CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE KINGDOM OF GOD IN THE OLD TESTAMENT
AND SECOND TEMPLE LITERATURE

In the final two chapters, we will examine the fourth and last element in Matthew’s idiolectic use of heaven language, his unique expression kingdom of heaven. As before, we will begin by examining the literary and historical precedents for this notion before proceeding to study its function in Matthew’s Gospel.

The amount of secondary literature that has been produced on the topic of the kingdom of God is so vast¹ that nearly every scholar who ventures into this subject feels it is necessary to begin with a disclaimer. The present writer is no exception: To comprehensively analyze the various views and debates concerning the kingdom of God would be a massive task that goes beyond the constraints on this project. Moreover, this kind of secondary literature analysis is not necessary for the development of my thesis.

Nevertheless, because of the great importance of the kingdom in Jesus’ proclamation, some understanding of contemporary notions of God’s kingdom is essential for interpreting Matthew. It is a fair question to ask, What would preaching about the kingdom of God have meant to Jesus’ hearers? To Matthew’s? Therefore, what follows is a stream-lined examination of the relevant concepts and texts related to the kingdom of God in the literature preceding and contemporary with Jesus’ ministry. We will begin by examining the issue of the translation of מלאיהMALAI and βασιλεία and then proceed with a roughly chronological treatment, tracing the kingdom of God from the Old Testament through the various corpora of the Second Temple literature. This chapter will conclude with a study of how the themes of kingdom and heaven and earth are interwoven in the stories of Daniel 2–7.

¹ Roy Harrisville cleverly describes the study of the kingdom of God theme as a well-worn path that has evolved to the ultimate point of a concrete thoroughfare, on which nothing truly new can be said, “only a perpetual tinkering for purposes of employment or repair.” Roy A. Harrisville, “In Search of the Meaning of ‘The Reign of God’,” Interpretation 47/2 (1993), 140.
Although “kingdom” is the common English translation for βασιλεία and מָלָכָה, the majority of scholars have long accepted that words such as “reign” and “sovereignty” better communicate the typical usage of these words. It was Gustaf Dalman’s late 19th-century study that effected the consensus view that the Hebrew root מָלָכָה and its Greek counterpart βασιλεία are best understood to mean sovereignty rather than a territorial or spatial kingdom. Dalman writes: “No doubt can be entertained that both in the Old Testament and in Jewish literature מָלָכָה, when applied to God, means always the ‘kingly rule,’ never the ‘kingdom,’ as if it were meant to suggest the territory governed by Him.”

Most scholars have been convinced by Dalman’s argumentation and his view is regularly cited, though some have offered assorted critiques. One important qualification was made by S. Aalen in his 1962 article on kingdom of God in the Gospels. In this lengthy and reasonable treatment, Aalen generally agrees with Dalman’s view, but shows that on a few occasions in the OT and often in the Gospels, the idea of God’s kingdom does indeed have the sense of a sphere or territory. Brevard Childs also follows Dalman but offers a different kind of modifying critique. Childs points out that our understanding of the kingdom should not be determined so strictly by the rabbinic tradition (as Dalman does) because this tradition was rather suspicious of and ultimately rejected the views of kingdom found in the apocalyptic literature. Instead, we must also take into account the usage of kingdom in the apocalyptic literature. In a series of articles from the perspective of translation theory, the linguist Rick Brown offers yet another correction to Dalman’s widespread view. Brown convincingly shows that

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2 Dalman, *Words of Jesus*, 94.

3 J. C. O’Neill in “The Kingdom of God,” *NovTest* 35 (1993), 130, calls Dalman’s statement “perhaps the most influential sentence ever written” in New Testament studies. While being certainly an overstatement, this remark does reveal how widespread Dalman’s view has become.


5 In a 1988 article Joel Marcus revisits the question of the sense of kingdom and offers a critique of Aalen while supporting a view that basically aligns with Dalman. Joel Marcus, “Entering Into the Kingly Power of God”: 663–675.
