

Mark's Good News of the Kingdom of God

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Introduction

"Behold the time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has drawn near, repent and believe the Gospel" (Mark 1:15). With this announcement, Jesus begins his ministry. He sets his agenda. He proclaims the arrival of a long-awaited event: the visitation of God to his people. Whatever Jesus' original audience may have thought about this proclamation or, for that matter, about the one making the proclamation, they could at least understand the meaning of his words. Apparently, the same was true for Mark's readers. At no time in his Gospel does Mark, or the other Gospel writers, explain to his readers what "the Kingdom of God" means. Both Jesus and Mark take for granted that their respective audiences will understand the meaning and significance of the phrase.¹ When Jesus made the announcement recorded in Mark 1:15, his hearers evidently had no need for an explanation—not yet, at least. For Jews living in first century Israel, with hippodromes and arenas scattered throughout the land and in Jerusalem, Roman standards flying in prominent places, Roman crosses at times lining the roads, Roman soldiers in barracks in the Temple precinct, and with a Roman governor living secure in his palace in Jerusalem, the coming of the "Kingdom" meant deliverance. God would deliver his people, as he promised. Their enemies will be destroyed, God will visit his people in a decisive way and Israel will be restored and exalted with God as her King. The "Kingdom of God" may have

meant more than that, but it certainly did not mean less.

The Kingdom of God was arriving, and Jesus proclaimed the good news that God was acting on behalf of his people to deliver them from bondage and oppression, forgive their sins, heal their diseases, crush their enemies, and subdue the fallen creation. God was, in other words, manifesting his sovereign rule and reign over the whole world. And Jesus invited all who heard him to take part, to join in; he even told them precisely how to become members and citizens of the Kingdom of God. Yet as the ministry of Jesus unfolds in Mark's Gospel, it becomes abundantly clear that Jesus' Kingdom agenda is not living up to the ideas and hopes of his contemporaries, not even those of his closest companions, hand-picked by Jesus and let in on the "mystery of the Kingdom of God" (4:11). The Israelites in the first century expected the Kingdom, but Jesus proclaims, teaches, reveals, displays, and embodies the Kingdom of God in unexpected ways.

The task before us is to consider Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God specifically as recorded in the Gospel of Mark. The Kingdom Jesus proclaimed is the Kingdom to which we are invited and of which we are citizens. Yet although we are citizens of a Kingdom that *has come*, we are citizens of a Kingdom that is also still yet *to come*. In the meantime, we live with one foot in "this age," surrounded by a different kingdom, which although defeated, nevertheless continues to stand

in direct opposition to the Kingdom of God and diligently seeks to draw away our focus and allegiance. We need, therefore, constantly to (re)align our thoughts, our hearts, and our expectations with the Kingdom of God as announced and inaugurated by Jesus.

Our God Reigns: The Kingdom in the Old Testament

Jesus' announcement of the Kingdom of God was not an innovation or a novel concept.² The idea of the Kingdom of God is firmly rooted in the Old Testament, in spite of the fact that none of the OT writers use the exact phrase "Kingdom of God." The OT writers do, however, use a variety of words, phrases, and concepts to denote God's rule over all creation in general and over Israel in particular. That God is already the sovereign King over all the universe is a given fact in the OT. At the same time, it is clear that the full manifestation of God's sovereign rule has yet to appear in the world. Thus God's absolute reign is also a promise in the OT.

The Present and Future Kingdom

The closest OT parallels to the NT phrase "Kingdom of God" are found in those texts that speak of God's royal rule or dominion.³ The Psalmist declares, "The Lord has established his throne in the heavens; And his sovereignty rules over all" (103:19). Similarly, Daniel proclaims, "His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and his dominion is from generation to generation (4:3)."⁴ These texts affirm that all people, nations, and history are part of God's dominion.

The OT writers also speak of God as a reigning King or as *the King*.⁵ Though God reigns over all, he is the King of Israel in particular.⁶ God, not men, will reign over

the nation of Israel. Gideon asserts God's kingship when he tells the people, "I will not rule over you, nor shall my son rule over you, the Lord shall rule over you" (Judg 8:23). In 1 Samuel, God's kingship over Israel is explicit and the clamoring of the Israelites for a king is viewed as an outright rejection of their divine King. The Lord tells Samuel, "Listen to the voice of the people in regard to all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them" (1 Sam 8:7, cf. 12:12).⁷ Likewise, God himself asserts his kingship over Israel through Isaiah: "I am the Lord, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King" (43:15). The Lord is "the King of Israel" (Zeph 3:15).

The OT also reveals that the relationship between God and Israel is implicitly that of a King and his subjects. God's powerful display of redemption of his people from Egypt, where both nature and Pharaoh are subject to him, his establishment of the covenant on Sinai, and his defeat of the nations that stood between his people and the promised land, are all indicative of God's sovereign rule over Israel.⁸ This sovereign-subject relationship also underlies the period of the Judges when there was no human king in Israel. Furthermore, although the eventual establishment of a human king in Israel was a point of contention, the king sitting on David's throne "was understood to reign as Yahweh's representative . . . the monarchy was looked upon as the concrete manifestation of Yahweh's rule."⁹

God's kingship is not, however, limited to the nation of Israel. In addition to the texts that speak directly about God's dominion, other texts reveal God's active role as the sovereign ruler over all creation. In the words of the Psalmist, "Say

among the nations: "The Lord reigns" (Ps 96:10), and in another place, "The Lord reigns; let the earth rejoice; Let the many islands be glad" (Ps 97:1). Jeremiah unambiguously expresses this same thought when he addresses God as "King of the nations" (10:7).¹⁰ God's dominion, however, extends beyond even the nations of the earth. "Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool" (Isa 66:1). Taken as a whole, the unambiguous message of the OT is that there is nothing over which God does not presently reign.¹¹

While God's rule and reign over all creation is a present reality, the OT writers, particularly the prophets, hold out the hope of a coming day when God's kingship will be revealed and established in a new, comprehensive manner.¹² God's rule is present, but it is also future.¹³ The Kingdom presented in the OT is, therefore, an eschatological kingdom.¹⁴ One striking text connects the announcement of "good news" with the future coming of the Kingdom, "How lovely on the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who announces peace and brings good news of happiness, who announces salvation, and says to Zion, Your God reigns" (Isa 52:7). Thus the promise of future salvation for the people of God goes hand-in-hand with the promise of the coming Kingdom.¹⁵

Just as the divine King of Israel is *presently* the King of the nations, whether they recognize it or not, so also there will be a *future* manifestation of God's kingdom that will envelop all the nations. In the future, however, there will be universal acknowledgement and reverence for God's kingship. The nations that once opposed Israel will one day "go up from year to year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts" (Zech 14:16, cf. v.17). All the vari-

ous teaching about the rule and reign of God in the OT, i.e., that God is King of Israel, the nations, the creation, and the entire universe, coalesce into a vision of a future unmitigated, universal revelation of the Kingdom of God.¹⁶

As Ridderbos points out, Daniel's visions of the role of the "Son of Man" in the coming Kingdom deserve special attention.¹⁷ Daniel sees the "Ancient of Days" sitting on his throne, and he takes away the kingdoms that belong to the beasts (the various nations in Daniel's prophecy), and gives sovereign rule over to the "Son of Man. . . . That all the nations and tongues might serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away. And his kingdom is one which will never be destroyed" (7:9-14). Compare the language of this text with that found in Daniel 6:26 where Darius decrees that all people under his rule "are to fear and tremble before the God of Daniel; For he is the living God and enduring forever, and his kingdom is one which will never be destroyed, and his dominion will be forever."¹⁸ These texts refer to God's dominion, and the eschatological dominion of the Son of Man in remarkably similar language. The future expectation of the Kingdom is directly linked to one who will come and reign as King in a way that parallels the kingship of God himself.

This brief survey of the OT background of the Kingdom of God supports the idea that when Jesus announced the Kingdom of God, his hearers at least understood the general content of his message.¹⁹ Those who heard Jesus' declaration knew "the story"—it was their ongoing history and their expectations, established and promised in the OT, that Jesus summarized in the statement, "the Kingdom of God is at hand."²⁰ What they were not prepared for,

however, was the way Jesus went about showing and teaching them *how* their history and promises were being fulfilled.²¹

Mark 1:15: The Announcement of the Kingdom

The Rule and Reign of God

When Jesus says “the time is fulfilled,” he is not only saying that a new era is unfolding as an old era comes to a close, but also “that the decisive time has now arrived.”²² The long expected fulfillment of the OT promise of the eschatological rule and reign of God is breaking into history through the ministry of Jesus. The time of waiting is over, the time of fulfillment is at hand. What John the Baptist preached as coming, thus renewing the prophetic expectation that God was going to act on behalf of his people (Mark 1:2-8, cf. Matt 3:1-11; Luke 3:2-16), Jesus proclaims as fulfilled.²³ Jesus announces the good news of the reign of God (cf. Isa 52:7). The arrival of the Kingdom of God, therefore, goes hand in hand with the gospel of God’s salvation.

As seen from the OT, God’s Kingdom is the universal rule of God, encompassing all things under his domain, but that does not mean that the Kingdom is only “an abstract concept” or that the phrase refers mainly to a location or sphere; the Kingdom of God is primarily a reference to God’s dynamic rule and reign over his people.²⁴ This interpretation finds support earlier in the chapter in the collection of OT texts used in relation to the ministry of John the Baptist (vv. 2-3).

First, John is the “messenger” sent from God. In Exodus 23:20 God declares, “Behold, I am going to send my angel (*angelos*) before you to guard you along the way and to bring you into the place which I have prepared.” In its context, this dec-

laration is connected to God’s promise to “be an enemy to your enemies” (v. 22); that he will bring them into the land through his angel and “completely destroy” their enemies (if Israel obeys) (v. 23); and that there will be successful conquest of the land (vv. 27-31). God will act to defeat his enemies and establish Israel in the promised land.

Second, John’s mission is to “prepare the way” of the Lord. As in Exodus 23, God promises through the prophet Malachi that his messenger “will clear/prepare the way before me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to his Temple” (Mal 3:1). Again, God’s decisive action is highlighted in this text. God comes to judge (3:2, 5; cf. 4:5), but he also extends an offer to his people, “Return to me and I will return to you” (3:7). The coming of the Lord as sovereign judge is portrayed as a dynamic event in which God himself will act.

Third, John’s voice is “the voice of one crying” (1:3; cf. Isa 40:3).²⁵ He will “clear a way for the Lord in the wilderness,” and “make smooth in the desert, a highway for our God.” What follows in the context in Isaiah is an exposition of the dynamic rule of God. God will “come with might, with his arm ruling for him” (40:10). As sovereign King (vv. 12-17), he sits enthroned “above the circle (‘vault’ NASB) of the earth” (v. 22), and he defeats the earthly rulers and powers (vv. 23-24). God’s kingdom is not limited or bound to any sphere, but the emphasis is upon the active or “dynamic” exercise of his sovereignty.

The three texts quoted in Mark 1:2-3 show that John’s role as the messenger who prepares the way for the Lord, means in effect that he is preparing the way for the Kingdom. The parallel between pre-

paring the way for the Lord and the Kingdom of God is evident in Matthew where John is quoted as saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (3:2). Thus when Jesus proclaims the Kingdom of God in verse 15, the dynamic nature of the Kingdom is already established through the activity of the forerunner.

The Kingdom Is at Hand

Jesus says that the Kingdom, the rule and reign of God, is “at hand” or “has drawn near” (*engizō*). In doing so, Jesus announces that the Kingdom of God had dawned and is still dawning. Jesus is not saying that the Kingdom of God has already arrived in its fullness, i.e., “The Kingdom has come.”²⁶ On the other hand, neither is it the case that “at hand” refers only to a future time, however imminent it may be. As R. T. France points out, attempts to draw a line between either a “present” or a “future” interpretation of this text fall short.²⁷ The various arguments based on so-called linguistic evidence (e.g., Dodd) often fail because they tend to consider words (e.g., *malkuth*, *malkutha*, *basilea*, etc.) in isolation without a proper consideration of either the immediate context or in a larger biblical-theological context.²⁸ In any case, the context of Mark argues for interpreting “at hand” to mean that the promised rule and reign of God is actively at work in the person of Jesus Christ, and that there is still a sense in which the Kingdom is yet to come. In other words, though the phrase is often over-used, the Kingdom is “already” and “not yet.” The eschatological nature of the Kingdom, evident from the OT, continues in the Kingdom announced by Jesus.²⁹

Jesus’ proclamation includes an invitation to take part in the Kingdom. As John preached a baptism of repentance

as a way of preparation for the coming Kingdom (1:4; cf. Matt 3:1-2; Luke 3:3), so Jesus calls for repentance in light of the new revelation of the Kingdom.³⁰ The call for repentance is also a call to “believe the Gospel.” Jesus invites people to

stop trusting in themselves and living lives apart from God. . . . Instead they should start trusting in the good news that God’s sovereign power and presence was now invading the world to deliver his people from the oppression of sin and evil which plagued them ever since the Fall in the garden of Eden!³¹

The full content of this “good news” is yet to be revealed but as Mark’s narrative unfolds, people are continually challenged to believe that God really is working in their midst through the ministry of Jesus. The call to believe becomes even more critical as Jesus continues to reveal, in shocking and surprising ways, the reality of the Kingdom. From this point in the narrative, people are called to abandon their own pre-conceived ideas and expectations and trust in Jesus’ way of inaugurating the Kingdom of God.³² The tension that develops between what people expected of the Kingdom and what Jesus preaches about the Kingdom becomes one of the over-arching themes in the Gospel of Mark.

Though both Jesus and his contemporaries base their conceptions of the Kingdom on the OT, their perspectives on how the Kingdom of God will manifest itself are at odds. Moreover, Jesus does not simply re-interpret the OT message of the Kingdom, he reveals the Kingdom in new ways. His teaching on the Kingdom is not merely a commentary on the OT—it marks the fulfillment of the OT along with new revelation about what the Kingdom is like. Jesus presents the great

hope of Israel, the coming Kingdom of God, in various ways such as a seed that grows on good soil (4:8, 20); a man who cast seed on the ground (4:26); a mustard seed (4:31); as something only those with child-like faith may receive (10:14-15); or as something difficult to enter (10:23). These descriptions of the Kingdom did not match up to the expectations of Jesus' contemporaries.

The Stories of the Kingdom

One of the primary ways Jesus revealed the Kingdom was through parables. One of the key elements of the parables is the surprising ways in which they reveal Jesus' conception of the Kingdom. The parables not only reveal the unexpected nature of the Kingdom, they are part of the inauguration of the Kingdom.

The Mystery of the Kingdom: The Sower

The parable of the sower (4:1-9) (or perhaps better, "the soils") is one of the most well known of all the parables. It is also in some sense the most important, for it sets the backdrop for the rest of the Kingdom parables, and because Mark includes Jesus' interpretation (4:13-20). Through this parable, Jesus reveals the "mystery of the Kingdom of God" (4:11). With parables such as this one, Jesus confronts his hearers with what they *should* expect about the Kingdom of God.

In this parable, seed falls on four different kinds of ground: (1) beside the road; (2) on rocky ground; (3) among thorns; and (4) on good soil. As one might expect, only the seed that fell on good soil flourishes. This is hardly surprising. Yet the meaning of the parable is far from clear, as evidenced by the fact that later the disciples ask Jesus about it. Jesus proceeds

to let them in on a secret: they will get insider information on the parable, and the "mystery of the Kingdom of God" will be made known to them. The parable reveals something extremely important about the Kingdom: though the Kingdom of God, as proclaimed by Jesus, may appear insignificant and at times indiscernible from its surroundings, it will ultimately produce extraordinary results. The parable thus describes the eschatological nature of the Kingdom. This is the "mystery." The Kingdom is already here, though on one level its "progress" or "success" may be difficult to perceive. Yet ultimately the Kingdom will manifest itself in abundance. The "mystery" is that the Kingdom is not initially coming on the scene with fanfare or in a cataclysmic battle, it is coming like seed that is planted on good ground that will ultimately bear its intended fruit. Like seed sown on good soil surrounded by seed that falls on rocky ground and among thorns, the Kingdom is being inaugurated in the context of a hostile world, another kingdom that will not last. The Kingdom of God, however, is at work, and *it will come in its fullness*. Seemingly small beginnings will be followed by dramatic conclusions. The negative response to Jesus' ministry, which is already evident in Mark's gospel (2:7, 16, 24; 3:2, 6, 22), is not a cause for alarm or distress. The disciples should not measure success in terms of immediate response, but they should believe that the Kingdom is taking root, and the results are ensured. In short, "fulfillment without consummation" is the "mystery of the Kingdom."³³

The Seed Parables

When we consider the next two parables in Mark, the Seed (4:26-29) and the Mustard Seed (4:30-32), similar themes

as those found in the parable of the sower appear again. In the parable of the seed, Jesus compares the Kingdom of God to a man who casts his seed then goes away, and without him knowing it, the seed sprouts up and the plant grows to maturity. The seed sprouts into a mature plant without human intervention.³⁴ What, then, is the message? The disciples should trust God to bring his Kingdom in his own way and in his own time. Even if God's way is hidden, one must trust that the Kingdom that has already come will yet fully be revealed.

In the next parable we encounter similar themes, but the emphasis on small, insignificant beginnings is even more pronounced. Jesus picks one of the most unlikely of things with which to compare the Kingdom: a mustard seed. Bearing in mind the OT background concerning the Kingdom of God, could Jesus have picked a more unsuitable metaphor? So it must have seemed to those who heard Jesus tell this parable. How surprising and unexpected this parable must have been for the disciples. Again, Jesus confronts the hopes and expectations of his hearers head-on with his idea of the Kingdom of God. Like the previous parable, the Kingdom does not come with immediate results. It comes, rather, like the smallest of seeds. Yet in due time, the end result infinitely exceeds the expectations based on such a small beginning. It is precisely this idea of small beginnings that Jesus' hearers were not expecting. As Stein points out, it is not the end result, "the greatness of the kingdom of God in its final manifestation, for every Jew who heard Jesus would agree with this . . . what was not recognized nor understood was the smallness and insignificance of its beginning."³⁵ In this parable, as in the previous two, what is

yet to be revealed in the future must be believed now in the present. Jesus' message of the Kingdom cannot be judged on the basis of what is seen at the outset—the gospel of the Kingdom requires faith, that is, trusting in Jesus and his way of inaugurating the Kingdom.³⁶

Signs of the Kingdom³⁷

The Kingdom of God is inaugurated not only through Jesus' preaching but also through his powerful miracles. Jesus casts out demons, he heals the sick, and he exercises power over nature. All of these works attest to the announcement in Mark 1:15. The dynamic rule and reign of God is at hand, and its presence is evident in the ministry of Jesus.

Kingdoms in Conflict

The Jews of Jesus' day looked forward to the day when God would visit his people and destroy their enemies; as the OT background makes clear, this was not an unreasonable expectation. The coming of the Kingdom meant the destruction of their foes. Surely Jews living in the first century would expect the coming of God's Kingdom to coincide with the defeat of the Romans. Jesus, on the other hand, seems to show little interest in throwing out the Romans. In fact, as he tells his disciples, the Romans will play a major role in the fulfillment of his ministry (10:33). God did promise the defeat of Israel's enemies, and Jesus goes about doing just that in dramatic fashion, but the fulfillment of that promise in the ministry of Jesus goes beyond the Romans (who were a mere manifestation of a larger problem) to a much larger foe. Jesus confronts the real enemy of God's Kingdom and his people: Satan and his kingdom.³⁸

Though the temptation narrative is

remarkably short in Mark's Gospel in comparison to Matthew (4:1-11) and Luke (4:1-13), Jesus' encounters with demonic forces receive substantial attention. Jesus' announcement of the Kingdom follows on the heels of his personal encounter with Satan, and soon after in the narrative Jesus is in Capernaum preaching when a possessed man cries out, "What business do we have with each other, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the holy one of God" (1:23). This is not the only time when Jesus' teaching or preaching is connected with his exorcisms. In 1:39 Mark says that Jesus went in the synagogues of Galilee "preaching and casting out demons." Jesus' preaching of the Kingdom of God is inherently connected with confronting and casting out demons. In the events in Capernaum, Jesus astonished the crowds not only because he taught with authority (cf. 1:22) but also because "He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him." In another episode, Jesus' authority over the demons is evident when they beg him to send them into pigs rather than out of the country all together (5:10, 12). Ironically, it is the demonic forces that recognize Jesus for who he really is—the Son of God—even though the people around Jesus fail and refuse to believe.

The opposition to the Kingdom by Satan is not limited to his temptation of Jesus before the commencement of Jesus' ministry. Jesus attaches Satan's name to the dramatic confrontation with Peter in Mark 8:33 after Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi. After Jesus tells the disciples exactly what is going to happen in Jerusalem, Peter takes Jesus aside in order to keep him from making such a mistake. Jesus responds to Peter, while looking at all the disciples, "Get behind

me, Satan; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's." What Peter had done, whether he knew it or not, was suggest that "the Christ" (8:29) not do the very thing he came to do. Jesus regards this as a satanic attack on the will and purpose of God—an attack on the Kingdom of God.

The prophets promised that when God's rule extended throughout the world it would spell defeat for the enemies of God's people. This work begins in Jesus' ministry. The surprising thing is that rather than a violent political uprising, much less a great military rout, Jesus reveals God's sovereign rule over Satan and the demonic forces as he goes about preaching the Kingdom of God and casting out demons. The Kingdom of God had come on the scene in a new and decisive way and the eschatological defeat of evil had begun in the present age, but it was not the visitation that people expected. Matthew records Jesus' word on the matter: "If I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matt 12:28). As for Satan and his demonic forces, the true enemies of the Kingdom of God, they understand very well what an encounter with Jesus means, "they consider his coming as their own destruction."³⁹

Ruling over Sickness

Jesus' authority over disease and sickness is yet another sign that the Kingdom of God is at hand. Jesus' teaching, astonishing to his hearers, is accompanied by miraculous healing. As noted above, the encounter with the possessed man in Capernaum takes place in the context of Jesus' teaching in the synagogue. Jesus' healings of the diseased and infirmed are also signs that the Kingdom of God

is at hand. The call to believe that God's Kingdom was arriving in the original proclamation in Mark 1:15 should be kept in mind when we consider Jesus' miracles of healing. Those who are sick come to Jesus "in the faith that he has the power to heal them."⁴⁰ As Hooker points out, faith in Jesus is implied by the fact that people come to him to be healed,⁴¹ but certain statements in Mark make an explicit connection between faith and Jesus' healing miracles.⁴² A leper comes and says, "If you are willing, *you can* make me clean" (1:40);⁴³ Jesus recognizes that faith prompts the friends of the paralytic to lower him through the ceiling (2:5); the woman suffering from a hemorrhage says to herself, "If I touch his garments, I will get well" (5:28), and Jesus acknowledges that her faith is instrumental in her healing (5:34); Jesus assures Jairus not to fear but "only believe," when news of his daughter's death reaches him (5:36); and Bartimaeus displays explicit faith when he cries out, "Jesus Son of David, have mercy on me" (10:47, 48), and Jesus recognizes this faith, saying, "Go; your faith has made you well" (10:52). These who come to Jesus come to him in faith, laying hold of Jesus' proclamation that the Kingdom of God is at hand.

The link between faith and healing is nowhere more explicit than when Jesus comes to Nazareth in Mark 6. Listening to Jesus in the synagogue, these people among whom Jesus grew up were offended that this "carpenter" taught such amazing things, possessed such wisdom, and performed such miracles (6:2-3). Aside from healing "a few sick people," Jesus "could do no miracle there" (v. 5). In response to this encounter with his fellow Nazarenes, Jesus "wondered at their unbelief" (v. 6). Jesus made it clear

from the outset that people must trust that God's rule and reign was arriving among them; they must repent of their unbelief and believe the gospel. Many of the people in Nazareth rejected Jesus' teaching and were dubious of his wisdom and miracles. That Jesus could not do many miracles there is a commentary on the faithlessness of those around him. Theirs was the astonishment of skepticism, and perhaps jealousy, not the awe of those who recognize the Kingdom coming in their midst.

Finally, Jesus' authority over sickness signifies his authority over the root-cause of all disease and illness. Men lower a paralytic through the roof so that Jesus will heal him. Jesus responds, much to the amazement of some in the room, "My son, your sins are forgiven" (Mark 2:5). The scribes are shocked, "Why does this man speak that way? He is blaspheming; who can forgive sins but God?" (2:7). Jesus, knowing their thoughts, asks them, "Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven'; or to say, 'Arise, and take up your pallet and walk?'" (2:9). Then, to show them that his ability to heal reveals his authority to forgive sins (v. 10), he tells the paralytic, "rise, take up your pallet and go home" (v. 11). In Isaiah 32-35 the prophet speaks of the future when God will visit his people in salvation and his enemies in judgment. At that time, "Your eyes will see the King in his beauty" (33:17). The cry will be, "For the Lord is our judge, the Lord is our lawgiver, the Lord is our King; He will save us" (33:22). In the new city where God rules and reigns, "no resident will say, 'I am sick'; The people who dwell there will be forgiven their iniquity" (33:24). God will come in fierce judgment (chapter 34), but God's people should take heart because

“He will save you. Then the eyes of the blind will be opened and the lame will leap like a deer and the tongue of the mute will shout for joy” (35:4-6). When Jesus healed the paralytic at the house in Capernaum, those in the room were witnessing the arrival of the eschatological day of God’s salvation.⁴⁴ The Kingdom was breaking in around them, sins were forgiven and the lame walked.⁴⁵

Ruling over Nature

Though the connection between the coming of the Kingdom and Jesus’ repeated displays of power over nature is not explicit, when we consider the OT background, in which it is clear that God’s rule and reign extends over all creation (e.g., 1 Chron 29:11), then we see signs of the Kingdom in these miracles.⁴⁶ The Kingdom of God does not just arrive in the hearts of men—it arrives on earth. The earth must also be redeemed, and Jesus’ miracles reveal that the end-time redemption of creation has begun in his ministry.

One explicit thematic link between the arrival of the Kingdom and Jesus’ authority over nature is the emphasis on faith in the light of Jesus’ miracles. When Jesus stills the storm in Mark 4, he identifies the fear of the disciples as evidence of a lack of faith (v.40). Similarly, the inability of the disciples to understand the significance of the feeding of the five thousand (6:33-44) and the four thousand (8:1-9) causes Jesus to use words already familiar in Mark’s narrative, “Do you not yet see or understand? Do you have a hardened heart? Having eyes, do you not see? And having ears, do you not hear. . . . Do you not yet understand?” (8:17-21).⁴⁷ The first time Jesus used these words was in reference to “those outside,” to whom the “mystery

of the Kingdom of God” was not revealed (4:11-12). In this case, the ones to whom the mystery was revealed receive the rebuke. Confronted with power so over-whelming and far removed from their experience, the disciples failed to understand that they were witnessing God’s rule and reign over nature. In these miracles they did not see that the Kingdom of God was arriving in the person and work of Jesus. Their lack of understanding is due to their unbelief, because the message of the Kingdom, displayed in miraculous signs, must be grasped by faith.

All these signs bear witness to the proclamation of Mark 1:15. The Kingdom is at hand and people must repent of their unbelief and believe the gospel. “How great are his signs, and how mighty are his wonders! His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and his dominion is from generation to generation” (Dan 4:3 [MT 3:33]).

The King and the Kingdom

Mark’s theology of the Kingdom of God is grounded in the preaching and miracles of Jesus. These things manifest the coming of the Kingdom in Jesus’ ministry, but the Kingdom of God arrives not only through Jesus’ words and deeds, it arrives in Jesus himself. He is the embodiment of the rule and reign of God. We have seen that Jesus’ preaching and miracles cause a great deal of shock and surprise among those who encounter him, but the most unexpected aspect of the Kingdom of God comes in what is revealed about Jesus’ role in fulfilling the promise of the coming Kingdom.

Son and Servant

One of the more startling aspects of the coming of the Kingdom of God is that Jesus is revealed as *both* the Son of God

(Mark 1:1, 11; 9:7), and the Suffering Servant of Isaiah's prophecy. God proclaims that Jesus is his Son, "in whom I am well pleased" (1:11); language that parallels the Servant of the Lord identified in Isaiah (42:1ff). In other words, "the Royal son is the suffering servant."⁴⁸ Hardly anything was more unexpected by Jesus' contemporaries.

The Son of Man

Jesus identifies himself on several occasions as "the Son of Man."⁴⁹ As seen earlier, the figure of the son of Man in Daniel receives "dominion, glory, and a kingdom" (or "sovereignty") (Dan 7:14). The authority granted to the Son of Man in Daniel is absolute and everlasting. When Jesus uses this title for himself, it is often in connection with his authority. Thus the Son of Man "has authority to forgive sins" (2:10), and he is "Lord even of the Sabbath" (2:28). Though he must suffer in the present, in the future the authority of the Son of Man will be revealed "when he comes in the glory of his Father with his holy angels" (8:38). Everyone will see and acknowledge his authority when "they will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory" (13:26). The Jewish authorities may turn him over to the Romans to be crucified, but the day will come when they "shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven" (14:62). The allusions to Daniel's Son of Man are unmistakable. Daniel saw the Son of Man coming "with the clouds of heaven" (7:13), just as Jesus describes the scene when he will come again. Rather than a designation of his humanity, the title Son of Man identifies Jesus as the divine King himself. The Kingdom is at hand because the King is at hand.

The Servant of the Lord

When the disciples ask Jesus about the teaching of the scribes concerning Elijah (9:11), Jesus replies, "Elijah does first come and restore all things. And *yet* how is it written of the Son of Man that He should suffer many things and be treated with contempt?" (v. 12).⁵⁰ Jesus here reveals his dual role as the Suffering Servant (Isa 53:3; cf. Ps 118:22) *and* the Son of Man.⁵¹ What the Scripture prophecies about Isaiah's servant applies to Daniel's Son of Man. Mark makes this connection in several places in his Gospel.

After Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ (8:29), Jesus reveals the true nature of his mission to his disciples: "And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again" (8:32). As noted earlier, the shock of this revelation leads Peter to step in and suggest a better alternative. Jesus repeats this message two more times in this section of Mark's narrative (9:31; 10:33-34), and each time the disciples fail to understand (9:33-34; 10:35). We should not be too hard on the disciples for their lack of understanding, for virtually no one was looking for the Kingdom of God to come about in this fashion. After all, was not the Kingdom of God about exaltation and glory, and the defeat of Israel's enemies? What did suffering and death have to do with the establishment of God's Kingdom? For Jesus, however, the glory and exaltation of the Kingdom comes only *through* suffering. Glory must follow the cross.

Jesus the Son of Man *will* be revealed in the full glory and power of the Kingdom, but first Jesus, the Suffering Servant, must suffer the rejection of his people, humili-

ation at the hands of his adversaries, and ultimately death on the cross. The OT promised that when the Kingdom of God arrived it would come with judgment (e.g., Isa 2:4; 13:13; 24; Mic 4:3; Obad 21). What we find in Mark, however, is that this judgment does come, but it “falls on the only one who does not deserve it”—it falls on Jesus.⁵² Isaiah prophesied that the Servant of the Lord would be “despised and forsaken” (53:3); bear the grief and sorrows of God’s people and be smitten by God (v. 3); and be wounded and crushed for the sins of God’s people (v. 4, 6, 8, 11). In Mark we encounter the Suffering Servant as the heavenly, royal Son of Man, whose “blood is poured out for many” (14:24).⁵³

The Son of Man endures suffering under the judgment of God, but yet God’s judgment is still to come. Now, however, God’s judgment is stored up for those who do not believe in Jesus. The gospel of the Kingdom is revealed to be the “Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” To believe the gospel is to believe in Jesus. Rejecting Jesus means rejecting the Kingdom of God. Unless one believes that the Kingdom of God is inaugurated by the one who died on a Roman cross, one will not enter the Kingdom. When Jesus curses the fig tree in Mark 11:12-14, it is a living metaphor for the judgment that will fall on those who reject the revelation of the Kingdom of God in the person and work of Jesus.⁵⁴

The Way of the Kingdom

Mark’s emphasis on the theme of discipleship is directly connected to Jesus’ teaching on his mission as the Son of Man and the Suffering Servant. Jesus’ followers must first understand exactly whom they are following, then they will understand the true nature of discipleship. Believing

that the Kingdom of God is arriving in the ministry of Jesus does not mean mere assent to a set of facts about Jesus. Many in Nazareth acknowledged Jesus’ miracles, as did Jesus’ fiercest opponents. Many ate the loaves and fish and later went away (John 6:60, 66). Judas, one of the twelve hand-picked by Jesus, not only *saw* the signs and heard the teaching, he himself went out preaching the kingdom, “that men should repent,” and presumably worked miracles (Mark 6:7-13; cf. Matt 10:1, 9-14; Luke 9:1, 3-5). The kind of faith for which Jesus calls, the kind of faith required in the Kingdom, is faith that manifests itself in a willingness to abandon everything (including one’s expectations), and suffer everything in order to follow Jesus.

Suffering and the Cross

In many ways the expectations for the Kingdom of God in the first century were tantamount to “a theology of glory.” People were looking for a time of national restoration that would mean the destruction of their enemies and political dominance for Israel. The bottom rail would be on top. What they did not expect was Jesus’ revelation of the Kingdom of God in the message of the cross. So when Jesus spoke to his disciples and the crowd around him and said, “If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it,” the response must have been one of shock, if not utter confusion. It is fair to say that Luther’s idea of “a theologian of the cross” would not have set well with most of Jesus’ contemporaries.⁵⁵

Had there been an expert in public

relations or political strategy among Jesus' entourage that day, his mind would have been reeling with thoughts of doing damage control in the wake of the "taking up your cross" speech. This was not a way to gain points in the polls. For one, Jesus connects being one of his disciples with an execution stake. For Jews living in the first century, a cross was not a symbol attached to a chain or a charm bracelet. A cross was something on which criminals were hung to die. Traveling through any given Roman province in the first century, one might well walk along cross-lined roads outside the gates of a city. No one voluntarily takes up a cross; to the contrary, one recoils from a cross. Secondly, Jesus holds out the prospect of deprivation and death as what one should willingly embrace in order to follow him. By this time Jesus was well known as someone who went around talking about the Kingdom of God and preaching the good news. Now, however, he is talking about the "gospel" in relation to suffering and death. The words, "believe the gospel" (Mark 1:15) take on further significance. However much Jesus' ministry did not live up to expectations by this point in the narrative, everything prior to this sermon on discipleship pales in comparison.

When we consider that prior to his teaching on discipleship Jesus told the disciples exactly what was going to happen to him in Jerusalem, then we can understand the meaning of the words "follow me." Jesus says that if someone is going to follow him then that person must follow him in every respect. In other words, Jesus says that being his disciple entails total surrender of the very thing everyone holds most dear—his life. The Son of Man is going to lose his life, his disciples must be prepared to do the same.

Glory in the Kingdom of God can only come through suffering. This is a radical, even revolutionary, message for disciples of Jesus, and certainly not just for those living in the first century.

The disciples were not expecting this kind of message. They were expecting the glory of the Kingdom of God, not suffering and death. We know this to be true because of their reaction the next two times Jesus tells them what he has come to do. In 9:31 Jesus again predicts his passion and resurrection. Mark tells us that the disciples do not understand (v. 32), and their confusion is evident because Mark records that the disciples immediately began discussing who would be the greatest (v. 34). Later in 10:32-34 Jesus teaches them about his death and resurrection for a third time. Though this is the third time that Jesus tells them what is going to happen to him, the disciples still do not understand. What was on the mind of the disciples when they argued over who would be greatest is the same thing that prompts James and John to ask, "Teacher, grant that we may sit one on your right and one on your left in *your glory*" (10:37). The expectations and notions the disciples had about the coming of the Kingdom were such that though they had a clear word from Jesus on what was going to happen in Jerusalem, they could not grasp his message of suffering and the cross.⁵⁶

Jesus' encounter with the rich young man (10:17-23) is a practical example of how expectations collided with Jesus' teaching about discipleship in the Kingdom of God. This young up-and-comer no doubt could have covered everyone's traveling expenses had he been allowed to join up, but he was so in love with his money that he could not bear to part with it in order to follow Jesus. That encounter

prompted Jesus to say, “How hard it is for the wealthy to enter the Kingdom of God” (10:23). Jesus is not saying that rich people cannot be his followers. What Jesus does in effect is tell the young man that he has to take up his cross. He has to sacrifice the thing he loves most dearly, his money. Yet when faced with the unyielding demand of discipleship he had to turn around and leave. This is why Jesus says to the disciples, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!” (v. 24). In the case of the young man the difficulty is giving up wealth, but at the heart of the matter is the demand to be willing to suffer the voluntary loss of all things for the Kingdom of God.⁵⁷ The young man could not forsake his riches for Jesus and the gospel; in other words, he wanted his glory without suffering and the cross.

The way of the cross does, however, lead to glory. Jesus told the disciples that he would not only be killed, but also that he would rise up again after three days (8:31). It is highly unlikely that the disciples understood what Jesus was talking about since we know that the same phrase confuses them later in the narrative (9:10), but it is not just coincidence that Jesus’ teaching on discipleship includes the hope of saving one’s life. The Son of Man must suffer and die and *then* he will rise from the grave. The followers of Jesus must give up all rights to their lives for the sake of Jesus and the gospel and *then* they will gain life. This is not a “pie in the sky when I die” theology either; the gift of life, like the Kingdom, is eschatological. The glory of the future is experienced to some extent in the present. In other words, the present sufferings are accompanied by foretastes of the Kingdom. In the context of chapters 8-10, where discipleship is a major theme, Jesus tell his disciples,

Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel’s sake, but that he shall receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, along with persecutions; and in the age to come, eternal life. But many who are first, will be last; and the last, first (Mark 10:29-31).

In this text, Jesus uses the same phrase recorded in 8:35, “for my sake and the gospel’s.” Losing one’s life (8:35; 10:29), not only means gaining eternal life (8:35; 10:30), it also means gaining the blessings of the Kingdom even in the midst of “the present age.” Yet Jesus cautions his disciples not to rest on these blessings, because until “the age to come” arrives in its fullness, the blessings of the Kingdom will come only “with persecutions”—even the blessings of this age are marked by suffering and the cross.

Any attempt to enter the Kingdom of God other than through embracing the “good news” of suffering and the cross, results in death and judgment. One’s condition before the future judgment of God is, again, dependent on whether or not one embraces Jesus and his way of the Kingdom of God. Those who refuse to believe the good news that the Kingdom of God is dawning in the ministry of Jesus, but who follow after the world in a quest for glory apart from suffering and the cross, will not only lose their lives, they will also face the judgment of God when the Son of Man and the Kingdom of God come with power (8:38-9:1; cf. 13:24-32).

Unworldly Standards

In most cultures and societies, not

least our own, greatness and worthiness are judged according to factors such as strength, power, and wealth. Considerations such as these, however, are polar opposites to the standards of greatness and worthiness in the Kingdom of God. The “greatest” in the Kingdom of God are the lowliest in the eyes of the world.

Servants and Children

In Mark 9:31 Jesus, for a second time, teaches his disciples about what is going to happen to him in Jerusalem. As Mark makes clear, the disciples did not understand what Jesus was telling them (v. 32), and their failure to understand is evident in the fact that they immediately turn their attention to which of them is going to be the greatest (v. 34). Jesus takes this opportunity to teach them what is the true mark of greatness in the Kingdom of God: “Sitting down, he called the twelve and said to them, ‘If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all’” (v. 35). In any culture, this is an unexpected description of greatness.⁵⁸ Jesus turns the standards of the world upside down. It is not the strong, the influential, or the wealthy person who receives recognition in the Kingdom of God, it is the lowly, the one whose life is lived in the service of others rather than in service of oneself. This radical statement lies at the heart of true discipleship. Denying oneself (8:34) is eminently manifested in being a servant. A servant’s whole reason for being is to live for others, and in the Kingdom of God this is a status that one takes on voluntarily.

In order to illustrate his teaching, Jesus sits a child in their midst. Later Jesus will tell the disciples that “whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it” (10:15).⁵⁹ Thus children

illustrate that one does not merit the Kingdom of God, one only enters it by faith. In 9:36, however, the emphasis is not so much on being *like* a child as on receiving a child, that is, “to reverse the conventional value-scale by according importance to the unimportant.”⁶⁰ It is likely that Jesus’ words extend beyond children specifically to the general idea of low status, i.e., to “those who are like children in their littleness and unimportance.”⁶¹ Though much discussion surrounds the meaning of this text and its place in the pericope, it is at least clear that Jesus is calling the disciples to abandon the world’s perspectives and standards regarding what it means to be great, and align themselves with the perspectives and standards of the Kingdom of God.⁶²

After the third instance of Jesus’ teaching the disciples about his approaching suffering in Jerusalem (10:33-34), James and John ask Jesus if they can sit beside him in his glory (10:37). Jesus tells them that they do not understand what they are asking, and sitting on his right and left is a privilege already determined by the Father. First, however, James and John must concern themselves with the fact that if they are going to follow Jesus, they must follow him in his suffering (vv. 38-40). Along with their question, their insistence that they are “able” to drink Jesus’ cup and share in his baptism (allusions to suffering and death), indicates that James and John do not yet share Jesus’ perspective on the Kingdom of God. Though justifiably irritated with the brothers’ not-so-subtle display of self-promotion, the indignation of the other disciples is probably not a sign that they understood Jesus’ teaching any better than James and John.

In order to correct their thinking, Jesus once again turns to the theme of

servanthood. The disciples, like all Jews living in the first century, were familiar with Gentile authorities. The governors of Palestine were often petty-tyrants seeking to curry the favor of the Emperor in order to serve their own political ambitions.⁶³ Roman rule in general was marked by such tendencies. The ambition and desires the disciples express are thus comparable to those of the Gentile authorities. Jesus takes the opportunity to reemphasize what should mark those who follow him. That Jesus emphasizes this point again speaks to the centrality of servanthood in the Kingdom. That Jesus had to emphasize it again also speaks to how difficult it is for the disciples to grasp his message. The disciple who would be great must seek to serve the rest (10:43-44). In light of the world's standards, this teaching could not seem more backwards.

Once again Jesus grounds his message in his own person and ministry. Jesus does not simply lay down some principles for living, he calls the disciples to take on the same perspective and actions as the Son of Man. They are to be servants *because* "even the son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (10:45). This is the ultimate reason why the followers of Jesus are to give up all claims to their own lives, take up their crosses, and live their lives for the sake of others. Being a disciple means being like Jesus. This is precisely what Jesus tells the disciples in John 13. After washing their feet, Jesus tells them, "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him" (13:15-16; cf. 15:20). The Apostle Paul expresses the same thought in his letter to the Phi-

lippians. Paul exhorts the Philippians to live for the sake of one another and he grounds his exhortation in the person and work of Christ:

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, *and* being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Phil 2:5-8).

Learning and practicing what it means to be great in the Kingdom of God, means learning and practicing the life of a servant, as personified in the life and work of the King.

Opposition and Rejection

The unexpected nature of Jesus' inauguration of the Kingdom of God expresses itself most visibly in the mounting opposition to Jesus and his message.⁶⁴ This opposition begins early in Jesus' ministry and increases as the narrative moves ever onward to Calvary. When God visits his people as he promised in the OT, unbelief and rebellion welcome him.

Right off the bat, those who encounter Jesus are astonished by what they hear and see. His teaching differed from that of the scribes (1:22), and he even has authority over demons (1:27). Soon after, however, when Jesus proclaims the forgiveness of sins, the scribes meet him with the charge of blasphemy (2:7). From this point on, Jesus' ministry of the Kingdom of God comes under attack from the religious leaders of the day.⁶⁵

Aside from Jesus' crucifixion, the most remarkable instance of opposition to Jesus

comes in chapter 3. Right after appointing his twelve representatives,⁶⁶ Jesus returns home with his disciples and a crowd so large surrounds them that they cannot even eat a meal. Jesus' family thinks he has lost his mind, but that is nothing compared to the judgment of the scribes who declare, "He is possessed by Beelzebul' and 'He casts out demons by the ruler of the demons'" (3:22). For the readers of Mark this charge comes after the demons themselves have correctly identified Jesus and admit that they have nothing whatsoever to do with him (1:24).⁶⁷ The irony is unmistakable. The demons, against whom Jesus has come, understand who he is, but the scribes, experts in the Scripture and in rabbinic teaching, reject him. Jesus counters their attack by showing the absurdity of their reasoning: "How can Satan cast out Satan?" (v. 24). The Kingdom of God has dawned in their midst but their unbelief and opposition is so fierce that they attribute the coming of the Kingdom to the work of Satan.

At the heart of the opposition to Jesus is the question of his authority. This is the question that drives such controversies as Jesus' disciples not fasting (2:18ff); Jesus healing on the Sabbath (3:2ff); the disciples eating with unwashed hands (7:2ff); and Jesus driving the moneychangers out of the temple (12:27ff). Jesus went around teaching and doing works that witnessed to the coming of the Kingdom, and everyone heard his preaching and saw his miracles. Whether Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom and whether he did miraculous signs was not in question. The issue came down to believing that Jesus' teaching, miracles, and actions bore witness to the coming Kingdom. Many of the religious leaders, however, faced with Jesus' words and deeds responded by asking for a sign

(8:12).⁶⁸

The opposition to Jesus reaches its climax at Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion. The Suffering Servant and Son of Man is despised and rejected, just as the Scriptures, and Jesus, predicted. In one of the great ironies of history, Jesus is crucified on a cross while scoffers walk by and shout, "Let this Christ, the King of Israel, now come down from the cross, so that we may see and believe" (15:32), and on the cross a placard is attached reading, "The King of the Jews" (15:26). The Kingdom of God has arrived in suffering and the cross.

Ultimate Triumph

The cross, however, is not the end of the story of the Kingdom. Jesus' resurrection proclaims the fulfillment of the Son of Man's suffering. For Mark's readers, the resurrection is the sign that the Kingdom of God has dawned in the life and work of Jesus. Throughout Mark's Gospel, the arrival of the Kingdom is coupled with teaching about the final consummation of the Kingdom. Suffering and the cross will one day give way to glory and exultation. Thus Jesus tells his hearers on several occasions that he will return in glory and power and the Kingdom of God will be manifest to all (e.g., 8:28-9:1; 13:26; 14:62). For those who believe the gospel of the Kingdom, they will be gathered from every part of the world (13: 27), and they will sit down in fellowship with Jesus in the Kingdom of God (14:25). A foretaste of that time is revealed to Peter, James, and John when they see the King in his glory on the Mount of Transfiguration (9:2-8). The transfiguration reveals Jesus in the glory with which the "Son of Man" will return at the end of the age (8:38, 9:1).⁶⁹ It is also an eschatological vision of the glory

that follows the path of the cross. Jesus' teaching regarding his own suffering always precedes his teaching regarding discipleship, and that teaching is accompanied by the assurance that he will rise from the dead (e.g., 8:31; 9:9, 31; 10:34). On the mountain, Jesus' teaching about his own death and resurrection, as well as the imperative and promise of discipleship, receive "divine endorsement" with the words, "This is my son, the beloved. Listen to him!" (9:7).⁷⁰ These assurances, central to Jesus' message of the Kingdom, are vindicated by the resurrection. These texts also support the idea that the Kingdom has dawned in the ministry of Jesus and that it will be fully revealed in the future.

The resurrection is the key for understanding and appropriating the emphasis in Jesus' teaching on the necessity of living by faith. The Kingdom of God, though it may appear as insignificant as a mustard seed, will one day be revealed in its fullness (4:32; cf. 4:8, 20). Though they may suffer now, they will receive eternal life in the coming age (10:30). Being a disciple in the Kingdom of God means bearing a cross, but giving up one's life for Jesus and the gospel means that one's life will be saved (8:35). The followers of Jesus may experience war, famine, beatings, betrayal, arrest, and hatred, but those who endure will be saved (13:8-13). Though a follower of Jesus, confronted with Jesus' teaching on the Kingdom, may cry out, "Then who can be saved?" (10:26), Jesus answers, "With people it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God" (v. 27). The assurance of all these promises are grounded in the resurrection, for the resurrection reveals fully the message of Mark 1:15. The nearness of the Kingdom of God, "the good

news," is the message of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus' proclamation in 1:15, therefore, encompasses his entire ministry so that the gospel of the Kingdom of God is "the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (1:1).⁷¹ The resurrection of Jesus confirms Isaiah's prophecy: "Our God reigns!"

Conclusion

The phrase "the Kingdom of God" means that God is ruling and reigning over all creation. Jesus, the divine Son of God, the Suffering Servant and Son of Man, inaugurated God's Kingdom in his life, death, and resurrection. Though the time was fulfilled in the incarnation, the Kingdom of God was not fully consummated even at the resurrection of Jesus. We await the final revelation of God's rule and reign. The Son of Man will yet return in the glory of the Father. The Kingdom of God remains an eschatological Kingdom that has arrived and is still to arrive. In the meantime, the Kingdom of God grows up in the midst of the kingdom of this world. This means that like the first disciples of Jesus, we live in a period of fulfillment mixed with expectation. Because we so easily forget this truth, we have a persistent tendency to revert to the attitudes and perspectives that Jesus continually rejected and corrected. And like the twelve, we always need realignment with Jesus' perspective on the Kingdom because we so often conceive of the Kingdom in terms of our desires and expectations. We need, therefore, a constant reminder that living under God's rule and reign means, for the present, suffering and the cross—and only after, glory.

The first way to remind ourselves about the reality of the Kingdom of God is to consider the King and his life and teach-

ing. When we consider that the way of the Kingdom means following Jesus, then we will not be surprised when we meet with suffering, rejection, or even death because of the Gospel—in fact, we will embrace it. Secondly, when we remember that the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, then we will refrain from judging success merely in terms of size and influence, and embrace the Kingdom *by faith*. This faith rests secure in the knowledge that God is at work building his kingdom through ways and means that seem small and insignificant in the eyes of the world. Thirdly, when we remember that the true citizens of the Kingdom of God are described as servants and children, then we will abandon selfish ambition and desire for personal gain, and begin spending our lives serving others. Finally, when we remember that the final revelation and triumph of the Kingdom of God is certain, and that Jesus is returning to judge the world and save his people, then we will be strengthened and encouraged to go out and preach the good news, proclaiming, “the time is fulfilled, the Kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe the gospel.”

ENDNOTES

¹N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1996), 198-202.

²As Hafemann puts it, “Jesus did not invent the kingdom of God,” (Scott Hafemann, “Jesus and the Kingdom of God,” unpublished essay, used with permission).

³Not surprisingly, scholars writing on the Kingdom of God cite similar OT texts as background. I am basically following Ridderbos’s categorization of the

relevant texts (Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, trans. H. de Jongste, ed. Raymond O. Zorn [Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1962], 4-8), though similar categories and divisions can be found in numerous works.

⁴See below for further discussion of Daniel 7. Texts such as 1 Chron 29:11; Ps 22:28 (MT 22:29); 103:19; 145:11, 13; Obad 21, also speak of God’s rule and dominion.

⁵E.g., Pss 10:16; 24:7; 93:1. See Ridderbos, 4.

⁶“While God is King over all the earth, he is in a special way the King of his people, Israel,” (George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974], 46, originally published under the title, *Jesus and the Kingdom* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964]).

⁷Other examples of God’s kingship over Israel are found in Deut 33:5; Num 23:21; Ps 44:4; 48:3; Isa 33:22; 41:21; Jer 8:19; Mic 2:13.

⁸C. C. Caragunis, “Kingdom of God/Heaven,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 417-418.

⁹*Ibid.*, 418.

¹⁰See also, Exod 15:18; 1 Kings 22:19; Ps 47:2 (MT 47:3); Isa 6:5.

¹¹“The idea of the rule of God over creation, over all creatures, over the kingdoms of the world and, in a unique and special way, over his chosen and redeemed people, is the very heart of the message of the Hebrew scriptures” (Graeme Goldsworthy, “Kingdom of God,” in *The Dictionary of Biblical Theology* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000], 618).

¹²Henry sums up the general presence of an “already-not-yet” perspective of the Kingdom of God in the OT: “In line

with the progressive nature of historical revelation the OT portrayal oscillates between an emphasis on Yahweh's already existing kingly rule and on his rule in progress toward its yet future climactic goal" (Carl F. H. Henry, "Reflections on the Kingdom of God," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 35 [1992], 39).

¹³"Side by side with the kingdom that is we meet in the Old Testament a kingdom yet to come" (Geerhardus Vos, *The Teaching of Jesus Concerning the Kingdom of God and the Church*, 2nd rev. ed. [New York: American Tract Society, 1903], 18 [Vos's emphasis]). Vos continues, "Though Jehovah was king, he nevertheless could perform acts in the future, work deliverances for his people, such as would render him king in a new sense" (ibid., 19). Many authors note and/or discuss the OT's future-oriented perspective regarding the Kingdom, e.g., G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1986), 19; Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Black's New Testament Commentary; London: A & C Black, 1991; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 55; George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed., ed. Donald A Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 58; Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., "Kingdom of God/Kingdom of Heaven," in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 479; John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark* (Sacra Pagina Series,

vol. 2; Collegetown, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 71.

¹⁴For a thorough discussion of the eschatological hope of the coming Kingdom of God, see N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 202-20; and idem, *The New Testament and the People of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1992), 302-320. Many other pages in these works by Wright could be cited, for in both of these works he analyzes writings from the OT and from the intertestamental period (and presents his understanding of how such texts were interpreted) in order to establish the backgrounds for the eschatological worldview that permeated the thoughts and expectations of Jews living in that era.

¹⁵"This expectation [the coming manifestation of God's kingship] of the future has such a prominent importance in the scope of the prophetic divine revelation that it may be called the center of the whole Old Testament promise of salvation" (Ridderbos, 5).

¹⁶Other texts include, Isa 40:9-11; 24:23 (the entire section of Isaiah 24-27 can be cited in this regard); Obad 21; Micah 4:3; Zeph 3:15 (Ridderbos, 5). See also Psalms 47; 93; 96; 97; 99.

¹⁷Ibid., 6-7.

¹⁸My emphasis. For a discussion of the connections between Daniel 6 and 7, and the Son of Man in particular see N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 291-297.

¹⁹Mark's original readers, many of whom were no doubt familiar with the OT through the Greek transla-

tion of the LXX, would have also understood that the Kingdom of God was not a new idea. It is certain that those not familiar with the LXX learned the significance of the OT concept of the Kingdom of God through the apostolic teaching and preaching.

²⁰"To say 'the kingdom of God is at hand' makes sense only when the hearers know 'the story' so far and are waiting for it to be completed" (N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 226). Ladd expresses a similar thought, saying that Jesus "assumed that this [the Kingdom of God] was a concept so familiar that it did not require definition" (*The Presence of the Future*, 45).

²¹The OT is far and away the primary background for understanding what Jesus meant, and what his hearers understood, when he announced the arrival of the Kingdom of God. However, the Jewish literature written during the intertestamental, or Second-Temple, era serves as important secondary background to the NT. Because of the purpose and scope of this article, emphasis will not be placed on this literature. A few words of explanation, however, are in order. From the close of the OT canon to the first writings included in the NT, there stands a period of roughly four centuries, during which time Israel's national hopes periodically rose and fell. Following on the mitigated joy of the return from exile, Jews living in Palestine suffered once again under foreign dominion at the hands of the Selucids, experienced a time of national resurgence under

the Maccabees, and fell once again under foreign domination by the Romans. During these turbulent centuries, Jewish writers produced a body of extremely diverse literature (although a substantial amount of the literature included under the general headings of “apocryphal” and/or “pseudepigraphical,” was not written until well into or after the first century). Though not considered canonical (at least not by most Protestants), this literature is nevertheless a window into the world of first century Judaism, and is particularly helpful as a guide to how some Jews living during the time of Christ read and interpreted the OT. For a discussion of this literature in relation to the Kingdom of God, see Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 305-306. For a discussion of other non-canonical literature, including the Targums, read specifically as background to the Kingdom in Mark 1:15, see Rikki Watts, *Isaiah’s New Exodus in Mark* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1997; reprint edition, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 96-102.

In a land where God was supposed to be King, yet where Latin was heard on a daily basis, it is hardly surprising that Jews were thinking about the promise of a coming Kingdom. For example, in the *Testament of Moses*, the writer looks forward to a time when Israel’s enemies will be destroyed, the nation restored, and the universal reign of God is established. “The King will appear throughout his whole creation, the heavenly one will arise from his kingly

throne.... Yea, all things will be fulfilled” (10:1-10). Similarly, in the *War Scroll* (1QM), the writer speaks of a decisive, future victory over their enemies and a time when “sovereignty shall be to the God of Israel” (6:6). Both of these texts, and others, are cited in Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 305-306. It should be pointed out, however, that there is substantial discontinuity, in terms of content and emphases, between the literature of the intertestamental period and both the Old and New Testaments (see Ladd, *Presence of the Future*, 99, 106).

²²R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark* (New International Greek Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 91.

²³See William L. Lane, *Commentary on the Gospel of Mark* (New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 64.

²⁴Ladd, *The Presence of the Future*, 139. A majority of scholars agree that the Kingdom of God refers to God’s “dynamic” rule and reign over his people. There are, however, objections, e.g., Hans Kvalbein, “The Kingdom of God in the Ethics of Jesus,” *Communio viatorum* 40 (1998): 197-227. Kvalbein argues that the Hebrew and Aramaic words (*malkuth* and *malkutha*, respectively) typically translated by the Greek *basileia*, are not usually connected with various words with a meaning “to come.” Kvalbein’s linguistic arguments are not ultimately convincing, but more problematically, he insists on too sharp of an either/

or distinction between the Kingdom as God’s rule and the Kingdom as it relates to God’s gift of salvation. The survey of OT texts above show that no such dichotomy exists. God’s rule and reign is inherently connected with the salvation of God’s people.

²⁵Note that the LXX, quoted by Mark, differs slightly in punctuation. This is not a matter of concern here.

²⁶C. H. Dodd argues for this view in, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, rev. ed. (New York: Scribners, 1961), see particularly, 29-35. Though Dodd’s conclusion that Jesus meant that the “Kingdom has come” (i.e., “now here”) stills draws a great deal of attention, it has not stood up to scholarly scrutiny. Beasley-Murray aptly compares the debate between Dodd and J. Y. Campbell over this issue as a discussion that “resembles a long-drawn-out tennis match” (73).

²⁷France, 93. “It is therefore not appropriate to ask whether ‘the kingdom of God’ is past, present, or future, as if it has a specific time-reference. . . . God’s kingship is both eternal and eschatological, both fulfilled and awaited, both present and imminent” (ibid.).

²⁸As Beasley-Murray notes, “The linguistic arguments do not appear adequately to account for the utterances in which the disputed terms occur. As Kelber has put it, the basic deficiency in these arguments ‘lies in their failure to come to grips with the semantic significance of words in their contextual setting’” (73). Beasley Murray is citing Werner H. Kelber, *The Kingdom of God in Mark: A New*

Place and a New Time (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 9.

²⁹Readers should note that this *does not* mean that God is now partly ruling in the present but will rule completely in the future. “Already” and “not yet” does not refer to a kind of intermediate state where God is reigning spiritually while waiting for a time when he will rule completely. God rules now every bit as much as he will in the future. The emphasis here is on the manifestation or revelation of God’s Kingdom. As Vos puts it, “the kingdom itself is not strictly speaking represented as future, but only the enforcement or manifestation of the kingdom. God’s rule is ever existing” (20).

³⁰Jesus did not merely proclaim, as John did, the imminence of divine visitation, he asserted that this visitation was in actual progress, that God was already visiting his people” (Ladd, *Presence of the Future*, 111).

³¹Hafemann, 1.

³²Wright makes this point a number of times in both *The New Testament and the People of God* and *Jesus and the Victory of God*.

³³Ladd, *the Presence of the Future*, 222.

³⁴This point cannot receive enough emphasis. Christians often speak of “building the Kingdom,” but we must remember that, while the Kingdom may advance *through* us, it is not built *by* us.

³⁵Robert H. Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 95.

³⁶These parables are not, then, about

subjective experience or growth in the Kingdom of God. While some may find Moltmann’s comments on these parables touching, he misses the point of these parables when he says, “The parables from nature make the Kingdom of God very sensual. I smell a rose and I smell the Kingdom of God. I taste bread and wine and I taste the Kingdom of God. I walk through a blooming, colorful meadow and I feel the Kingdom in which everything can grow and develop” (Jürgen Moltmann, “Jesus and the Kingdom of God,” *Asbury Theological Journal* 48 [1993]: 7).

³⁷Unlike John, Mark does not use the word *sēmeia*. Hooker, however, is correct to say that the miracles recorded by Mark serve a similar purpose (73). See John 2:11, 23; 3:2; 4:48; 6:2, 26; 7:31; 9:16; 11:47; 12:37; 20:30.

³⁸The future defeat of Israel’s enemies is, as seen earlier, a major theme in the prophets, e.g., Mich 4:11-13; Zeph 3:8; Isa 31:4-9; Ezekiel 38-39; Joel 3:9-15; Zech 12:1-9; 14:1-3. Some of these texts are cited above, and this specific list of citations is from Ladd, *The Presence of the Future*, 150.

³⁹Ridderbos, 63. Ridderbos cites Mark 1:24 and Luke 8:28 in this regard.

⁴⁰Hooker, 72.

⁴¹E.g., Jairus falls at Jesus’ feet and says, “My little daughter is at the point of death; come and lay your hands on her, so that she will get well and live” (5:23). This is undoubtedly a show of faith. Likewise, the Syro-phoenician woman’s persistence with Jesus implies that she believed

he could heal her daughter. Jesus’ tells her, “Because of this answer go your way; the demon has gone out of your daughter” (7:29).

⁴²Ibid. The texts considered here are also cited by Hooker.

⁴³Emphasis added.

⁴⁴As Guelich notes, “Healing the sick and forgiving the sinner correspond to the prophetic hope for the age of salvation. Thus, the pronouncement of forgiveness in this healing context makes explicit the fundamental character of Jesus’ healing ministry. . . . Jesus’ healing of the sick (2:1-12) like his exorcism of the demons (1:21-28) proclaim the ‘gospel of the Kingdom’” (Robert A. Guelich, *Mark 1-8:26* [Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 34a; Dallas: Word, 1989], 86).

⁴⁵“The announcement and presentation of radical healing to a man in his entire person was a sign of the Kingdom of God drawn near. The paralytic experienced the fulfillment of God’s promise that the lame would share in the joy of the coming salvation,” (Lane, 99). One of the texts Lane cites is Isa 35:6. His citation prompted me to read the larger context in Isaiah.

⁴⁶While these miracles are most often discussed in terms of Mark’s Christology, the identity of Jesus and the presence of the Kingdom are inseparable. When Jesus displays his authority over nature we see the inauguration of the redemption of creation. Creation itself has suffered the effects of sin (Rom 8:19-20), and must be redeemed (v. 21). See Ladd, *The Presence of the Future*, 60.

⁴⁷See Isa 6:9ff; Jer 5:21; Ezek 12:2. There is also reference to the hard-

ness of the hearts of the disciples in the face of another miracle over nature. When Jesus walks on the Sea of Galilee and climbs into the boat, the disciples are terrified. Mark explains their reaction as a result of not understanding the miracle they recently witnessed: “for they had not gained any insight from the incident of the loaves, but their heart was hardened” (6:52).

⁴⁸Hafemann, 2.

⁴⁹Mark 2:10, 28: 8:31, 38; 9:9, 12, 31; 10:33, 45; 13:26; 14:21, 41, 62; cf. Dan 7:13-14.

⁵⁰A great deal of discussion surrounds this text, particularly in regard to the role of John the Baptist as the coming Elijah (see Mal 4:6). What concerns us here, however, is the connection Jesus makes between the Son of Man and his suffering. It is possible, as France points out, that there is an allusion to Ps 118:22 (LXX 117:22), which speaks of the “rejection” (*apodokimazō*) of the corner stone. Mark uses a different word (*exoudeneō*) “despise,” but the quotation of Pss 118:22 in Acts 1:4 has *exoudeneō*, instead of *apodokimazō*. So it is conceivable that Mark and Luke use a similar text of the LXX. There is also a possible connection between Mark’s use of *exoudeneō* and the occurrence of that word in Isa 53:3 in various translations of the LXX. “Whether or not a direct verbal echo is established, the thought of rejection is clearly present in both Ps. 118:22 and Is. 53:3, and few more sources probably can be suggested for the conviction that Scripture predicts the rejection of the Son of Man” (France, 360).

⁵¹See also Mark 14:21, “For the Son of Man must go, even as it is written of him.”

⁵²Hafemann, 2.

⁵³Evans notes, “The two scriptural traditions complement each other, with the Suffering Servant of Isa 53 redefining the mission and destiny of the ‘son of man’ in Dan 7. Indeed, the ‘son of man’ will someday ‘be served,’ but he first must serve, even suffer and die, as the Servant of the Lord” (Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20* [Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 34b; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001], 123).

⁵⁴As Hooker states, “the story symbolizes the judgment which is going to fall on those who reject the message of the Kingdom, and whose hard hearts prevent them from seeing the power of God at work in Jesus” (75).

⁵⁵This phrase appears in the proofs for *thesis 21* of the Heidelberg Disputation. See, Timothy F. Lull ed., *Martin Luther’s Basic Works* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 44. It is, of course, anachronistic to apply Luther’s phrase to people living in the first century. Nevertheless, Luther’s juxtaposition between the theologian of glory who “prefers works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and, in general good to evil” (*ibid*) and the theologian of the cross who “comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross” (*thesis 20*), is a fitting way to distinguish between Jesus’ message of the Kingdom and the expectations of his contemporaries. See also, Martin

Luther, “*Heidelberg Disputation*” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 31, trans. Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Mulenberg, 1957), 40, 53.

⁵⁶As Lane says, “The disciples’ thoughts were upon the glory; when questions of rank seemed appropriate” (340).

⁵⁷“The kingdom of God is entered through renouncing this world’s cares and concerns—by renouncing everything and following Jesus” (Ladd, *The Presence of the Future*, 116).

⁵⁸As Donahue and Harrington note, “With this teaching Jesus challenges and subverts the assumptions of his culture and rank and status” (285). This statement applies to all cultures.

⁵⁹The same emphasis is found in Matt 18:3.

⁶⁰France, 374.

⁶¹*Ibid*.

⁶²Scholars have difficulty understanding why Mark’s narrative emphasizes receiving children when the context “is concerned with the humility which ought to characterize a disciple” (Hooker, 228). However, when we recognize the emphasis in this text on the difference between standards in the world and standards in the kingdom of God, the difficulties are alleviated. See, France, 374. For different sort of discussion of this text see, Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 270. He understands Jesus as teaching specifically about how the disciples are to view children.

⁶³See Lane, 382.

⁶⁴It is impossible here to consider every incidence in which Jesus met with opposition. There are many texts in Mark that highlight this theme, e.g., 1:22; 2:6-7, 16, 18, 24; 3:2, 6, 22; 7:1-13; 8:11; 10:1; 11:28-33; 12:13-17; 18-27; 14:13ff; 15:1-15, 16-21.

⁶⁵Very early on, the Pharisees conspire with the Herodians (with whom they had little in common otherwise) to destroy Jesus (3:6).

⁶⁶The appointment of the twelve apostles is itself a sign of the inauguration of the Kingdom. As representatives of Jesus, and therefore of the Kingdom, the twelve disciples are commissioned to go out and preach and cast out demons. They were, as Wright says, "to be his helpers in the proclamation and inauguration of the kingdom" (*Jesus and the Victory of God*, 462).

⁶⁷Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 281.

⁶⁸The request for a sign is itself a sign of unbelief. Guelich points out the contrast between the Pharisees and those who came to Jesus believing he was able to minister to him: "In contrast to others who come to him in faith anticipating God's offer of help and healing, the Pharisees in their blindness had failed to see God's sign and to believe in Jesus or his ministry" (*Mark 1-8:26*, 416). Jesus identifies the Pharisees with a phrase that points back in history to others marked by faithlessness. By addressing them as "this generation," Jesus identifies the Pharisees with "the generation of Noah's day (Gen 7:1) and the stubborn, disobedient wilderness wanderers in Ps 95:10-11 (cf. Deut 32:5, 20). Here it is

a pejorative term referring to those who turned their backs on God.... The same designation occurs later in 8:38 and 9:19 with reference to Jesus' contemporary generation characterized as 'adulterous, sinful' (8:38) and 'unbelieving' (9:19)" (ibid., 414-415).

⁶⁹"The transfiguration should be understood as a visual verification of Jesus' claim to be the 'son of man' who will come in the glory of his Father with the holy angels' (Evans, 36). Similarly, "The transfiguration," notes Lane, "is a manifestation of Jesus' sovereign power which pointed beyond itself to the parousia" (314).

⁷⁰The "divine endorsement" from heaven ensures the disciples, and Mark's readers, that "Jesus' talk of rejection and death has not disqualified him from his messianic task. He is still God's Son, and his message, now placed in a new light, must still be heeded" (Evans, 38).

⁷¹As Hengel states regarding the connection between Mark 1:1 and 1:15: "In other words, the *euaggelion tou theou* of the dawn of the rule of God preached by Jesus in his public appearance, which is a thematic summary of the beginnings of his message, extends throughout Jesus' words and actions, passion and resurrection to become the comprehensive *euaggelion tou uiou theou* at the beginning" (Martin Hengel, *The Four Gospels and the Gospel of Jesus Christ*, trans. John Bowden [Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000], 95).