history and his final act consummating redemption can be viewed as though they were a single act.' Ladd (1959) states:

A *basileia* may indeed be a realm over which a Sovereign exercises his authority; and it may be the people who belong to that realm and over whom authority is exercised; but these are secondary and derived meanings. First of all, a kingdom is the authority to rule, the sovereignty of the king. (p. 19)

To buffet this abstract meaning of *basileia*, Ladd (1952:79; cf. 1959:20–21; 1974:123, 135) frequently employs Luke 19:11–27, claiming that the nobleman who went into a far country to receive a kingdom, received 'clearly neither the domain nor the subjects, but the authority to rule as king in the given domain over its people.'⁴ Similarly, Revelation 17:12, 17–18 is also often used to show that ten kings will receive '*authority as kings*', which Ladd understands as focusing on the 'royal power' to rule, rather than on a realm (1952:79; cf. 1974:134).⁵ Or Revelation 5:10 is repeatedly employed to highlight that a 'redeemed people' constitute the kingdom 'not because they are subjects of the king, but *because they share his regal power*' (1952:79–80; cf. 1974:134).⁶ 'The Kingdom is God's kingly rule' (1974:58).

2.5 Summary

Ladd (1952:77; emphasis added) is convinced that the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament 'require us to hold an interpretation of the kingdom of God which is a future eschatological reality and which *at the same time is in some sense or other a present reality*.' Ladd (1952:77), a premillennialist, says that if the kingdom 'means a *single realm* over which the King reigns, then Berkhof is right in his insistence that premillennial doctrine logically excludes any present spiritual kingdom.'⁷ 'The kingdom, the domain, the realm of Christ's

4 To which McClain (1959:18) responds: 'Would any average reader of the parable, feeling no urgency to prove something, conclude that when the kingdom was given to the nobleman, he received only an abstract "authority" and not authority over *something*, that is, the actual subjects in the realm over which he was chosen to rule?'

5 Revelation 17:18 states, however, that they are kings 'of the earth', a clear reference to a realm.

6 Revelation 5:10 continues to say in the same verse that these believers will, in the future, reign 'over the earth'.

7 Ladd refers to Berkhof (1951:166): 'Premillenarians (*sic*) are compelled by the logic of their system to deny the present existence of the kingdom of God.' Berkhof's statement, and Ladd's endorsement of it, will be disputed.

reign, if there is but one realm', continues Ladd (1952:77–78), 'can hardly be future and present at the same time.' Indeed, the law of non-contradiction (A is not non-A) states that no two contradictory statements can both be true at the same time *and* in the same sense. Consequently, Ladd's key to the solution as to how the kingdom can be both present and future at the same time is to define the kingdom of God *primarily* with reference to God's sovereign reign and kingly power, and only *secondarily* or *derivatively* with a realm, realms, or stages in redemptive history. This anchors his definition of the kingdom in the eternity and omnipotence of God and this *appears* to solve the problem of how the kingdom can be both present and future at the same time.

But logic dictates that it cannot be so at the same time *and* in the same sense. Therefore, Ladd argues that Jesus offered an utterly new 'form' of the kingdom to Israel, providing two reasons to justify his stance. First, he (1974:150) claims that Jesus reinterpreted Israel's prophetic hope. Apparently, the New Testament involves a 'rather radical reinterpretation of the Old Testament prophecies' (1994:373). Second, according to Ladd, in his Person and mission the Messiah offered a new and utterly unexpected 'form' of the kingdom—a mystery.

3. Towards a Definition of the Kingdom of God

Given the importance of a definition, how may the kingdom of God be defined? The *universal kingdom of God* may be defined as 'God's macrocosmic rule through his exclusive, sovereign dominion over all of creation, a rule without pause or end' (Beacham 1996:235).⁸ As the nontemporal and omnipotent Creator, God rules over all He has created (cf. Ps 103:19; 1 Chr 29:11). God is the Creator, He providentially sustains it, and sometimes He intervenes miraculously in his creation. Once God created, He sovereignly rules into eternity over all he has created. The realm which God created is *not* eternal: it has a definite beginning, depends on God for its continued existence, and has a definite ending. The present heavens and earth will be made new in the eternal state.

As noted by McClain (1959:17) and others (Beacham, 1996:235; Vlach 2017:28–29), a kingdom comprises a total situation of *at least* three essential elements: (1) A *ruler* with adequate authority and power; (2) A *realm* of subjects to be ruled; and (3) The actual exercise of the function of *rulership*. All three elements are simultaneously needed for a kingdom, and there cannot be a kingdom in the total sense without a ruler, a realm, and the actual exercise reigning function (McClain, 1959:17; Vlach 2017:29). Regarding the *universal kingdom of God*, the three elements of a kingdom are simultaneously in place: God is actively exercising his rule over all his creation. In his definition, Ladd emphasises the first element of a kingdom and specifically designates the second element of a kingdom as being of 'secondary' importance.

What complicates an understanding of the kingdom is that God has *delegated* authority to humankind to rule over the earth (Gn 1:26–28; Ps 8; Heb 2:5–8). This introduced *conditionalities* into the equation. Obviously, Adam and Eve cannot just do as they please. Adam and Eve's right to rule over the earth on God's behalf is *conditional* upon obedience to the rule of the Divine King of the universe (Peters, 1972:227). Further, it is impossible to rule over nothing. Humankind is to exercise the function of rulership from, and over, the earth (and not, for example, from and over Mars). If the first and second elements of a kingdom are in place, that alone is not enough. When God anointed David as king (1 Sm 16:13), the actual exercise of the function of rulership only commenced much later, first in Judah and subsequently over all of Israel (2 Sm 2:4; 5:1–5). The same holds true for the nobleman who receives authority to rule, but only starts to exercise the function of rulership over the realm

8 Contrary to Berkhof (see note 7), the current existence of the universal kingdom, which includes the spiritual, is not denied.

when he returns (Lk 19:11–27). Within the overarching universal kingdom of God, one can provisionally state that there exists a more limited divine kingdom over the earth, namely the *mediatorial kingdom of God*.

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, believers will inherit the mediatorial kingdom 'prepared for you from the foundation of the world' (Mt 25:34). Peters (1972:34) emphasizes that the 'establishment of this kingdom was determined before, and designed and prepared from, the foundation of the world.' Whatever conditions the delegation of authority to humankind over the earth may have introduced, this is part of God's eternal plan, so Christ *must* establish the kingdom on the earth.

If Adam and Eve had perfectly obeyed God's will, then the rule of God would have perfectly been manifested on earth as it is in heaven. And, for a while, that was indeed the case. When God created the universe, but before the fall of Satan, Adam and Eve, the rule of God was perfectly manifested in all of creation. At that time, the universal and mediatorial kingdoms were indistinguishable from each other (Beacham, 1996:235).

After Adam and Eve's fall, the will of God was not done on earth as it is in heaven. Focusing on the realm of the earth is therefore *crucial*, *not* of secondary importance. Not only is humankind incapable of restoring its relationship with God, but God must also enable humans to perfectly obey him, otherwise delegated authority will again be squandered.⁹ Much of the Bible's storyline is about how the just and loving God will, by His grace, not only provide salvation through Christ, but the Last Adam will also restore humankind's rule over the earth (cf. Gn 3:15). After Christ has abolished all rule and authority and power, and defeated the last enemy, He will hand over the mediatorial kingdom to God the Father (cf. 1 Cor 15:23–28; Php 2:9–11). In the eternal state, the sovereign rule of the eternal God will perfectly be manifested in the new heaven and be mediated by the Lord Jesus Christ over the new earth—and the universal kingdom and the mediatorial kingdom will again be indistinguishable (cf. Rv 22:3).

But in the meantime, *conditions* related to the mediatorial kingdom still exist and have not all been fulfilled. God instituted human government in Genesis 9, but after all the nations fell into idolatry at Babel (Gn 10–11), God created a new nation through Abram. Israel was chosen to be the nation through which God would mediate his salvific and kingdom blessings. The nature of God's relationship with Israel can be seen in two kinds of covenants. According to Weinfeld (1970:184–186), after both Abraham and David had already obeyed and served their Master loyally in truth and righteousness (Gn 12:4; 22:18; 1 Ki 3:6; 9:4), God established a covenant of 'royal grant' with Abraham (Gn 15) and David (2 Sm 7:8–16). As Anderson (2018:149) notes, 'covenants of grant are conditioned upon obedience, but are unconditional after their inauguration (at least for the initial recipient).' Therefore, Abraham will receive the promised land, seed, and blessing (cf. Gn 15); David will have an everlasting dynasty with Messiah sitting on the glorious throne of David (cf. 1 Chr 17:14; Ps 89:4). An obligatory type of covenant, reflected in the Sinai covenant, 'constitutes an obligation of the vassal to his master, the suzerain' (Weinfeld 1970:185). The 'suzerainty-vassal covenants', writes Anderson (2018:149), 'are unconditional in their initiation, but conditioned after inauguration.'

How could later generations of Israelites participate in the blessings of the grant covenants, specifically the Abrahamic covenant? If Israel had obeyed the Mosaic covenant (which pointed to the Messiah), then she would have experienced the blessings of the Abrahamic and other covenants of grant (McClain, 1959:62–64; Woods 2016:24–27). Unconditional covenants such as the Noahic, Abrahamic, Davidic and the New covenant, are the *means* or *vehicles* through which God's kingdom program is manifested on the earth (Vlach 2017:96).

9 Believers that have received their glorified bodies will be able to perfectly mediate God's rule on earth.

Eventually, Christ will either himself fulfil God's unconditional covenants promises, or ensure that it is fulfilled.

God established a theocracy over Israel at Mount Sinai. The Lord did not force a kingdom upon Israel; all Israel accepted the Lord's call (Ex 19:8). But at a pivotal point in Israel's history, the elect nation requested Samuel to 'appoint a king for us to judge us like all the nations' (1 Sm 8:5). God responded to this grievous sin in mercy and forgiveness, but He did not give Israel exactly what they asked for (McClain, 1959:99). Israel does not have the right to appoint a king of its own choosing; instead, the universal King will anoint the mediatorial king. Peters (1972) explains:

God, foreseeing this very sin of the nation, made provision for it already through Moses (thus evidencing *both* His foreknowledge and a Divine Purpose to be accomplished). To avert the evil, and overrule it for good, He gave express directions (Deut. 17:14–20) that the choosing of such a King should be under *His exclusive control*, and that such a King *must acknowledge* the Theocracy as existing - i.e., God's supremacy in the Kingdom—making his rule *subordinate* in all respects to that of the Chief Ruler (p. 227).

This adds *another condition* for the establishment of the mediatorial kingdom, namely that Israel 'shall surely set a king over you whom the LORD your God chooses' (Dt 17:15a). Not only will God anoint the king of Israel, but the nation *must* accept God's anointed. According to Woods (2016:26), 'An important provision of the Mosaic Covenant is that Israel must enthrone the king of God's own choosing (Deut. 17:15).' 'Until this condition of Israel's acceptance of her Messiah has been satisfied, the kingdom cannot come to the earth' (Woods, 2016:77).

The kingdom in Israel ended when God's glory left the temple in Jerusalem (Ezk 8–11). As punishment for its idolatry, Israel was expelled from the land and taken to Babylon. But Israel's disobedience did not abrogate the covenants of grants given to the patriarchs and to David. The post-exilic prophets did not 'radically reinterpret', transcend, or spiritualize earlier Old Testament revelation (cf. Hg 2:6–9; Zch 14:16–21). The kingdom will yet be restored to Israel, as Beacham (1996:236) writes: 'God was not finished with this kingdom. The Old Testament prophets who had forecasted its demise also consistently foretold its consummate restoration (Lv 26:40–46; Ezk 11:14–20; Hs 1:10–11).' Echoing throughout the Old Testament is the promise that if a generation of faithful Jews repent, the blessings of the various covenants of grant (e.g. Abrahamic, Davidic) would be received in a restored kingdom to Israel under the Messiah (Anderson 2018:148–150; Woods 2016:27).¹⁰ Multiple, unconditional prophecies portray a future salvation and restoration of Israel to its land in the kingdom—if, and when, Israel repents.¹¹ The Jewish people could not have expected anything other than a restoration of the literal, physical, earthly kingdom by the Messiah—but they had to meet the spiritual requirements to enter this kingdom. Unsurprisingly then, when John the Baptist and Jesus burst onto the scene, they proclaimed: 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near' (Mt 3:2; 4:17).

The definition of the mediatorial kingdom of God must address the fact that certain *conditions* must be met. First, humanity's right to rule on God's behalf over the earth is conditional upon impeccable obedience to the King of the universe. In this regard, Adam failed, but the Last Adam always succeeds. Second, Israel must accept the king of God's

10 Unbelievers (unbelieving Israelites included) will not enter the kingdom when the Coming One will establish his rule over Israel and all the nations—but all believers (Gentile believers included) will enter it.

11 For example, Lv 26:40–45; Dt 4:25–31; 30:1–6; Jr 3:11–18; 31:35–37; 33:25–26; Ezk 36:22–30; Hs 5:15–6:3; Jl 3:18–21; Zph 3:14–20; Zch 12:10–31:1; 2 Chr 7:14. See also New Testament texts such as Mt 23:39; Ac 3:19–21; Rm 11:1, 11–12, 26–28.

choosing (Dt 17:15). Until the second condition is met, the mediatorial kingdom of God will not be restored (cf. Hs 5:15-6:3; Mt 23:39; Ac 3:19-21). Third, God's rule over the earth is to be mediated through persons that have the human nature. Given these conditionalities, the mediatorial kingdom may be defined as God's rule over the earth through the Messiah-King whose will is perfectly subordinated to the King of the universe; who will exercise this function of rulership over the earth; and who must be enthroned by a faithful Jewish generation. Ladd's kingdom beliefs will now be critiqued.

4. Criticising Ladd's Kingdom Beliefs

Ladd's kingdom beliefs rest on the view that the kingdom of God can be present and future at the same time *and* that such be so *not* in the same sense.

4.1 The definition of the kingdom

The elevating of the abstract or dynamic reign to a 'primary' level, and the relegating of concrete realms or stages of history to 'secondary' importance, *seemingly* allow Ladd to anchor his definition of the kingdom of God on the omnipotence and eternity of God. Ladd links the first and third elements of a kingdom—a *ruler* with adequate authority and power and the actual exercise of the function of *rulership*—to God's eternity, and then claims that the kingdom of God is both present and future at the same time. But the realm of God's kingdom was created, and it exists in time, in history. God's creation does not possess the attribute of eternity. Neither the universal kingdom nor the mediatorial kingdom of God exist outside of time. Ladd (1959:25) affirms the Biblical worldview of time as 'a linear concept', and he (1968:43) confirms that this age and the age to come are 'two consecutive periods of time' that are 'divided by the Parousia.' Consequently, the kingdom of God cannot logically be present and future at the same time. Moreover, concerning 'this age' and the 'age to come', believers are not now living 'between the times' (contra Ladd, 1959:42). Ladd uses the eternity of God—and God is indeed beyond and above time—to claim that the kingdom of God can, *in history*, be both present and future at the same time. No, it cannot.

Ladd's definition of the kingdom of God was criticised soon after his first book was published. McClain (1959:17) argued against a 'royal authority without a realm, or a king without a kingdom', adding that terms such as the kingdom of God are 'intended to convey meanings which are pertinent to actual situations in the world of reality with which common men are somewhat familiar.' More recently, Goldsworthy (2008) remarked:

Some have sought to distinguish between a realm and the dynamic of God ruling and to opt for one or the other as the meaning of the kingdom. I find this distinction unconvincing. The Bible does not leave the kingdom in the abstract. If God rules, he rules somewhere, even if somewhere is everywhere. There is no abstract rule without a realm (p. 7).

But it seems that not even Ladd can really separate the 'secondary', concrete realm from his abstract idea of a kingdom reign for too long. Commenting on Matthew 6:10, he (1959:21), understands the petition to mean asking God to 'reign, to manifest His kingly sovereignty and power, to put to flight every enemy of righteousness and of His divine rule, that God alone may be King over all the world.' In the next sentence, Ladd (1959:22) admits: 'However, a reign without a realm in which it is exercised is meaningless.' It appears that Ladd has destroyed his entire argument. Indeed, the definition of the kingdom of God *must* include the realm; it cannot be relegated to secondary or derived importance.

4.2 The nature of the kingdom offered

Logically, the kingdom cannot be present and future at the same time (as Ladd claims) *and* in the same sense. Ladd therefore postulates that during the first advent, Jesus offered a new and utterly unexpected spiritual 'form' of the kingdom, claiming that the New Testament radically reinterprets the Old Testament and calling this the mystery of the kingdom. This

part of Ladd's influential theory is widely accepted today, but the Synoptic Gospels paint a different picture.

4.2.1 *Expectations at the time of Jesus's birth*

Contrary to Ladd's view, expectations around the time of Jesus's birth do not suggest that a new form of the kingdom was to be offered. Before Jesus' birth, God sent the angel Gabriel to Mary, revealing that Jesus would receive the throne of his father David, reign over the house of Jacob, and have a kingdom that will have no end (cf. Lk 1:26–33). This holy angel's message was neither wrong nor too concrete. Surely Mary should have understood this message in accordance with numerous Old Testament prophecies concerning a Jewish king who would also rule politically (cf. Is 9:6; Jr 23:5–8). There is no suggestion that Mary should have radically reinterpreted Old Testament prophecies and expectations. Further, Mary did not expect *only* a political king, but she *also* rejoiced in God her Saviour (cf. Lk 1:47). The same can be said for the father of John the Baptist: Zacharias expected the Messiah to save Israel from their enemies *and* to bring spiritual salvation (Lk 1:68–75). The Gospel of Matthew starts by introducing Jesus Christ—in this order—as the 'son of David' *and* as the 'son of Abraham' (cf. Mt 1:1). And when the Magi arrives in Jerusalem to come and worship the 'King of the Jews', even unbelieving Herod interpreted the Child as a threat to his political administration (cf. Mt 2:1–12). In agreement with Vlach (2017):

The Jewish expectations of Mary, Zacharias, Simeon, and Anna should not be glossed over or dismissed. Nor should we view their beliefs as needing to be transcended by later revelation. These people, under divine guidance or inspiration, believed the coming Messiah would bring salvation and national deliverance for Jerusalem and Israel. Their understanding is consistent with the message of the OT prophets and an important indicator that the storyline begun in the OT is the storyline that the NT will build upon (pp. 261–262).

4.2.2 *Relying on Old Testament revelation*

As no definition of the kingdom was provided by John the Baptist, Jesus, the twelve apostles and the seventy, the Jews could *only* understand what was meant by the kingdom by relying on Old Testament revelation. In agreement with Woods (2016:56), since 'the use of the term "kingdom" early in the Gospels is left undefined, and consequently the reader is left without any clue as to its alleged abrupt change of meaning into something entirely spiritual, this New Testament use must be identified by its Old Testament usage.' What was meant by the kingdom is undeniably the restoration of the kingdom in Israel (cf. Mt 19:28; Ac 1:6). Even though there are spiritual requirements to enter this kingdom, the nature of the kingdom is clear: The Jewish people could not have expected anything other than a restoration of the literal, physical, earthly kingdom by the Messiah. If Jesus offered Israel a kingdom that differed radically from God's Old Testament revelation—without ever explaining a change of meaning of 'kingdom'—then the Israelites would have had every reason to reject Jesus as being a false messiah.

To show the dangerous folly of such a supposed 'radical reinterpretation' of God's Word, imagine someone arriving on the scene *today*, who claims to be Christ, offers a kingdom unrelated to any Biblical revelation, and who even performs signs and wonders to substantiate his claims. Would you have any Biblical grounds to accept such a person as the anointed one? What if he says he is merely 'radically reinterpreting' the Bible? Would you trust him if he claims his utterly new and unexpected 'form' of the kingdom was a 'mystery'? Sadly, many will fall for such a ruse when the antichrist appears on the scene (cf. Jn 5:43; 2 Th 2:9–10).

The New Testament writers indeed note non-literal fulfilments of Old Testament passages, but they do not, Rydelnik (2019:114) insists, 'interpret the Hebrew Bible in a creative,

atomistic, or non-contextual way', but rather 'their hermeneutics were contextual and reflective of the intent of OT passages.' When Ladd sees a non-literal fulfilment of an Old Testament text or prophecy in the New Testament—be it a typological, applicational or summation fulfilment—he *assumes* that it *must necessarily* follow that unconditional and as-yet-unfulfilled Old Testament prophecies will not literally be fulfilled to the people to whom God originally made such promises to. But what God promised unconditionally, He will fulfil to those people it was promised to, for God cannot lie.

4.2.3 *Not new to insist on a spiritual basis for the kingdom*

The Lord undoubtedly insisted on a spiritual basis for his kingdom, but this is *neither new nor utterly unexpected*. If the kingdom announced as 'at hand' by the Lord, 'had been exclusively a "spiritual kingdom", or as some have defined it, "the rule of God in the heart", such an announcement', writes McClain (1959:303), 'would have had no special significance whatever to Israel, for such a rule of God had *always* been recognized among the people of God.' As noted earlier, Israel must repent before the kingdom will be restored (cf. Mt 4:17; 11:20; 23:37). Mere physical descent of Abraham does not guarantee entrance into the kingdom (cf. Mt 3:9); one must be born again to enter the kingdom (Jn 3:5). But again, insisting on a spiritual basis for the kingdom is neither new nor utterly unexpected. Importantly, it also does not abrogate the moral, ethical, political, social, economic, and other aspects of the mediatorial kingdom. Ladd's definition of the kingdom at best relegates the physical realm of the mediatorial kingdom to secondary importance; at worst, it opens the door to Platonic tendencies to spiritualize God's purposes. 'The idea of a "spiritual" kingdom-only smacks of Platonism and its elevation of the spiritual over the physical', writes Vlach (2017:46), adding that the 'kingdom of God has spiritual requirements and characteristics, yet it also is physical and national with a relationship to the earth.' In agreement with McClain (1959):

The notion that a spiritual kingdom can have no relation to considerations which are the stuff of physical existence, is one of the strangest idols ever constructed in the cave of the human mind. God is spirit and wherever His power breaks supernaturally into the system of nature, the cause may properly be called spiritual, whatever the effect may be, whether the healing of a disease, the raising of a dead body, the regeneration of a sinner, or the setting up of a political state on the earth (p. 522).

4.3 *Conditionality and the mediatorial kingdom*

The key to understand difficult kingdom-sayings in the Gospels is not to radically redefine the Old Testament's kingdom promises as Ladd does, but to recognize the *conditionality* of the offer of the kingdom. A consideration of conditionality is something which Ladd completely ignores. In agreement with Peters (1972:364–365): '[T]his preaching of the nighness of the Kingdom, this offer of the Kingdom to the Jews at the First Advent on condition of repentance, is the *key* to the commingling of the Advents of Christ.' It certainly is of crucial importance.

4.3.1 *Conditionality during Jesus' first advent*

Jesus Christ subordinated his will perfectly to that of God the Father, the Ruler of the universe (cf. Mt 4:2–11). What is still required for the mediatorial kingdom to be established is that Israel must accept the king that God had chosen (cf. Dt 17:15). The kingdom that Jesus offered to the Jewish generation living at the time of Christ's first advent was identical to what the Old Testament prophets had predicted. Jesus authenticated his messianic claims in word and deed (cf. Mt 5–9) and sent apostles to Israel with the gospel of the kingdom (cf. Mt 10). Will this be the faithful Jewish generation that God has been looking for? Will they repent, obey the Mosaic covenant which points to the Messiah, and then participate in the blessings of the covenants of grants given to David and Abraham (and others) in the promised kingdom? As is evident already in Matthew 11, the Jewish generation living at the

time of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ were unwilling to repent (11:16–24).

Matthew 12:28 is 'Exhibit A' of Ladd's kingdom theory. But in this Matthean context, it is instructive to keep the three elements of a kingdom in mind. There is no doubt that God the Father had given Jesus Christ the right to rule in Israel. Further, in the Person and works of Christ, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, glimpses of the actual exercise of the function of rulership had come in Israel at that time. Jesus declared, 'But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom has come upon you' (Mt 12:28). For Ladd, 'that's' it, because in his definition of the kingdom the second element of a kingdom—a *realm* of subjects to be ruled—has been relegated to 'secondary or derived' importance. Granted, two of the three elements of a kingdom were indeed in place, namely the right to rule with power and the actual exercise of the function of rulership. But the realm over which Jesus was to rule, in terms of subjects in the land of Israel, was in the *very process* of *rejecting* his Messiahship. There cannot be a kingdom in the total sense without a ruler, a realm, and the reigning function. Contrary to Ladd's claim, Matthew 12:22–32 undoubtedly shows that 'this generation' in Israel's history did not want to set Messiah as king over it as God stipulated in Deuteronomy 17:15. No wonder Jesus was beside himself (Mk 3:21). As a result, the *national* sin of blaspheming the Holy Spirit was met with a *national* judgement (Mt 12:32; Woods, 2016:70). As Jesus later explained to Israel's religious leaders, the possibility of the mediatorial kingdom being established in their day was taken from them and will be given to a future Jewish generation who will repent, enthrone the Messiah, and produce the fruit of the kingdom (cf. Mt 21:43; 23:39; Woods 2016:231–232). Moreover, the point of the parable in Luke 19:11–27—a parable Ladd often refers to when he defines the kingdom—is to explain that the kingdom was *not* going to appear immediately because its establishment has been *delayed* (Hixson & Fontecchio, 2013:134).

4.3.2 Conditionality and Jesus' second coming

Ladd's definition of the kingdom cannot make provision for any conditionality relating to the establishment of the mediatorial kingdom at the time of Jesus's second coming. But if the restoration of the Davidic kingdom was conditional upon the elect nation accepting the Messiahship of Jesus—which 'this generation' rejected during the first advent—must the same condition apply before the kingdom will be established at Christ's second coming? Yes. In a context which is undeniably Jewish (Mt 23:37–39), Jesus says that the Jews will not see Him again until they say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the LORD!' (Mt 23:39). In agreement with Allison (1983:77; cf. Vlach 2017:374–379), Matthew 23:39 is to be understood as a conditional prophecy, because the 'date of redemption is contingent upon Israel's acceptance of the person and work of Jesus.'

The same condition is also evident when considering the forerunners to Christ's first and second advent. Ladd (1974:199) considers the prophecy of Malachi concerning Elijah to have been fulfilled in John the Baptist. But to the contrary, what is said in Matthew 11:14 is that John the Baptist will have fulfilled the role ascribed to Elijah only *if* (the conditional Greek particle εἰ) 'you are willing to receive it.' As the immediate and larger contexts make clear, John the Baptist was rejected by 'this generation' (Mt 11:16–19; 14:1–12). Since the condition was not met, John the Baptist is not Elijah (cf. Mt 17:10–11).

Could John the Baptist have fulfilled the prophecy mentioned in Malachi 4:5–6 relating to Elijah the prophet? Even though John the Baptist was not literally the prophet Elijah (Jn 1:21), but only 'Elijah-like', the Gospels affirm this possibility in terms of contingency—but also show that this conditionality was not met (cf. Mt 11:12–24). John the Baptist shared many characteristics with Elijah (cf. Mt 3:4), going before the Lord 'in the spirit and power of Elijah' (Lk 1:17a). John the Baptist even turned 'many' of the children of Israel to the Lord their God (Lk 1:16). But what John did not do is to restore 'all things' as Jesus said Elijah still had to come and do (Mt 17:11; cf. Mt 4:5–6). Jesus affirms plainly that indeed 'Elijah is coming first and will restore all things' (Mt 17:11). The meaning of Matthew 17:11 is not contradicted by

the next two verses, but rather explains what happened to the first forerunner and what would also happen to Jesus during his first advent (Mt 17:12–13; cf. 14:1–12). Elijah the prophet will come 'before the great and dreadful day of the LORD' and his task will be to prove the Messiahship of Jesus to a future Jewish generation (cf. Mt 4:5–6). Again, Ladd's definition of the kingdom can only float abstractly above the clouds; it can hardly deal with conditionality relating to actual situations in the world of reality.

4.4 *Is it a mystery?*

Ladd's understanding is that the kingdom of God 'is to work among men in *two* different stages' and that the first stage (or 'form') is a 'mystery' as the kingdom of God has 'now come to work among men but in an utterly unexpected way' (1959:55; emphasis added). But again, insisting on a spiritual basis for the kingdom is neither new nor unexpected (McClain 1959:303), so that is not a Biblical mystery. In Matthew 13 and Mark 4, Jesus provides new information about the kingdom, not information that contradicts Old Testament revelation concerning the kingdom. Whatever else New Testament mysteries may be, they cannot contradict previous revelation. But that is Ladd's claim.

Ladd (1974:222; cf. 1994:91) says the parables of Mark 4 and Matthew 13 set forth the 'single truth' of the mystery of the kingdom, which is '*the coming of the Kingdom into history in advance of its apocalyptic manifestation.*' Ladd's understanding is that the mystery of the kingdom is *one*, new, utterly unexpected 'form' or 'stage' of the kingdom. But Matthew 13:11 does not say that, for the text refers to *mysteries* [plural] of the kingdom, so how many forms or stages of the kingdom was supposedly offered during the first advent?

The parables of Matthew 13 were given in a context of judgment, possibly on the same day that Israel's religious leaders, representing 'this generation', had blasphemed the Holy Spirit (Mt 12:23–32; 13:1, 13–15, 36). If the mediatorial kingdom will not be restored in their day, what will happen during the time now known as the inter-advent age? God is gathering a harvest of believers who will enter that kingdom when Christ establishes it after his return to the earth. From Pentecost onwards, believers in Christ participate in the spiritual blessings of the New Covenant and every believer is permanently indwelt by the Holy Spirit. That still does not mean that Christ has established the mediatorial kingdom.

5. Conclusion

I have argued that the kingdom of God cannot logically be present and future at the same time. If this is so, then Ladd's 'already but not yet' view of the kingdom is flawed. I have further argued that Jesus did not offer Israel a new and utterly unexpected 'spiritual form' of the kingdom—and moreover, this 'form' is not the mystery of the kingdom. If this is true, then again Ladd's theory of the kingdom should be dismissed. The New Testament builds on the same kingdom program mentioned in the Old Testament. The key to unlocking difficult kingdom-sayings in the Gospels is not to 'radically redefine' Old Testament kingdom promises, but rather to recognize the *conditionality* of the offer of the kingdom. The restoration of the mediatorial kingdom did not happen during Christ's first advent because one condition was not met—but eventually, Israel will enthrone the Messiah-King of God's choosing. During the inter-advent age, many people are coming to faith in Christ and these believers will inherit the mediatorial kingdom that Christ will establish when He returns.

Why focus on details of a definition of the kingdom when bombs are dropping in Ukraine, millions are fleeing their country, and food prices are skyrocketing? The answer is that the universal kingdom of God is 'already', but the mediatorial kingdom of God is still 'not-yet'. Having a clear view of the kingdom and a better understanding of God's purposes for this earth gives the believer in Christ a real hope for a wonderful future. Just as Adam, his wife, and their descendants were to have mediated God's rule over the earth, so the Lord Jesus Christ, the Church, and the nations—with a believing Israel pre-eminent among the nations—will rule over the earth. At his first coming, Christ secured the victory on the

cross. Nevertheless, the New Testament repeatedly affirms that Satan is still the 'god of this age' (Jn 12:31; 2 Cor 4:4; 1 Jn 5:19). At his second coming, Christ will evict the usurper and his followers. Then the Lord Jesus Christ will return to this planet and rule the mediatorial kingdom (cf. Mt 6:10; Rv 11:15).

Dedication

This article is dedicated to Dr Andrew M. Woods and Prof Michael J. Vlach in acknowledgement of their contribution to the doctrine of the kingdom.

Bibliography

- Allison, D.C. 1983. Matt. 23:39–Luke 13:35b as a Conditional Prophecy. *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 18(5):75-84. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0142064X8300501803>.
- Anderson, D.R. 2018. *Free Grace Soteriology*. The Woodlands: Grace Theology Press.
- Beacham, R.E. 1996. "Universal and Mediatorial Kingdoms". In M. Couch (ed.), *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications. 235-237.
- Berkhof, L. 1951. *The Kingdom of God*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Geisler, N.L. 2011. *Systematic Theology: In One Volume*. Minneapolis: Bethany House.
- Goldsworthy, G. 2008. The Kingdom of God as Hermeneutic Grid. *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, 12(1):4-15.
- Hixson, J. B. & Fontecchio, M. 2013. *What Lies Ahead: A Biblical Overview of the End Times*. Brenham: Lucid Books.
- Ladd, G.E. 1952. *Crucial Questions about the Kingdom of God*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Ladd, G.E. 1959. *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Ladd, G.E. 1968. *The Pattern of New Testament Truth*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Ladd, G.E. 1974. *The Presence of the Future: The Eschatology of Biblical Realism*. London: SPCK.
- Ladd, G.E. 1994. *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press.
- McClain, A. J. 1959. *The Greatness of the Kingdom: An Inductive Study of the Kingdom of God*. Winona Lake: BHM Books.
- Peters, G.N.H. 1972. *The Theocratic Kingdom*, vol. 1. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications.
- Riddlebarger, K. 2013. *A Case for Amillennialism: Understanding the End Times*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books.
- Rydelnik, M. 2019. The Old Testament in the New Testament. In M. Rydelnik & E. Blum (eds.). *The Moody Handbook of Messianic Prophecy: Studies and Expositions of the Messiah in the Old Testament*. Chicago: Moody Publishers. 103-117.
- Scholtz, J.J. 2016. One Messiah, Two Advents, Three Forerunners: The Chiastic Structure of Matthew 11:2–17:13. In *die Skriflig* 50(1), a2125. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ids.v50i1.2125>.
- Scholtz, J.J. 2016. Vooronderstellings wat die eskatologie beïnvloed. In *die Skriflig* 50(1), a2170. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ids.v50i1.2170>.
- Storms, S. 2015. *Kingdom Come: The Amillennial Alternative*. Ross-shire: Mentor.
- Van Wyk, Jan H. 2015. Teologie van die koninkryk (Basileiologie)? Teologies nagedink oor die plek en betekenis van die koninkryk van God in die teologie en die kerk. In *die Skriflig* 49(2), Art. #1875. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v49i2.1875>.
- Vlach, M.J. 2017. *He Will Reign Forever: A Biblical Theology of the Kingdom of God*. Silverton: Lampion Press.
- Weinfeld, M. 1970. The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East. *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 90(2):184-203. <https://doi.org/10.2307/598135>.
- Woods, A.M. 2016. *The Coming Kingdom: What is the Kingdom and How is Kingdom Now Theology Changing the Focus of the Church?* Duluth: Grace Gospel Press.