

B. The Emergent Kingdom – The Coming of Immanuel

John was appointed by the Lord to prepare Israel for the coming of the long-awaited kingdom. And at the heart of that kingdom was the profound reality of *theophany*: The uniform prophetic message was that Yahweh Himself would inaugurate His kingdom in connection with His own personal presence in the world. The promise of the kingdom was the promise of *Immanuel* – “God with us” – and this theme is most prevalent in Isaiah’s prophecy (cf. 7:1-12:6, 19:18-25, 25:1-27:13, 32:1-20, 40:1-11, 42:1-9, 49:1-13, 59:1-20, etc.).

In particular, Isaiah associated the eschatological coming of Yahweh with the coming of His Servant. Importantly, this Servant is presented in unique terms as both the fulfillment of Israel (Isaiah 49:1ff) and the presence of Yahweh (cf. Isaiah 40:1-11 with 42:1-16; also Zechariah 2:10-11). In this way the text indirectly indicates that, in this one individual, there is some sort of conjoining of the covenant Father and son; *both parties to the covenant are represented in him*. While Christians commonly recognize that the Isaianic “Servant of the Lord” represents Yahweh Himself in His coming to inaugurate His kingdom, it is far less common for them to find in this individual the fulfillment of Israel, Yahweh’s covenant son. The result is that they miss a crucial aspect of Christ’s identity and role as the God-Man.

1. The most explicit example of this prophetic conjoining of God and man is the **Immanuel prophecy** of Isaiah 7-12. There Yahweh promised to Ahaz that His own presence with the house of David constituted its security and well-being (7:1-8:10), and His presence – explained in terms of the principle of *Immanuel* – was to find expression in the coming of a child who is the covenant seed of David (cf. 9:1-7 with 7:13-14).

This context is profoundly important because it explicitly connects the central kingdom theme of theophany – “God with us” – with the promised royal seed of David. Though there remains a degree of mystery in Isaiah’s revelation, the prophet leaves no doubt that Yahweh’s enduring promise to come and establish His kingdom was to be fulfilled in the covenant son of David. Somehow that Davidic seed would represent the Lord’s tangible presence in the world; Yahweh’s promise to establish and rule over His kingdom was to be realized in the Davidide set forth in the Davidic Covenant.

For this reason, if the person of Jesus were indeed the promised Isaianic Servant, then one would expect that He would be introduced as the *Immanuel-Davidide* of Isaiah’s prophecy, and this is precisely the case.

- a. Before Jesus was even conceived the Lord dispatched His angel to inform Mary of her impending pregnancy and its significance. The Lord had appointed her to conceive the Son promised to David, with the implication being that the time had come for Him to restore David’s house and kingdom as He promised through His prophets. Luke is the most explicit in this regard (cf. Luke 1:26-33 with Amos 9:11-15), but Matthew also emphasizes the Davidic identity of Mary’s child – not by linking Him with the Davidic Covenant as such, but with the subsequent derivative promise that the royal Davidic seed would come out of Bethlehem, the ancestral city of David (Matthew 2:1-6, cf. also 1:1-17).

- b. The child to be conceived in Mary's womb would be the Son of David in whom the kingdom was to be realized. But, according to Isaiah, as the promised Davidide this son must also be the One fulfilling the promise of *Immanuel*. Again, this is exactly how He is introduced. Mary would conceive a son, but not by normal procreation; The Lord's Spirit would come upon her and, through a sublime, inexplicable miracle, a conception would take place. Thus the mystery of Immanuel in relation to David's seed was resolved at last: The Son of David was to be uniquely the Son of God (cf. Matthew 1:18-23 with Luke 1:30-35).
2. Central to the Old Testament promise of the kingdom was the fact that Yahweh Himself would come and establish it. But prophetic revelation also indicated that Yahweh's kingdom was to be ruled by the seed promised in the Davidic Covenant. Isaiah reconciled these truths by revealing that the Davidide who would restore and rule over David's kingdom would do so according to the principle of Immanuel: His victory and dominion were to be Yahweh's; in His rule Yahweh's own rule would be expressed.

But another stream of Old Testament messianism also converged with the promise to David of a royal "Branch": The coming Davidic ruler was to be a **king-priest** – a priest according to the order of *Melchizedek*, king of Salem and priest of the Most High God (cf. Psalm 110 with Zechariah 6:9-15; cf. also Genesis 14:18 with Hebrews 5-7).

The *royal* aspect of prophetic messianism associated with David enjoys an obvious and intimate connection with the Isaianic servant motif and the principle of Immanuel (along with the Isaiah contexts, consider Jeremiah 30-33). The focal point of that connection is the matter of *dominion*: The Branch of David is shown to be the Servant of Yahweh in whom the Lord establishes His kingdom and executes His dominion over His creation. But the Scripture is concerned with a corollary issue, namely how the divine dominion is secured and carried out. It is in that regard that the *priestly* aspect of messianism comes to the forefront. The Davidic Branch is the Melchizedekian Priest.

Though perhaps not apparent at first glance, this messianic component is central to the doctrine of the kingdom of God. The reason is tied to the fact that the Lord's kingdom is, in every manifestation, a *redemptive* kingdom – a kingdom having its origin and essence in the principle of redemption.

- a. This truth was implied in the primal promise of the **protoevangelium**: In the most basic sense, redemption involves liberation secured by appropriate payment, and in the instance of the post-Fall circumstance the issue was liberation from the curse. This deliverance was to be secured by the woman's seed as He overcame the serpent through the implied price of His own bruising. Given the nature and effects of the Fall, any manifestation of God's kingdom – that is, God's rule through man, the image-son – would necessarily involve redemption. The kingdom of God concerns divine-human *dominion* in the context of divine-human *communion*, and this reality demands the liberation of man from the subjugating power of his estrangement from his Creator-Father.

- b. Later, God further developed the promise of recovery (with its implied restoration of His kingdom rule) by making a **covenant with Abraham**. In that covenant He explicitly promised a future kingdom in terms of land, seed, and blessing: Abraham's seed would enter into Yahweh's blessing and mediate that blessing to the world by living as His beloved "son," dwelling with Him as Father-King in His sanctuary-land. Once again the kingdom of God was shown to be dominion in the context of communion.
- c. The first expression of that kingdom was realized in the theocratic **nation of Israel**. Israel was the promised seed of Abraham and Canaan was Yahweh's sanctuary where the nation would enjoy the blessing of communion with the God of their patriarchal fathers. But what was only implied in Eden was now overt: The theocratic kingdom had its source in a great redemptive act. Israel was born out of divine redemption and this reality was the foundational premise of the covenant and identity marker of the covenant people (Exodus 15:1-18, 20:1-2).
- d. The Israelite kingdom was a redemptive kingdom and, given its place as first-level fulfillment of the kingdom promised to Abraham, it follows that the **final form of the kingdom** would also be associated with redemption. Again, this is precisely what the Scriptures reveal.
- No sooner did the prophets declare the destruction of the Israelite kingdom than they began to speak of a future kingdom associated with the promised son of David. David's existing kingdom would come to its decreed end, but this didn't mean the end of Yahweh's oath to permanently establish David's kingdom in his son.
 - The Lord's enduring commitment to David's house and kingdom was attested historically in the recovery of a Judean remnant following the Babylonian destruction of Judah and Jerusalem. This miniscule restoration was used by the prophets to reaffirm that Yahweh had not forgotten or forsaken His promise to David. Most importantly, the return of the Judean remnant under Cyrus reinforced the connection between Yahweh's kingdom and the principle of redemption. As the Lord redeemed a remnant from Babylonian captivity, so the true Davidic kingdom would be the product of divine redemption through an appointed *messiah* (ref. esp. Isaiah 42:1-54:17).
- e. It is in relation to the concept of a redemptive kingdom that the doctrine of the *Day of the Lord* emerged in the prophets. Yahweh would indeed come and establish His kingdom through a great redemptive act, but, consistent with the meaning of *redemption*, that act would involve judgment and deliverance. The Lord was going to usher in His kingdom by defeating the enemies who had taken His sons captive, thereby liberating them and taking them to Himself to be with Him in His dwelling place. The first Exodus was to find its own fulfillment in a second Exodus (Isaiah 51:1-11; cf. 11:1-16).

In history and in prophecy, God's kingdom has been shown to be a redemptive kingdom, but the principle of redemption always had a temporal quality. Now, in the time of fulfillment, the Lord was revealing through His inspired witnesses that the kingdom principle of redemption – like the kingdom itself – was taking on a *spiritual* character. Deliverance from enemies had now, in the fullness of the times, become deliverance from the spiritual enemies of sin and death; temporal deliverance had become *salvation* (ref. Luke 1:39-55, 67-79). This transposition is the key to understanding the priestly aspect of Old Testament messianism. Like its Israelite predecessor, Yahweh's true kingdom was to be a redemptive kingdom, but redemption in relation to it would involve deliverance from sin, and this spotlighted its priestly dynamic.

The priestly aspect of the eschatological kingdom was itself nothing new, for the Israelite kingdom had also been a priestly one (Exodus 19:5-6). Even as the kingdom of Israel was founded on the Sinai Covenant, the covenant was founded on the priesthood. The covenant at Sinai established formal relationship between Father and son, but that relationship – set in the context of human estrangement – depended upon a system of mediation by which the unrighteousness (that is, the relational unfaithfulness) of the son could be addressed (Hebrews 7:11).

And at the heart of that mediation was the principle of **sacrifice**. The son's violation of the covenant demanded satisfaction, but, more than that, *the continuance of the covenant relationship required that the son's obligation of perfect righteousness under the covenant be met on his behalf*. Violation of the covenant by either party meant the end of the covenant; thus, in a context in which the son was capable only of unceasing violation, the continuation of the Israelite kingdom depended upon the son's appropriation of an alien righteousness.

The covenant Father provided such a substitute for His son, but that provision was only symbolic; the blood of bulls and goats could never take away sin. While Israel's sacrificial system spoke of righteousness by portraying how the problem of estrangement was to be resolved, it didn't procure it. *In God's infinite wisdom, what was portrayed by priest and sacrifice would be fulfilled through the merging of the two*. The problem of human unrighteousness – that is, the curse of divine-human estrangement – would be resolved by a priest who would offer Himself as substitutionary atoning sacrifice.

This, too, was not a new idea; in their witness to the kingdom the prophets insisted that Yahweh's deliverance and restoration – which were to come through His Servant – would be effected by the Servant's self-offering. Zion's perpetual unfaithfulness had brought desolation to David's kingdom, but the Servant's work would secure restoration and a profusion of offspring for Yahweh (Isaiah 53-54). The Branch of David – the Servant of Yahweh – would rule as a priest upon His throne: Not only would the promised kingdom be *inaugurated* through a work of priestly triumph over the true enemies of God and man, namely sin and death, it would be *perpetuated* through priestly intercession. The One heralded by the forerunner as the winnowing Judge who would burn the chaff with unquenchable fire was also the Savior of whom He declared, "*Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*" (Luke 3:15-17; John 1:19-30).