

The kingdom of God in the Old Testament

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Abstract

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In recent times, the notion of the “kingdom of God” has received much interest by Old Testament scholars. Reformed theology has traditionally attached much theological value to this topic, whereas modern research is questioning the centrality of the theme. It seems as if text material on this topic is relatively limited. In this article contemporary research concerning antiquity, provenance and the development of the notion of God’s kingdom is briefly highlighted, with special emphasis on the study of the YHWH-malak Psalms. It is argued, however, that tradition-critical analysis runs the risk of insufficiently recognising the importance of the theme. The matrix of thoughts and ideas in which the theme is rooted has to be taken into account, both semantically and theologically. In this respect, the notions of creation and covenant are of special interest. Finally, both spatial and temporal characteristics of the kingdom of God in the Old Testament are delineated. The kingship/kingdom of God is still to be considered as a basic and even central notion in the Old Testament.

1. Introduction

“The kingship of God is among the most overworked topics in biblical research”, writes the Anglo-Saxon scholar Brettler at the beginning of his study *God is King. Understanding an Israelite Metaphor* (1989:13). Especially the so-called “enthronement psalms” (more correct: “Yahweh-is-King psalms”) are among the most disputed text groups in the Old Testament, says the German scholar Jeremias in the first sentence of his book *The Kingdom of God in the Psalms* (1987:7). These unanimous comments on both sides of the Atlantic are not very encouraging for

someone who wants to investigate the broad theme of “The kingdom of God in the Old Testament”. Indeed, in several of the past decades, Old Testament scholarship has produced a vast quantity of monographs devoted to this topic. Even a cursory glance at this subject-related literature leaves the reader with at least two impressions: in the first place that – considering the broad interest in this topic among Old Testament scholars – the theme of the kingdom of God must be of special interest for the theology of the Old Testament and the history of Israelite religion; in the second place, that – considering the diversity and sometimes mutual contradictoriness of the research results – this theme must be highly complicated in the Old Testament.

Reformed theology, which has traditionally attached much value to the redemptive-historical relations within Scripture, has always underscored the great importance of the idea of the kingdom of God. In this theological tradition, the Old and the New Testament are read in terms of the line of the expectation of the kingdom of God. In this case, the theme is very broadly defined and encompasses the totality of God’s rule in the past, present, and future. Sometimes the entire history of revelation is subsumed under the heading of the kingdom of God, as the centre or the unifying theme of the entire Bible. Some Potchefstroom theologians even take the lead in this respect. Du Toit (1969:12) for example writes:

The Kingdom idea encompasses the whole notion of the rule of God over his people and particularly the vindication of that people in glory at the end of history.

Helberg (1995:7) argues likewise:

The idea or concept of the kingdom of God runs right through the Old Testament, from Genesis to Malachi, even though the term as such never occurs in it. (...) The kingdom of God (...) entails God’s dominion in connection with creation, fall, and redemption.

This line of thought meshes with the classic view of scholars like Buber and Bright, both of whom have published influential studies on the theme of the kingdom of God. For Buber the realisation of the all-embracing kingdom of God is “the alpha and omega” of Israel (Buber, 1964:538). Bright even states that “the concept of the kingdom of God involves, in a real sense, the total message of the Bible” (Bright, 1953:7; cf. Ridderbos, 1972:24-28).

The conviction that the idea of the kingdom of God plays such a central role in the Old Testament is questioned, however, by modern research (Dietrich, 1980:251). According to a majority of scholars, the confession of God as King only began to play a significant role in a later phase of

Israel's history. Much energy has been invested in tradition-historical and history-of-religions research which seek to cast additional light on such topics as the antiquity and origin of the "God-is-King" idea, the relation to and possible derivation from analogous notions in the religions of Israel's *Umwelt*, the specific function of God's kingship in the cult, the intent of the expression *YHWH mālak* in the "enthronement psalms", the relation between God's kingship and the earthly Davidic kingship, and the development of the kingdom idea in the course of Israel's history. The most important impetus to this trend in modern research came from the Scandinavian scholar Sigmund Mowinckel, who, by analogy with the Babylonian New Year's festival with its ritual repetition of the creation of the world, the struggle against the forces of chaos, the myth of the dying and rising deity, etc., postulated an Israelite New Year's festival in which the enthronement of YHWH was said to be central and is expressed in the enthronement cry "YHWH has *become* King" (*YHWH mālak*). Meanwhile, the time when such insights from the Scandinavian and the Myth-and-Ritual school were followed with enthusiasm has passed (but cf. Gray, 1979), but a new consensus with respect to the origin and development of the theme of God's kingship has not yet crystallised.

In any case, it is clear that in the notion of the kingdom of God in the Old Testament we are dealing with a lively and fascinating theme. In this article we want to zoom in on some aspects of it, in the process taking the following route: (a) first we will take a look at the relevant pool of Old Testament texts which seems to render the theme of the kingdom of God problematic; (b) next we will note the main line of modern research in this area; (c) then we want to somewhat broaden our field of vision, both semantically and theologically, and defend the opinion that the kingdom of God is indeed a fundamental theme in the Old Testament; and (d) finally we will attempt to reconstruct the essential thrust of the Old Testament message concerning the kingdom of God.

2. Relevant Old Testament texts

A more or less technical term for the notion of the kingdom of God such as the New Testament possesses in the expression *βασιλεια των οὐρανων / του θεου* is lacking in the Old Testament. The more general notion of the *kingship* of God is the predecessor and matrix of the more specific notion of the *kingdom* of God. But for the sake of convenience we employ the term "kingdom of God" in the broader sense: a comprehensive expression which embraces the elements of "kingship", "rule", "reign", "sovereignty" and "kingdom" (cf. Klein, 1970:649). If this notion were a very important or even an all-controlling theme in the Old Testament, as Reformed theologians claim it is, one would certainly at least expect that the standard royal title *melek* would be frequently

applied to God or that God would frequently be the subject of the verb *mlk* (*qal*).

However, this is not the case either – quite the contrary is true. The epithet *melek* is assigned to God only 42 times¹. Only 13 times God is the subject of the verb *mlk* (*qal*)². Equally limited is the text group in which the abstract nouns derived from *mlk*, nouns which refer to the kingdom or the royal dignity, are directly connected with God (only 14 times):

- *malkût* in Ps. 103:19; 145:11-13 (3x); 1 Chron. 17:14; 28:5;
- *mamlākāh* in 1 Chron. 29:11; 2 Chron. 13:8;
- *m^elukāh* in Ps. 22:29 and Ob. 21 (cf. the splendid imagery in Isa. 62:3!);
- *malkū* in Dan. 4:3, 34; 6:27; 7:27; see also Dan. 2:44; 7:14, 18).

Even if one adds, as most scholars do, the texts in which there is mention of God's throne³, the text material which literally contains the notion of the kingdom of God is relatively limited.

These quantitative data become even more striking when we note the nature, distribution, and dating of these texts. As it concerns the nature of the texts, we observe that by far the majority of them are hymnic and poetic, and are in some fashion related to the Zion tradition (see e.g., Exod. 15:18; Isa. 6:5; 24:23; 52:7; Jer. 8:19; Mi. 4:17; Ps. 24:7-10; 48:3; 146:10 and the "enthronement psalms" 93, 95-99, cf. Preuss, 1991:174; Seybold, 1984:947f. and Nel, 1997:961). The theme of God's kingship evidently played a role especially in the cult, the psalmody and the prayers. Also the distribution of the texts is striking. The majority of them are located in the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, Daniel and Chronicles, and further especially in the psalms (notably in the enthronement psalms). The few text fragments which refer explicitly to a kingdom of God all belong – with the one exception of Obadiah 21 – to the books of Daniel, Chronicles and Psalms. In the juridical, historical-narrative, and

1 Numb. 23:21; Deut. 33:5; 1 Sam. 12:12; Isa. 6:5; 33:17, 22; 41:21; 43:15; 44:6; Jer. 8:19; 10:7, 10; 46:18; 48:15; 51:57; Mi. 2:13; Zeph. 3:15; Zech. 14:9, 16, 17; Mal. 1:14; Ps. 5:3; 10:16; 24:7-10; 29:10; 44:5; 47:3, 7f.; 48:3; 68:25; 74:12; 84:4; 95:3; 98:6; 99:4; 145:1; 149:2; Dan. 4:37.

2 Ex. 15:18; 1 Sam. 8:7; Isa. 24:23; 52:7; Ezek. 20:33; Mi. 4:7; Ps. 47:9; 93:1; 96:10 (= 1 Chron. 16:31); 97:1; 99:1; 146:10.

3 *kissē*: 1 Kgs. 22:19; Isa. 6:1; 66:1; Jer. 3:17; 14:21; 17:12; 49:38; Ezek. 1:26; 43:7; Ps. 9:5, 8; 11:4; 29:1; 33:14; 47:9; 89:15; 93:2; 97:2; 103:19; Lam. 5:19; 1 Chron. 28:5; 29:23; 2 Chron. 9:8; 18:18; 24x in all; cf. Tengström, 1993:28-99.

sapiential literature the theme of God's kingdom seems to be almost completely absent. As for the antiquity of the texts – at least insofar as we can date the texts with any certainty – it is clear that the theme of the kingdom of God is to be found especially in the (late) postexilic literature: Psalms, Chronicles, and Daniel. Seybold (1984:948) can with some reason say that the history of the *theologoumenon* of the kingdom of God is reflected in the statistical state of affairs. It is not surprising, therefore, that many scholars believe that the notion of God's kingdom in the Old Testament does not play a major role, let alone that it should be viewed as a unifying theme. This does not alter the fact that the idea of God's kingship did unmistakably acquire an important place of its own in the faith traditions of Israel. This explains why modern biblical research occupies itself intensively with the study of the origin and development of this idea.

3. Modern research

The discussion concerning the antiquity and provenance of the notion of the kingdom of God occupies an important place in scholarly literature. We can only briefly touch on a single component. Often scholars are of the opinion that the most ancient (dateable) text which contains the idea of God-as-King is to be found in the famous call vision of the "royal" prophet Isaiah which came to him the year king Uzziah died (ca. 740 b.C., cf. Janowski 1989:423). In Isaiah 6:5, deeply impressed, the prophet cries out: *'et-hammelek yhwh š^eba'ôt ra'û c^eênay* – "my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts". Isaiah sees the divine King in his glory sitting on his throne, the hem of his robe filling the temple. He is surrounded by the official ministers of the heavenly state (seraphim) who bring him homage. Here, according to many scholars, we encounter the close connection between the theology of Zion and the idea of the kingdom of God. God has chosen Zion where he is enthroned as King. It is no accident that it is precisely in Jerusalem that this idea could develop as it did: it was the location of the temple and the palace. It was also the place where ancient Canaanite "divine-king" ideas were indigenous. It is probable that in pre-Davidic Jerusalem the god *Zdq* was worshipped as king, as can be inferred, for example, from the name Melchizedek (Gen. 14:18ff.; Ps. 110:4; cf. the name Adoni-zedek in Josh. 10:1ff.). To be borne in mind also is the Jebusite El-Elyon cult. Meanwhile scholars are aware that Isaiah's use of the royal title was not an innovation but presupposes prior familiarity with it.

Since when did Israel view and confess God as king? Was this already the case in pre-monarchical Israel, as Buber and Bright claim? (cf. De Moor, 1990:101f.). There are in fact a number of texts which might be read to support this claim: Judges 8:23; 1 Samuel 8:7; or 1 Samuel

12:12. Especially the American scholar Mendenhall conceived Israel's form of government in the days of the Judges as a pure theocracy on this basis. Usually, however, these texts are dated later (as deuteronomistic) on account of their anti-monarchical tenor (Dietrich, 1980:264; Lohfink, 1987:45). Also texts like Exod. 15:17; Numb. 23:21; Deut. 33:5; Ps. 24 and 29 are not dated before the 10th century b.C. Many scholars are inclined to assume that concrete experience with kingship was a necessary condition for the development of the concept of the kingdom of God. The idea of divine kingship is then deemed theologically relevant only after the rise of kingship in Israel because this notion can be deployed both in an affirmative-legitimizing *and* in a critical-offensive manner *vis-à-vis* kingship. This does not mean that before that time the sense of God's majestic highness was lacking. In this connection one points especially to the ancient expression *yōšēb [hak]k^erûbîm*: "he who is enthroned upon the cherubim", (1 Sam. 4:4; 2 Sam. 6:2; 2 Kgs. 19:15; 1 Chron. 13:6; Isa. 37:16; Ps. 80:2' 99:1 (cf. Ps. 22:4)) and to the role which the ark played in Israel's history as a military palladium functioning as God's throne or footstool (Ollenburger, 1987:33-46; Westermann, 1966:1574). Also the idea of the heavenly royal court (cf. 1 Kgs. 22; Job 1; Ps. 82; the use of the plural in Gen. 1 and 6; Ps. 89, etc.) we mentioned earlier, may stem from ancient times.

What, then, is the reason why the royal title itself, or the use of the word *mlk*, was avoided in the earliest period of Israel's history? There must have been intentional reasons for this. Not only because the notion of the kingdom of God could only be made theologically operational after the rise of the monarchy but especially because from ancient times there had been in Israel a certain aversion to Canaanite ideas of divine kingship (Zenger, 1986:177; Soggin, 1975:916; Dietrich, 1980:252; Lohfink, 1987:49ff.). Also the association of the *melek* title with idolatry, for example in the context of the Molech cult, constituted a barrier (Wildberger, 1984:86). Also cf. (divine) names like Melchart, Milchom, Adrammelech, Anammelech, and the "queen of heaven". Inevitably, however, the idea of YHWH as king increasingly asserted itself, not least after the capture of Jerusalem (Westermann, 1966:1573). Royal epithets, which were applicable to the "static" divine king El and the "dynamic" divine king Baal familiar from the Ugarit-texts, were increasingly transferred to YHWH, as is evident, for example, from Psalm 29. Yet there are also striking differences between the kingship of YHWH and that of the Canaanite gods: God is king especially of the people of Israel. His kingship over the Gods is polemical and mythical in nature. He did not have to acquire his kingship in a battle with the forces of chaos, nor did he have to reconquer the kingship over and over via a cycle of death and resurrection (Westermann, 1966:1574; Preuss, 1991:177f.). Also to

be considered is the special way in which Old Testament authors speak of “my”, “our”, “your” King; in Ugaritic literature there is no parallel for this.

When a palace is built for the king in Jerusalem, also a temple (a royal chapel?) arises as a palace for God. It is probable that from that time on the notion of God’s kingship increasingly gained a place in the cult and in popular piety. God is revered as a “great King” above all God’s (Ps. 95:3), the “King of glory” who created the world (Ps. 24), King of all the nations (Ps. 47:8), King of his people Israel (“our King”, Isa. 33:22), King of individual persons (“my King”, Ps. 5:3). Especially the psalms are important in this respect. In the research the bulk of scholarly attention was devoted to the enthronement psalms we mentioned earlier. The idea that ancient Israel had a specific festival devoted to the enthronement of YHWH – for Mowinckel *the* crystallisation point of Israel’s faith and theology – cannot be definitely established. Alternative theories, such as H.J. Kraus’s “royal festival of Zion” or A. Weiser’s “covenant festival” have in the meantime been superseded (cf. Soggin, 1975:918). Scholars do consider it probable that these psalms somehow played a role in an autumn or New Year’s festival, in which the confession of God-as-King was an important element in the celebration (Janowski, 1989:453; Seybold, 1984:953). *YHWH mālak*, conceived earlier as an “enthronement formula” is usually understood today as an acclamation or proclamation formula, which does not so much express God’s *becoming* King as his *being* King (Zenger, 1986:179). The syntax indicates that it is not another god but YHWH who rules and does so from eternity. Yet it cannot be ruled out that the metaphor of enthronement applied to God may play a role in these psalms, as it presumably does in Psalm 47. It is important in any case that the cultic-kerygmatic proclamation of God’s eternal kingship was a reality already *before* the exile.

With the fall of Jerusalem in 586 b.C. we witness the end of the Davidic kingship but not of faith in God’s kingship. In a unique way it is especially Deutero-Isaiah who in this period proclaims the kingship of God. In his prophecies the creation and Exodus traditions are connected with God’s rule as king (this connection between the Exodus-tradition and the notion of the kingdom of God occurs also in late texts like Mi. 2:12; 4:7; Ps. 114:1f.; cf. Exod. 15:18 and 19:5f.). “Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel (...): I am the Lord, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King” (43:14f.). It is striking that it is *this* prophet, the prophet who in so many respects thinks in universal terms, who preaches God as the King of Israel (44:6), the King of Jacob (41:21, cf. Dietrich, 1980:263). The core message to Zion is: “Your God is King” (52:7). The kingdom of God is near! This immediate eschatological expectation, however, does not come true.

In post-exilic Judah one sees the emergence of two distinct theological lines of development. On the one hand, a priestly-theocratic kind of thought exclusively emphasises a praxis and understanding of God's kingship in the present, a praxis realised in living one's life according to the law. The celebration of the theocracy in the cult and in torah-piety belong closely together here. Also the book of Chronicles, with its emphatic articulation of God's kingship over Israel, a rule He has put into the hands of the Davidic king as his deputy (see 1 Chron. 17:14; 28:5; 29:11;23; 2 Chron. 9:8; 13:8), fits in this picture: the fact that Judah lives under Persian rule leaves God's kingship unaffected (Dietrich, 1980: 266; Kuntzmann, 1993:22)! On the other hand, in line with the same view, we increasingly see the unfolding of hope in God's coming kingdom, which takes shape in an eschatological-apocalyptic mindset. This hope can be associated with *YHWH-mālak* psalms in which the prospect of world judgment is celebrated (Ps. 96:13; 98:9). Several additions to the prophetic books testify to this kind of thinking; for example, the concluding verses of Obadiah (vv. 19-21) or the Isaiah apocalypse with its expectation of God's kingship on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem (Isa. 24:23). The impressive climax of the book of Zechariah proclaims God's universal kingship in combination with the centrality of Jerusalem (14:9, 16). Finally, on the outer margin of the Old Testament, especially the book of Daniel contains a concentrated message of the kingdom of God that *is* (4:3, 34; 6:27; 7:14) and that *is to come* (2:44; 7:18, 27).

Considering the provenance, antiquity, and development of the notion of God's kingdom, most investigators come to the conclusion that this idea does not play a central role in the Old Testament (Preuss, 1991:181; Alt, 1953:348; Klein, 1970:649; Schmidt, 1989:330).

As we survey the results of modern tradition-historical and history-of-religions research, we can draw two conclusions, positively as well as critically. On the one hand, modern research has introduced greater historical and theological relief into the theme of the kingdom of God in the Old Testament. That the confession of God's kingship has assumed varying forms in the different phases of Israel's history, precisely because of its rootedness in real life, keeps us from reading New Testament concepts into the Old Testament and opens our eyes to the singularity of the Old Testament witness. On the other hand, we cannot escape the impression that modern research is strongly hypothetical in such items as the reconstruction of the cultic life-setting of the psalms, the supposed borrowings of Jebusite-Canaanite ideas, the identification of post-exilic currents, the late dating of many texts. Consequently historical research runs the danger of insufficiently recognising the importance of the subject matter pertaining to the theme of the kingdom of God in the Old Testament.

4. A fundamental theme

Modern Bible research has convincingly demonstrated that the specific notion of the kingdom of God in the history of Israel only achieved a clearer articulation in a later phase. We must continually take into account, however, that in the Old Testament we as a rule do not get to deal with ideas and concepts which achieve a clearly definable theological identity of their own and have a history which can be clearly traced. The Old Testament does not offer “a history of ideas” but witnesses to a reality which in a variety of ways took shape in daily life. Accordingly, the value of the topic of the kingdom of God in the Old Testament cannot really be assessed with the aid of historical reconstructions alone. Of equal importance is insight into the matrix of thoughts and ideas in which this theme is rooted. “Ideas are ever larger than the words that carry them”, argues Bright (1953:11; cf. Beasley-Murray, 1986:17). In our opinion, the confession of the kingdom of God is definitely a fundamental element of God’s revelation in the Old Testament, a fundamental conviction which in the course of time was expressed in various ways but was never lacking in the faith of Israel. In the following section we want to elucidate this opinion further, both semantically and theologically.

4.1 Semantic aspects

The semantic field of the metaphor of God’s kingship has been thoroughly mapped out by Brettler. We agree with his conclusion that

... any scholarly attempt to understand God’s kingship which is limited to an examination of the root *mlk*, ‘to reign’, is fundamentally incorrect; ‘God is king’ was a productive metaphor throughout the biblical period and its entailments must be enumerated and examined to understand what the kingship of God meant in ancient Israel (Brettler, 1989:161).

In saying this, Brettler concurs with the view of Mettinger (1988:92), who calls the notion of God’s kingship a “root metaphor”. Mettinger explains this term as follows:

A metaphor that serves as a basic analogy or model (...) A root metaphor feeds a whole family of extended metaphors; it comprises the genetic code for a broad complex of ideas. In other words, the Lord as ‘King’ is a metaphor that generates other, related metaphors; it supports an entire tree and its attendant ramifications.

The idea of God’s kingship is fundamental to and associated with an entire complex of images and ideas. There is a large number of associated commonplaces between God as King and the Israelite king. A

wide range of terminology concerning royal appellations, qualities, trappings, domestic affairs, etc., is also applied to God. To refer to the thought of God's kingship, the Old Testament writers were not limited to the word group *mlk*. Available for this are also various epithets (e.g., ' *ādôn*, *š^ebā'ôt*), terms (e.g., *šp̄t*, *mšl*) and images (e.g., God as Shepherd, as Warrior, as Judge, as Shield, as Lamp, as Ruler, as Architect/Builder). With Mettinger it can be said that the fundamental understanding of God's kingship "lies beneath the surface of numerous texts, even of some that do not use 'king', 'to rule', 'throne', and so forth" (Mettinger, 1988:93). We are warranted in concluding that in the Old Testament no other complex of images is as often applied to God as that of kingship. Brettler (1989:160) states: "In fact, it is the predominant relational metaphor used of God in the Bible, appearing much more frequently than metaphors such as: 'God is a lover/husband' (...) or 'God is a father'". According to Watts (1992:136), kingship in the prophets is "the dominant image of God". Similarly, Gibson (1998:121) says that "The leading image of God in the Old Testament is undoubtedly of him as king" (cf. also Mills, 1998:5).

The fact that the royal title itself was frequently not assigned to God may, as we saw earlier, have had specific reasons in the context of the period of the early monarchy. About the current late dating of various *mlk* texts, for that matter, the last word has not yet been spoken. The tradition of a tension between the kingship of God and the desire for an earthly ruler (cf. Judges 8:23; 1 Sam. 8:7; 12:12), which goes back to the time of the judges, is plausible enough for us to take it seriously, as is the testimony of Numbers 23:21 and Deuteronomy 33:5 which places God's kingship over Jeshurun at the beginning of Israel's history. The tradition of the ark and the expression concerning him "who is enthroned upon the cherubim", according to many scholars, has ancient credentials. Also to be borne in mind is the onomasticon of that period with names like Abimelech (Gen. 20; 26), Elimelech (Ruth 1), Ahimelech (1 Sam. 21), and Malkishua (1 Sam. 14) (cf. Seybold, 1984:948f.). Another tradition with ancient roots is that concerning Zion, which, according to Ollenburger (1987:50, 146), is a core symbol of the Old Testament, the heart of which is formed by the notion of divine kingship! Important, additionally, is that in so many psalms – which stem from very different time periods – the kingship of God figures frequently; especially in the liturgy sometimes very ancient convictions of faith take shape and endure over time.

4.2 Creation and covenant

The fact that the kingship of God may be called an integrating element of Israel's faith and of the Old Testament revelation is evident not only from

semantic givens and ancient faith traditions, but certainly also from the connection between this *theologoumenon* and the notions of creation and covenant. “O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You who have set your glory in the heavens!” (Ps. 8:1). God has set his bow, the symbol of his power as creator, in the clouds (Gen. 9:13). God, the “Maker” and “Creator”, is Israel’s King (Ps. 149:2; Isa. 43:15). The entire created world is like a colossal edifice which is maintained by its Builder. In Israel the king was considered the chief builder. God, the Creator-Lord, is King and supreme Judge. The connection between pronouncements about the creation and royal forms of address may not be ignored. In all of the ancient Near East the Creator God was also honoured as King. In Israel this was no different. Implicitly – and sometimes explicitly – the recognition of sovereign dominion and kingship was included in the confession of YHWH as Creator and Sustainer of the world (cf. e.g. Amos 9:6; Ps. 24; 95). “As cosmic king YHWH is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, the one who is able to keep it running because he made it” (Watts, 1992:144). Recent research has adequately countered the idea – which until very recently was current in Old Testament scholarship – that belief in creation in Israel only really took shape under the influence of Deutero-Isaiah (Paas, 1998). God the Creator and God the King: these two are one. The numerous pronouncements concerning God’s universal rule as king are based on this unity. We only need to recall at this point the phenomenon of the prophetic oracles against the nations in which the message of God’s worldwide sovereign kingship is a central theme (cf. Jer. 46:18; 48:15; 49:38; 51:57; cf. Peels, 2000).

Of importance, in order to understand the notion of God’s kingship over Israel, in addition to the idea of creation with which God’s universal kingship is closely linked, is also the idea of covenant. The surrounding nations are “the kingdoms of idols” (Isa. 10:10); Israel is the kingdom of God (in addition to the exegetically difficult text Exod. 19:6, see especially 1 Chron. 17:14; 28:5; 2 Chron. 13:8) – then in a special way. “He is (...) the landlord of Canaan who has entered into a special relationship with his tenant, Israel, a relationship centered on the covenant” (Watts, 1992:144). In Old Testament scholarship the covenant idea is currently dated quite late, as a deuteronomistic product, a theological construction which is projected backward in history. Still, the Old Testament itself strongly suggests that the covenant idea is much older (Lohfink, 1987:54). Favouring this position is also the kind of covenant thinking which was widespread in the ancient Near East, and the not-to-be neglected parallels between Old Testament texts and Hittite and Assyrian vassal treaties. The question whether the covenant of Sinai was a “royal” covenant (thus M. Buber) is usually answered in the negative,

but – however one may think about the treaty-covenant parallel – the Old Testament notion of covenant undeniably contains the suggestion of the Suzerain who imposes his will (the law) on the vassal and demands complete loyalty to the exclusion of all other “lords” – YHWH is a jealous God (*'ēl qannô*). Ever since the Sinai covenant the notion of God’s royal rule has been brewing in the atmosphere. He is king over Israel, his inheritance, his own possession. It is he, therefore, who grants kingship to David and his successors (Selman, 1989:178).

In view of the above, the special attention devoted to the theme of the kingdom of God in many so-called ‘theologies of the Old Testament’ is not only understandable but also warranted. Vriezen considers the vision of the kingdom of God to be the deepest driving motif of the Old Testament: “We may regard the Kingdom of God as the central content of the message of salvation” (Vriezen, 1974:366; cf. 112ff., 467ff.). Also Eichrodt regards the expectation of a breakthrough of God’s royal rule the line of connection between the Old and the New Testament (Eichrodt, 1939:xii; cf. House, 1998:558). We have sufficient reason to assume that Old Testament belief in God from the very beginning included a theocratic component, even though the specific terms for kingship and kingdom only became established over the course of time (De Knijff, 1984:17; Peels 1999:20ff.). Does this mean that we must regard the theme of God’s kingdom as the “centre” and “unifying theme” of the Old Testament? On the possibility of identifying a specific “centre” of the Old Testament there has been extended discussion. Hasel (1992:168) correctly comments: “In our view the Old Testament is so rich that it does not yield a centre for the systematisation or organisation of an Old Testament theology”. Every overarching theme, after all, runs the danger of becoming a straitjacket which curtails the totality and variations of the Old Testament witness. But we can say that in large parts of the Old Testament the kingship/ kingdom of God is a basic and even central notion. In this connection we must indeed take account of the reality of the *historia revelationis*. God’s kingship has, at least in substance, been confessed from ancient times, and has over time, not the least in the perspective of the prophetic preaching, gradually acquired the contours of the kingdom of God in an eschatological sense. This last feature becomes increasingly clear especially after the exile and finally culminates in the preaching of the book of Daniel, with which the New Testament was to link up.

5. Two characteristics

If we now, to round things off, sum up, by way of a cross section, the Old Testament message concerning the kingdom of God, we want to refer to two core aspects which concern, respectively, the scope and the

realisation of the kingdom – a spatial and a temporal characteristic, as it were.

5.1 The scope of the kingdom of God

The Old Testament may speak both in universalist and in particularist terms of the kingdom of God. On the one hand, there is a universal kingship of God which extends to the whole creation. The entire universe must bow before Him; the world is in His hands; all the peoples must acknowledge Him. He even controls the Gods. Royally He judges the Gods (Ps. 82:1) and the entire earth, for all the peoples belong to Him (Ps. 82:8). “A great King above all Gods”, as Psalm 95:3 sings of Him. “I am a great King, says the Lord of hosts, and my name is to be feared among the peoples” (Mal. 1:14; cf. vs. 11). “King of the peoples” he is called (Jer. 10:6), “a great King over all the earth” (Ps. 47:2,8). The throne of his majesty is exalted high above the flood (Ps. 29). From his throne in heaven God rules over all, over the whole creation, sings Psalm 103:19.

At the same time there is a special kingship which pertains to the relation between God and Israel, the people of his covenant. His throne is not only in heaven but also on earth, in (the temple of) Jerusalem (Jer. 3:17). Although the heavenly and earthly throne, transcendence and immanence, can be distinguished, they cannot, as the juxtaposition in Ps. 11:4 strikingly indicates, be separated. Zion is the city of the great King (Ps. 48:3), where the gates lift their heads to let the King of Glory enter (Ps. 24). He will rule as King on Mount Zion (Isa. 24:33; Jer. 8:19). God’s kingdom – which usually denotes his power and rule – gains territorial features in the book of Chronicles: David is appointed by God “in my house and in my kingdom” (1 Chron. 17:14). Israel is his dominion (Ps. 114:2).

At this point we must reject two misunderstandings. The first is that the universalist and particularist element are in tension with each other. This is by no means the case. They are not mutually exclusive but rather complement each other, as is evident, for example, from the structure of Psalm 95 (the confession “he is our God and we are the people of his pasture” [vs. 7] *after* the acknowledgment of God’s dominion over the Gods and over creation [v.v. 3-5]), or from the prayer of Jehoshaphat in 2 Chronicles 20:6: “Do you not rule over all the kingdoms of the nations?” while especially in Chronicles the kingdom of God is directly associated with the people and land of Israel. Consider also the sequence of the confession “that God rules over Jacob (...) to the ends of the earth” (Ps. 59:13). The second misunderstanding is that the one kind of language developed from the other. Vriezen (1974:473), for example, asserts that

the most original idea is that of God's rule over Israel from which the idea of God's universal dominion developed later. We encounter the opposite idea in Schmidt, viz., that the universal kingship of God preceded the confession of YHWH as "King of Israel" which did not arise until the period of the exile (Schmidt, 1989:330; Dietrich, 1980:263). Preuss (1991:178), however, correctly comments that we are only dealing here with different applications of the same YHWH-is-King title.

5.2 The realisation of the kingdom of God

The Old Testament speaks of the kingdom of God on the one hand as a permanent-static kingdom which is eternal, and on the other as an active-dynamic kingdom which pursues its ends also in the reality of this earth. It is a kingdom that *is* and that is *to come*. Already implicit in the Old Testament are the temporal aspects of past, present and future, of the "already" and "not yet" (Soggin, 1975:920; Welten, 1982:308f.). "The Lord is King for ever and ever" (Ps. 10:16; 145:11-13; 146:10). God's throne was established long ago; He is from all eternity (Ps. 93:2). At the same time the Old Testament witnesses to a growing expectation of the *coming* rule of God, the breakthrough of his kingdom. This is most obviously the case in the book of Daniel. On the one hand, this book speaks of God's permanent eternal kingship (2:37; 4:3, 34; 5:21; 6:27; 7:14); on the other hand, this book emphasises the expectation of the kingdom that will be set up by God – a kingdom that will bring to an end all other kingdoms (the four kingdoms), but will itself endure forever (2:44; 7:18, 27).

Also in the enthronement psalms this temporal dialectic is already present (that is also perhaps the case in the image of enthronement, e.g. in Ps. 47:6; cf. Preuss, 1991:180; Janowski, 1989:445). For example, in Psalm 96 God is on the one hand acclaimed as the Creator-King, who guarantees the stability of the existing world, and, on the other, worshipped as the Coming One who will judge the world in righteousness. The perception of God's coming kingdom must have been intensified especially by the preaching of the prophets (cf. Vriezen, 1974:475f.). In the proclamation of the kingdom of God that is near, an important place is given, among other things, to the expectation of the *Yom YHWH* (the Day of the Lord) and of the coming Davidic-messianic Ruler.

The coming of God's kingdom, where all things will be new and different, has two sides: judgment and salvation. The King comes to judge on account of the corruption and hostility of humans; and he comes to bring salvation, because he ultimately aims at peace and joy. The faith and hope of the Old Testament faithful were coloured by "rejoicing over their king" (Numb. 23:21). Israel no longer needs to fear any harm when this

King will at some point be in its midst (Zeph. 3:15). The true King, after all, will also be the Shepherd par excellence: "See, here is your God! See, the Lord God comes with power and his arm rules for him. (...). He tends his flock like a Shepherd; he gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them in his bosom; he gently leads those that have young" (Isa. 40:10f.). God himself, like the good Shepherd that he is, will look after the sheep (Ezek. 34). Thus the Old Testament, as a result of its deep longing that reaches out to the end, is "open-ended": "Your eyes will see the King in his beauty (...). For the Lord is our Judge, the Lord is our Lawgiver, the Lord is our King: it is he who will save us" (Isa. 33:17, 22). This trishagion of hope constitutes the strongest link between the Old and the New Testament.

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