

# IN SEARCH *of a* FINE PEARL

The Kingdom of God That Was at Hand

Y.G. KOCH



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## The Search for a Fine Pearl

Imagine you're a North American who enjoys holidaying in Africa to escape the freezing winters at home. Over time, you befriend an African farmer and his family, who live relatively isolated from the modern world and have never traveled outside of their country. They also know little about the rest of the world, as they live without electricity and thus have no internet access.

One evening, you're having a great time around a campfire with this family on their farm in Africa. You all engage in riddle challenges, sharing laughter and enjoying each other's company. When it's your turn, you share this riddle: "A man and his dog are on opposite sides of a river. The man calls the dog, and it crosses the river without getting wet or using a boat or bridge. How did the dog do it?" The farmer and his family find the riddle perplexing. They can't imagine how the dog crossed the river without getting wet or using any help. In their village, the nearby river flows year-round and crossing it without a boat means getting wet. Noticing their confusion, you solve the riddle by stating, "The river was frozen!" The

farmer and his family stare at each other in confusion. They have never experienced a cold, snowy winter or heard of freezing rivers before. They struggle to understand the notion of a frozen river. Your riddle is from a different world—a world that they have never seen or experienced.

As the farmer's family found it hard to grasp the concept of a frozen river, many of us struggle to understand Jesus's message about the kingdom of God. No matter how hard we try, our words seem inadequate to capture it. It feels as though it's from another world, leaving us lost and stumbling in the dark. Scholars studying Jesus's life frequently identify the kingdom of God as his core message, a message they consider the most challenging to grasp. Those who study Jesus's life will eventually face this challenge. We find the theme of the kingdom of God prominently featured in Jesus's messages throughout his ministry. However, understanding the true nature of what Jesus meant by the kingdom of God remains difficult.

According to the Gospel of Mark, which is regarded as the earliest Gospel by most scholars, Jesus launched his public ministry by proclaiming the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God. Jesus called this message the gospel, that is, the good news.

“Now, after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel’” (Mk 1:14–15; see also Mt 4:17)

Most New Testament scholars consider the Synoptic Gospels—Mark, Matthew, and Luke—to be the earliest written accounts of Jesus's life and

teachings. These books refer to the kingdom of God more than a hundred times. From his teachings and parables to the Lord's Prayer and the Beatitudes, Jesus spoke and taught about the kingdom of God more than any other subject.

This fact has led scholars to conclude that "the kingdom of God" is a major part of Jesus's message. New Testament scholar Norman Perrin remarked: "The central aspect of the teaching of Jesus was that concerning the kingdom of God. On this, there can be no doubt and today no scholar does, in fact, doubt it. Jesus appeared as one who proclaimed the kingdom; all else in His message and ministry serves a function in relation to that proclamation and derives its meaning from it."<sup>1</sup> Likewise, E. P. Sanders writes, "By word no less than deed Jesus intended to proclaim the power of God. He referred to it as 'the kingdom of God' (Mark and Luke) or 'the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew)."<sup>2</sup> Only Matthew uses the phrase "kingdom of heaven" instead of "kingdom of God"; however, his application of the phrase shows that both expressions have the same meaning. As a devout Jew, he refrained from using the term "God" too frequently, opting instead to use "heaven" as a substitute. In his book *The Marginal Jew*, John Meier explains: "The use of 'heaven' in place of 'God' is simply a pious Jewish periphrasis to avoid constantly naming the Deity in the oblique case of a set formula."<sup>3</sup>

Consequently, anyone studying these Gospels needs (yet struggles) to understand what Jesus meant by "the kingdom of God." Even though the kingdom of God was Jesus's primary message, he never defined it. In fact, he said that the kingdom of God is a mystery (Mk 4:11). The phrase "kingdom of God" is also not common in the Old Testament and is rare in the New Testament writings outside of the Synoptic Gospels. Generations



of scholars have attempted to define and explain the kingdom of God, yet they have often had to admit that it largely remains a mystery. Sanders concedes, “Intensive efforts over the last hundred years to define the phrase have left the issue more confused rather than clearer.”<sup>4</sup>

For years, I’ve also found Jesus’s message about the kingdom of God hard to fully comprehend. My research often left me feeling that I still hadn’t grasped its true essence and that a crucial, unidentifiable element was missing. Consider a scenario in which you have never encountered a lake, but you want to understand what lakes are. You explore the physical characteristics of lakes, which include their distinct zones, as well as their various dimensions. You also learn about the wide array of life forms, ranging from microscopic organisms to fish, frogs, birds, and aquatic plants, along with their food chains and reproductive processes, among other aspects. Despite acquiring all this information about lakes, you still sense that something is lacking. Indeed, the most fundamental component—the water—is absent. It is the water that defines a lake and enables all the diverse life forms to thrive in the first place; however, this vital element is missing from your research.

I always found it difficult to grasp the essence of the kingdom of God until I began studying John the Baptist. Exploring his role within the Gospels revealed a new perspective to me. It felt like discovering a final puzzle piece, getting a breakthrough, or uncovering a vital clue to solve a riddle. Investigating the role of John the Baptist within the Gospels enabled me to step into previously unfamiliar territory and helped me to understand the essence of the kingdom of God. Suddenly, everything seemed to fall into place. I found John the Baptist to be the crucial link and bridge between the Old Testament hope and the New Testament story of Jesus.

The underlying work aims to guide readers on a journey to uncover the fundamental nature of God's kingdom. Our focus is mainly on the essence of the kingdom of God, that is, the essential element that defines the kingdom of God. Our exploration will begin with the events right before Jesus's public ministry and will conclude with the developments that took place shortly after Jesus's death. This study doesn't claim complete coverage of God's kingdom, nor does it cover every aspect of the subject. Our attention is focused on uncovering the final piece to enable us to comprehend the true meaning of the kingdom of God, a kingdom that Jesus proclaimed was imminent and was about to arrive. I hope that grasping its essence and fundamental nature will make all its other aspects clearer and easier to understand.

First, I would like to caution the reader that trying to understand the true essence of the kingdom of God is not a simple task and requires our full attention, commitment, and a readiness to devote our time. Above all, we need the help of God to open our eyes so we may see the mystery of the kingdom of God. As someone who is in search of a precious metal, we need to be ready to dig deeper into the biblical passages. We are not dealing with a regular stone that is readily available and can be found everywhere. The kingdom of God resembles a fine pearl of immense value, and we must be prepared to search for it and dedicate our time and focus.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it” (Mt 13:45–46).

One challenge we face in trying to understand John the Baptist and Jesus is the language barrier. This barrier goes deeper than the barrier that exists between their native language and ours. Entering the biblical world in its historical context is like visiting a foreign country that is culturally and linguistically different from ours. To understand the concept of a freezing river, your African friends need to learn new concepts and vocabulary that are from a foreign land and that they have never heard before, such as snow, ice, and a freezing winter. As we are entering the land of biblical prophets, we need to be ready to learn the language of prophets, a language we are not used to.

As modern readers, good communication entails using definitions and explanations with clear meanings. In contrast, biblical prophets speak in metaphors, parables, riddles, etc., to convey their message. When John the Baptist talked about the imminent wrath of God, he did not explain and say how God would punish Israel soon if it did not repent. Rather, he would employ a metaphor and talk about the axe that is being laid at the root of the trees and how bad trees would be cut and thrown into the fire (Mt 3:10, Lk 3:9). Likewise, Jesus warned the temple authorities about the coming judgment of God on them for rejecting John the Baptist and God's son by telling the parable of the tenants instead of speaking in a clear language (Mk 12:1–12). In fact, Jesus constantly used parables to convey his message more than anybody else in the Bible. This is the language of biblical prophets, and we must give it close attention if we want to grasp their message. If we expect clear definitions and explanations, then we will miss their message.

But there is an even more subtle medium of communication biblical prophets use that we constantly miss. It is their symbolic acts. Biblical

prophets do not always deliver their messages through their words alone. They also employ symbolic acts as an essential tool to convey their messages. It is thus important to pay close attention to both their actions and words in order to fully comprehend their overall message. As modern readers, we rarely give enough attention to their symbolic actions as we do to their words.

The prophet Isaiah walked “naked and barefoot” to signify that “the king of Assyria would lead away the Egyptian captives and the Cushite exiles ... naked and barefoot” (Is 20:2–4). Jeremiah put “straps and yoke-bars” on his neck to convey the message that many nations would come under the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon (Jer 27:2, 8). The prophet Hosea married a prostitute to show the relationship between God and the unfaithful Israel (Hos 1, 3:1–5). In the New Testament, we find the prophet Agabus, who took Paul’s belt and bound his own feet and hands to foretell how Paul would be bound and be delivered to the Roman authorities (Acts 21:10–12). These are just a few examples that show how prophets used symbolic acts to communicate a message.

These symbolic acts are like our modern-day nonverbal actions we see in peaceful demonstrations and protests. These modern symbolic actions may include acts like putting tape over one’s mouth, throwing buckets of fake blood, burning flags, wearing masks, armbands, or costumes, using symbolic colors like black for mourning, and so on. As a prophet, and in keeping with the tradition of biblical prophets, John the Baptist appeared to have employed symbolic acts, such as wearing a garment made of camel’s hair with a leather belt (Mk 1:6). We can also observe this practice in some of Jesus’s actions. One such example is Jesus overturning the tables of money changers and briefly disturbing the temple service (Mk 11:15–17).

In this study, we will give the needed attention to the prophetic acts and language that both John the Baptist and Jesus used to communicate their message. Overall, we employ a three-step approach to accomplish our stated goal of understanding the essence of the kingdom of God. First, we will explore how the Gospels portray John the Baptist and examine the social background of his time and the Old Testament passages, which our Gospels claim he was fulfilling. He will serve as a bridge between the Old Testament and Jesus. In this initial section, we will focus on the role of John to help us better understand the social context and the Old Testament foundations, which will ultimately offer a fresh perspective on the kingdom of God. We will then concentrate on Jesus in the second section, especially on his final week in Jerusalem. In the final part, we will look at the developments after the death and resurrection of Jesus. The first section is particularly vital for grasping the concept of the kingdom of God, as it places us in a cultural and historical context that is quite different from our own. It introduces us to the concept of the kingdom of God that is rooted in the Old Testament.

Overall, understanding the Bible presents a significant challenge because of the cultural and historical distance separating us from the events of the Bible. Even though we have the biblical texts in our hands, we often lack their historical and cultural context, thus opening the door to misinterpretations, as the saying goes: “A text without a context is a pretext for a proof-text.” “Proof-texting” describes the act of quoting a Bible verse out of context to support a specific perspective or doctrine. To avoid proof-texting and instead to understand the Bible stories in their historical context, this work tries to study the relevant texts by considering their historical, cultural, and linguistic background to be as close as possible to the events

of the Bible. This is only possible by drawing upon the expertise of various scholars, regardless of their personal beliefs, to gain historical, cultural, and linguistic insights, for which I am grateful. Using the specialized knowledge of experts in their respective fields, however, does not constitute an endorsement of their conclusions or personal beliefs.



## John the Baptist

The earliest Gospel, Mark, begins with an introduction to John the Baptist. We will also start our study with a brief overview of John the Baptist to set the stage for our subsequent exploration:

“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, ‘Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’ John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey.

And he preached, saying, ‘After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit’” (Mk 1:1–8).

Before even telling us anything about John the Baptist, Mark identifies John with two verses from the Old Testament (Mal 3:1 and Is 40:3), which we will investigate in later chapters: “Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple ...” (Mal 3:1) and “A voice cries: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God’” (Is 40:3). In Matthew and Luke, we find Jesus telling his disciples that John the Baptist is the messenger from Malachi 3:1. “What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, ‘Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you’” (Mt 11:9-10, Lk 7:26-27).

Malachi is the last classical prophet of the Old Testament, and for the four centuries since, God had not sent a prophet to the people of Israel (1 Macc 9:27). It is thus easy to see the impact that the Book of Malachi had and still continues to have on the Jewish people, in particular, the passages that talk about the coming of the prophet Elijah (Mal 4:5–6), which are the last verses of the book of Malachi.

Throughout the ages, Jews have expected the prophet Elijah to come before the coming of the Messiah. Already, some two centuries before Jesus, we find this expectation expressed (Sir 48:9–11). This expectation

continues to be displayed in various Jewish traditions, such as Elijah's cup, Elijah's chair, and Havdalah songs to this day. We also find hints in the Gospels showing the impact of Malachi on the contemporaries of Jesus. When Herod the tetrarch first heard about Jesus and became perplexed, some people wondered whether Jesus was the prophet Elijah (Mk 6:14–15, Lk 9:7–8). Similarly, when Jesus inquired about his identity, the disciples told Jesus that some people think he is Elijah (Mk 8:28, Lk 9:19, Mt 16:14).

The expectation of Elijah goes beyond the ordinary Jew in the first century. The scribes also seem to share this expectation. This is apparent in the discourse that the disciples had with Jesus shortly after they saw Elijah and Moses at the transfiguration:

“And the disciples asked him [Jesus], ‘Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?’ He answered, ‘Elijah does come, and he will restore all things. But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands.’ Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist” (Mt 17:10–13, Mk 9:11–13).

The scribes seem to expect Elijah to arrive before the coming of the Messiah. Among all the prophets of the Old Testament, what is the reason that people frequently mention Elijah? It is because of the impact that Malachi had as the last classical prophet of the Old Testament. Jesus appears to agree with the expectation of the scribes, but also identifies John

the Baptist as an Elijah-like figure who came before the Son of Man, that is, the Messiah. Remember, this discussion happened just after the disciples saw Elijah, according to Mark. Therefore, John the Baptist is certainly not Elijah. John is a different person. However, just like Elijah will come and “will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers,” John will also do the same (Mal 4:6, Lk 1:17). John the Baptist is the messenger from the Book of Malachi (Mal 3:1), and he came before the Messiah to prepare the people, just as Elijah is expected to do when he comes. The last classical prophet of the Old Testament, Malachi, wrote about both the messenger and Elijah. What Jesus seems to imply is that if the authorities rejected John the Baptist, the messenger from Malachi, how then would they accept Elijah when he comes? If they rejected John, they will surely reject Elijah too.

But did John the Baptist associate himself with the Book of Malachi and think of himself as an Elijah-like figure? To answer this question, we need to look at John’s symbolic acts closely. One such symbolic act we encounter with John the Baptist is his clothing. “Now John was clothed with camel’s hair and wore a leather belt around his waist” (Mk 1:6, Mt 3:4). Mark and Matthew both mention his camel hair clothing because it was uncommon compared to what people usually wore (see also Mt 11:8, Lk 7:25). The “hairy” garment/cloak and the leather belt remind us of the prophet Elijah, as they were his distinct marks. “He said to them, ‘What kind of man was he who came to meet you and told you these things?’ They answered him, ‘He wore a garment of hair, with a belt of leather about his waist.’ And he said, ‘It is Elijah the Tishbite’” (2 Kgs 1:7–8).

Elijah’s garment, which he used to wear with a leather belt, appears to be his distinct mark that distinguished him as a true prophet of God. When he

called Elisha to become his successor, he threw his garment over Elisha (1 Kgs 19:19–21). Elisha immediately understood what it meant to have the prophet's garment and followed Elijah to become his disciple. Elijah's garment seems to have left a lasting impression on later prophets, including false ones, as they continue to imitate Elijah by wearing a hairy garment. "On that day every prophet will be ashamed of his vision when he prophesies. He will not put on a hairy cloak in order to deceive" (Zech 13:4–5; see also Heb 11:37). Even if we agree with some Bible translations that render 2 Kgs 1:8 as Elijah being a hairy man rather than wearing a hairy garment, prophets still seemed to have worn hairy garments/cloaks to imitate Elijah. In my opinion, the reference to Elijah's belt only makes sense in coordination with a reference to his garment.

The garment appears to symbolize the spirit that was on Elijah, a spirit Elisha later sought to have when he requested a double portion (2 Kgs 2:9). Elisha's first miracle, performed with the garment, further emphasizes this connection (2 Kgs 2:14). Similarly, Luke tells us that John too would go "in the spirit" of Elijah (Lk 1:17). It is thus not surprising that John the Baptist, who "was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist" (Mk 1:6, Mt 3:4) is associated with and seen as an Elijah-like figure, as this seems to be also his intention when he employed this symbolic sign. Thus, John the Baptist appeared to have seen himself as an Elijah-like figure and, by extension, seems to have associated himself with the Book of Malachi. Otherwise, it is difficult to understand why John would wear such a symbolic and distinct cloth that would invoke the memory of Elijah. In fact, his clothing was so distinct that people seemed to talk about it, and that is typical of a prophet to convey a message (Mt 11:8, Lk 7:25).

But if John saw himself as an Elijah-like figure, then it is also logical that he expected the Messiah to come after him who would be “mightier than” himself. The expectation is that Elijah must arrive before the Messiah. Indeed, one saying of John the Baptist, found in all four Gospels, refers to the “one who comes after” John, who is more powerful than he is, and whom John feels unworthy “to bend down and untie the straps of his sandals” (Mk 1:7 NASB, Mt 3:11, Lk 3:16, Jn 1:26–27). John appears to see himself as the forerunner of the “one who comes after” him. This is also further highlighted by John’s inquiry about the “coming one” by sending his disciples to Jesus while sitting in prison (Mt 11:2–3, Lk 7:19). It shows the high expectations he had for the “one who comes after” him.

Understanding the impact of the Book of Malachi and the expectation of Elijah’s coming on the Jewish people allows us to envision the reaction that may have occurred upon the appearance of John the Baptist in the wilderness, clothed with camel’s hair and a leather belt like the prophet Elijah. “All the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins” (Mk 1:5). John has sparked a long-held hope, prompting people to travel eagerly to the wilderness to see him and receive baptism at his hands. The Gospels and the first-century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus confirm John’s popularity among the ordinary Jews even though the authorities rejected him. The Gospels tell us that the ordinary people saw John as a prophet (Mk 11:32, Mt 21:26, Lk 20:6). Likewise, Josephus writes that the people “seemed ready to do anything he [John] should advise” and when Aretas destroyed the army of Herod Antipas, “some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod’s army came from God, and was a very just punishment for what he did against John called the baptist.”<sup>5</sup> For it was



Herod Antipas, the tetrarch, who imprisoned and killed John the Baptist (Mk 6:16–29, Mt 14:1–12, Lk 3:19).

The second Old Testament verse that the Gospel of Mark and all the other Gospels associate with John the Baptist is Isaiah 40:3: “A voice cries: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’” This passage is about a voice that cries and announces the preparation and construction of a road, a highway, in the wilderness for God. We will investigate this passage in later chapters to understand what Isaiah meant by this highway, which is supposed to be built in the wilderness for God. John the Baptist was strongly associated with the wilderness. When Jesus asked the crowd about John, he said, “What did you go out into the *wilderness* to see?” (Mt 11:7, Lk 7:24). John preached in the wilderness around the Jordan River (Mk 1:4-5, Lk 3:3, Mt 3:1). Further, he also seemed to have employed another contentious symbolic act to emphasize this, his diet. John not only lived and preached in the wilderness but his diet also comprised locusts and wild honey, which pointed to a “wilderness diet” (Mk 1:6). His unique diet was controversial among his fellow Jews, even leading some to conclude that “he has a demon” (Mt 11:18, Lk 7:33). John’s preaching in the wilderness and his “wilderness diet” seem to hint that his association with the voice from the Book of Isaiah that cries about the highway in the wilderness may have originated from himself.

In both instances, when the Gospels link John the Baptist to the messenger mentioned in the Book of Malachi and the voice referenced in Isaiah, they refrain from providing any explanation regarding the significance of this connection. They do not attempt to articulate a theological argument or use these passages as a foundation for a Christian

doctrine. Instead, they simply state that John is the messenger from Malachi and the voice from Isaiah, without further elaboration. This and the fact that John appears to associate himself with Malachi (an Elijah-like figure) and Isaiah by employing symbolic acts imply that he may be the origin of his own identification with these Old Testament passages.

There is yet another significant symbolic act John performed that earned him his nickname, John the Baptist/Baptizer: his allusion to the wilderness comes with his providing baptism in the Jordan River, another prophetic sign. There were many public baths (pools) during the days of John the Baptist. Jewish people used public baths for ritual purification.<sup>6</sup> Archaeologists have found many public baths called Mikveh (Mikvoth) across Israel dating back to the time of John the Baptist. However, John didn't use one of them to baptize people. Instead of him going to the people and baptizing them in their nearest public pools, they had to come to him and be baptized in the Jordan River. In contrast to the public pools used for ongoing purification rituals, John's baptism was a onetime act representing repentance. It is not a ritual bath but a "baptism of repentance" (Mk 1:4) symbolizing a decision to abandon one's past life behind permanently and start over (Mt 3:8, Lk 3:8).

Interestingly, John appeared to have administered his baptisms mainly from "across or beyond the Jordan River" (Jn 1:28), that is, from the east side of the River and not from Judea. First-century historian Josephus offers further evidence for this by stating that John was imprisoned at Machaerus,<sup>7</sup> a fortified stronghold located in Perea on the eastern side of the Jordan River (in present-day Jordan), which was governed by Herod Antipas. Judea was under the direct rule of the Romans and would have been outside of Herod's jurisdiction. Hence, John's baptism in the Jordan

River from outside Israel seems to point to a crossing of the river into Israel.

The Jordan River has historical significance for Israel, as this is the river that the people of Israel crossed to enter the promised land. It symbolizes possession of the promise and arriving home and the end of wandering around in the Sinai Desert for decades. Consequently, John's strange "wilderness diet" of locusts and wild honey seem to point to the manna, the diet of the people of Israel during their wandering in the wilderness (Dt 8:16); the manna is also associated with honey, as it tasted like honey cake (Ex 16:31). Overall, his wilderness allusions and his baptisms in the Jordan River seem to point to Israel's historical journey in the Sinai Desert and her final possession of the promise after crossing the Jordan River.

At this early stage, we will not delve into the specifics of the meaning of John's symbolic actions and prophetic signs. For now, it is enough that we recognize what John was doing, that is, communicating a message by employing symbolic acts that seem to point to the prophecies found in the books of Malachi and Isaiah, as well as to Israel's historical journey through the wilderness and her entry into the promised land by crossing the Jordan River, ending her wandering around in the desert.

By now, I hope it is clear how much John, as a biblical prophet, has already communicated without uttering a word by using only symbolic actions. When we come to his sayings, four of his messages stand out, according to the Synoptic Gospels. First, we find his calling Israel to repentance. Repentance was his central message, so much so that his baptism was called a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mk 1:4). Those who repent and get baptized receive the forgiveness of sins. He is calling Israel to true repentance, not repentance of lip service,

but that which produces tangible fruits. He wants to bring about a sincere repentance that all can see. These include baptism by water and bearing “fruit that befits repentance” (Mt 3:8; Lk 3:8, 10–14). Repentance was also one of the main messages of Jesus. He began his ministry by proclaiming the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God, urging people to repent (Mk 1:15, Mt 4:17). We find also several passages in the Gospels where Jesus talked about the importance of repentance and warned cities for refusing to repent (e.g., Lk 5:32, Lk 15, Mt 11:20).

But what was the reason John and Jesus were urging Israel to repent? Why now? It is because “the time is fulfilled” (Mk 1:15). The call for repentance was a preparation for something that was imminent and was about to arrive. Jesus called it the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God. “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mk 1:15). This leads us to John's second message. He was promising a baptism that is far greater than his baptism with water—the baptism with the Holy Spirit. The “one who comes after” John would baptize those who repented with the Holy Spirit. “I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (Mk 1:8). It sounds like his baptism with water was a mere shadow of and a pointer to the baptism of the Holy Spirit by the “one coming after” him. This is significant. It has been almost six centuries since the glory and presence of God, the *Kabod*, had left Israel before the destruction of the first temple (Ezek 10:18–19, 11:22–23). John the Baptist is announcing the return of the Spirit and presence of God after so much time.

His third message must have sounded radical to his hearers: “And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham” (Mt

3:8–9, Lk 3:8). John is warning the people of Israel and announcing that a new way of God is coming. This time, it won't be like the "good old days," when being naturally born from Abraham was enough to be the people of God. This time, even stones can become children of Abraham. God is introducing a radical new way of becoming the people of God and children of Abraham.

Finally, we see John the Baptist warning those who reject his message of repentance about the coming wrath of God. "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (Lk 3:7, Mt 3:7). In the tradition of Old Testament biblical prophets, John the Baptist warned about the imminent judgment of God: "Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Mt 3:10, Lk 3:9).

John the Baptist is promising Israel the return of God's presence and the baptism with the Holy Spirit if she repents and listens to his message. Otherwise, the imminent wrath of God, symbolized by fire (Is 9:19), awaits her. Jesus also warned Israel about the coming judgment if she rejected God's message of repentance, which we will look at closely in later chapters. This is in line with the Old Testament prophets, whom God sent to warn the people about the coming destruction. Jeremiah, for example, warned about the coming destruction of the first temple in his so-called temple sermon (Jer 7). John, like Jesus, seems not only to have a promise of the return of God's Holy Spirit, but he also warned Israel about an imminent judgment if Israel rejects his message of repentance.

Having briefly surveyed John the Baptist's portrayal as found in the synoptic Gospels, we are now almost ready to explore the two Old Testament passages with which he is associated. But before that, there is a

crucial social background that we need to be familiar with, as this will help us better understand the context in which John the Baptist and Jesus were operating.



## Visit of a Landlord

In this chapter, we will examine an important social context that the contemporaries of John the Baptist and Jesus would have had no difficulty in recognizing. We will explore a world unfamiliar to many today, which thus is often overlooked.

The Gospel of Mark opens with an introduction to John the Baptist, followed by a description of the beginning of Jesus's public ministry (Mk 1:1–15). The other three Gospels agree that John the Baptist was the forerunner of Jesus. Before Jesus began his public ministry, John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness and set everything in motion. In all four canonical Gospels, John the Baptist preceded the public ministry of Jesus.

It is thus essential to figure out the role of John the Baptist and his relation to Jesus's mission as described in the Gospels, for he is the one who triggered the events in the New Testament. While it is certainly possible to study John the Baptist separately from Jesus, our primary goal is to understand Jesus and the kingdom of God that he declared to be imminent.

Therefore, our focus will predominantly be on the role of John and his connection to Jesus's mission, as portrayed in our earliest Gospels.

The Gospels present John the Baptist as God's messenger, whose arrival was prophesied by the Old Testament prophet, Malachi (Mt 11:10, Lk 7:27, Mk 1:2), as noted above. "Behold, I send *my messenger* to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple ..." (Mal 3:1). In contrast, Jesus is identified as the Son of God (Mk 1:1, 1:11) and as the "one coming after" John the Baptist, who began his public ministry only after the arrest of John (Mk 1:7, 1:14). Jesus also confirms that he is the one whom John the Baptist referred to as the "one coming after" him (Mt 11:2–6, Lk 7:18–23).

The Gospels portray John and Jesus as those who were sent by and operating in the service of God (Mk 1:2, 9:37, 11:30–12:9). God sent them to accomplish different tasks in a specific order; first, John, the messenger of God, and then Jesus, the Son of God. Jesus also associates his mission with that of John the Baptist, implying that God had sent them one after the other on a grand mission.

"But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.' For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they

say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds” (Mt 11:16–19, Lk 7:31–35).

Jesus and John the Baptist differ in many aspects. John is the messenger of God, while Jesus is the Son of God. John lived and preached in the desert, consuming locusts and wild honey (Mk 1:6, Mt 11:7, Lk 7:24), whereas Jesus lived among the people in towns and villages, eating the same food as ordinary people. Yet, they are both part of God’s mission.

Furthermore, the parable of the tenants (Mk 11:27–12:12) shows how Jesus connected his mission to that of John the Baptist. Jesus told the parable in response to the challenge he faced from the temple authorities, who questioned his authority (Mk 11:27–33). He replied by pointing to John the Baptist and asking them whether the baptism of John was from God. When the temple authorities refused to answer, he then tells the parable of the tenants in which a landlord sends one servant after another until he sends his beloved son as a last resort. After all his attempts failed, the landlord himself finally comes to his vineyard.

Jesus and the Gospels regard John the Baptist as a messenger in a series of messengers sent by God. What distinguishes John is his role as the final messenger before God sends his beloved son. The sequence is clear. First comes John, the messenger of God, and only after he was arrested did Jesus, the Son of God, begin his public ministry according to our earliest Gospels (Mk 1:14, Mt 4:12, Lk 3:20–21).

Moreover, it is important to note that both the messenger in Malachi and the voice in Isaiah are mentioned in the context of preparation. Malachi

speaks of a messenger of God who would be sent to *prepare* “the way before me” and the voice in Isaiah cries about *preparing* a highway “in the wilderness.” John urged the people to repent and be baptized with water in preparation for the coming baptism with the Holy Spirit by “the one coming after” him. Furthermore, according to the Gospel of Mark, Jesus began his ministry by proclaiming the gospel, saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mk 1:15). The time has come! A major event is about to happen. Although the specific tasks of John and Jesus differ, as we will see in later chapters, they both operated in the context of preparation for something that is soon to happen. They urged the people to repent and prepare for the imminent event that Jesus called the arrival of the kingdom of God. Something is being prepared for the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God.

There is yet another aspect we find in the Gospels concerning John the Baptist in relation to Jesus that may seem strange to the modern reader—the comparison we find concerning their status and rank. Jesus considered John the Baptist to be “more than a prophet” and the highest ranking among all “born of women” (Lk 7:26–28, Mt 11:9–11), meanwhile John spoke of “the one coming after” him to be superior and mightier than himself that he doesn’t consider himself worthy enough “to bend down and untie the straps of his sandals” (Mark 1:7 NASB). Of all the messengers of God that came before John, he is the highest ranking. However, he sees himself as being inferior to “the one coming after” him, the Son of God.

As modern readers, we often struggle to understand the mission of John the Baptist and his relation to Jesus because of the historical and cultural distance we have from the first-century story. For this reason, it is important to examine the context and background of their mission before we can dive

into trying to figure out their specific tasks. Our focus in this chapter is thus only on the setup and background of their mission.

Ronald F. Hock suggests that the opening of Mark's Gospel should be read in the context of social conventions associated with aristocratic households. He argues that the opening of Mark's Gospel, which details the coming sequence and status of John the Baptist and Jesus, reflects the social norms surrounding the visit of a landlord to his property.<sup>8</sup> Jesus also illustrated his mission in relation to John's using a social convention with which his hearers would have been familiar. In the parable of the tenants, Jesus identified himself with the son, who is the last one to be sent, following a sequence of messengers, until the landlord finally arrives. The landlord does not come first personally (Mk 12:1–11). Initially, he sends his servants, then his beloved son and heir, before finally coming to the vineyard himself.

This is the social convention that Hock is referring to. It was common for wealthy landowners to possess multiple estates, often situated far from their primary residence. When a rich landlord wants to visit his country estate, he would first send his servants to tell the tenants to prepare for the visit before his arrival. This is a social convention observed in different societies. The practice reinforced the social distance between tenants and landlords, which is only bridged by the convention of having intermediaries precede the landowner.<sup>9</sup>

Hock uses the popular second-century Greek novel, *Daphnis and Chloe* by Longus,<sup>10</sup> to make his case. The final part of this novel contains a “remarkably detailed and complete” description of a visit made by a prominent landowner to his property in the rural area of Mitylene. After hearing reports of significant damage inflicted on his properties by

brigands, the landlord decided to visit his estate in the fall. Lamon, the goatherd entrusted with the care of his estate, is the first to receive word of the forthcoming visit. At this moment, Lamon does nothing to prepare for the occasion. When, however, a slave of equal rank (*homodoulos*) to Lamon came in autumn with the news that their master would arrive shortly before the vintage to assess the damage to the fields, the preparations for the visit began.<sup>11</sup> Lamon gets busy, “preparing for his master’s arrival, seeing to it that everything would be pleasing to his eye. He cleaned out the springs so they would have clear water and removed the dung from the courtyard to be rid of its offensive smells, and he tended the garden to make it beautiful to look at.” Lamon tasked Daphnis, his foster son, to fatten the goats as best he could, adding: “The master hasn’t been here in a long time, and he will look them over closely.”<sup>12</sup>

While the preparations are in progress, a second messenger (*angelos*) arrives with instructions that the grapes be harvested as soon as possible. This second messenger is clearly of a higher rank than the first slave messenger (*homodoulos*). He is honorably named Eudromos and described as a *homogalaktos*, “or one who had shared milk with his master’s son”; in other words, he is the *syntrophos* of the master’s son, a privileged slave role in an aristocratic household.”<sup>13</sup> He says he would remain there until they turned the grapes into the sweet new wine. Then he would depart for the city. They welcomed the second messenger with hospitality. They began harvesting right away. “They carried the grapes to the wine press, poured the new wine into jars, and set aside the most luxuriant of the grapes, still on their branches so that the master and those coming with him would have an idea of what the vintage had been like and could derive pleasure from it.”<sup>14</sup> Eudromos has now completed his mission and is ready to return to

the city, but as he leaves, a cowherd and rival of Daphnis, vandalizes the garden to make the landlord angry at Daphnis. On finding it ruined, Lamon, his wife, and Daphnis mourn and become terrified, fearing the landlord would blame them for the damage. That night, the second messenger returned and announced that the master would arrive after three days but that his son would come first the following day.

The next day, the son arrives on horseback. The son is certainly not a messenger or a fellow slave. Therefore, Lamon, his wife, and Daphnis fell before his feet and begged for forgiveness by telling him everything. The son went to the garden, surveyed the destruction of the flowers, and said that he would take care of things with his father and would blame the damage on his horses. Lamon and the others responded joyfully, praising him and giving him gifts.

Two days later, the landlord finally arrives accompanied by his wife and a host of other slaves, both men and women. In the following days, he starts inspecting the fields, the vineyards, the garden, the pastures, and the flocks. The landlord is pleased with all he has seen and promises Lomon his freedom.

With this summary of a visit by a landlord to his estate, Hock notes,

“We can now appreciate the importance of the sequence as well as the increasing rank of the messengers who precede the house-holder in this important social event. The sequence in this visit included two slave messengers, then the son of the householder, and finally the householder himself. More specifically, the rank increases from that of a

mere *homodoulos*, to that of a more privileged *syntrophos*, to that of the powerful son and heir of the household, and to that, finally, of the most powerful person of all, the householder.”<sup>15</sup>

The social convention and context surrounding a landlord’s visit to his estate help us to better understand why the messenger John the Baptist has to come before Jesus, the son. Further, we can now appreciate why John is compared to the prophets before him and to Jesus. John the Baptist is the last prophet before the Son of God comes. Unlike Israel’s prophets before him, he is described as someone whose coming was foretold by previous prophets who lived hundreds of years before him. He is the messenger that the last classical prophet of the Old Testament, Malachi, wrote about, who would be sent to prepare the way before God. He is also depicted as the voice from the Book of Isaiah who calls out about preparing a highway for God in the wilderness (Is 40:3, Mk 1:3). John the Baptist is the last messenger of God before the Son of God comes. He is therefore the highest ranking among all the prophets who came before him. He is “more than a prophet” and the highest ranking among all “born of women.”

Nevertheless, he is far from the status or rank of the Son of God. The hierarchical distance between the messenger and the son is much wider. Hock thus notes that what John the Baptist displays toward Jesus is an “extreme deference,” not the “humility”, that is expected of a slave toward a superior,<sup>16</sup> when John declares he is not worthy even “to bend down and untie the straps of His sandals.” In Jewish culture, sandals were regarded as unclean. A disciple of a rabbi, who would be expected to perform menial



tasks, was exempt from dealing with sandals. Instead, this task was left to the lowest slave. “All tasks that a slave performs for his master, a student performs for his teacher, except for untying his shoe, a demeaning act that was typically performed by slaves and would not be appropriate for a student to do.”<sup>17</sup>

Although John is regarded as distinguished and superior to the prophets before him, Jesus is far greater than John. So profound is this distinction that John feels unworthy to “untie the straps of his sandals” (Mk 1:7 NASB). John also appears to see his ministry of baptism with water as inferior, a mere shadow of and a pointer to the baptism of the Holy Spirit by the “one coming after” him. His words highlight the contrast: “I baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (Mk 1:8). The contrast is also found elsewhere in the New Testament (Acts 1:5). The Gospels make it clear that the one who is coming after John is Jesus, the Son of God. No wonder John sees himself as far lower ranked than the one who is coming after him, as there’s a considerable gap in status and rank between John the messenger and Jesus the son.

The social norm further helps us to see the setting in which John the Baptist and Jesus operated. Although they were sent to accomplish different tasks, they were both operating in preparation for an imminent major event, which Jesus called the arrival of the kingdom of God. As noted above, John is portrayed as the messenger in Malachi who was sent to *prepare* “the way before me” and as the voice in Isaiah who calls out about *preparing* a “highway for God in the wilderness.” He is sent in the context of preparation. He preached repentance and baptized the people with water in preparation for something to come.

Jesus launched his public ministry by announcing the gospel, saying: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mk 1:15). He began his ministry as the first announcer (evangelist) of the good news, preaching the gospel of God. Gospel (*Euangelion* in Greek) means good news. In the first century, the Jewish people were under the rule of the Roman Empire. In the Roman Empire, the word *Euangelion* referred to imperial proclamations. It was the announcement of significant events in the life of the emperor or the empire such as the birth of an imperial heir, the accession of a new emperor to the throne, significant military victories, and the emperor’s visits to various parts of the empire.<sup>18</sup> These events are considered good news to the people who lived under Roman rule. It meant Roman peace, road construction, and prosperity. Thus, when Jesus started his ministry by proclaiming the gospel, it meant that Jesus was announcing a big event that he considered good news to his hearers.

Jesus proclaimed this *Euangelion* (the good news) by stating, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” The *Euangelion* (the good news) is the news of the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God. Hence, Jesus began his public ministry as the first announcer (evangelist), of the *Euangelion* (the good news), announcing the great event of the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God. A major event is about to occur soon and that is the good news, the *Euangelion*, to his hearers! Jesus never defined what he meant by “the kingdom of God” but proclaimed that the kingdom of God was going to arrive shortly. Later, he sent his disciples to the villages to proclaim the *Euangelion* (the good news) of the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God (Mt 10:7, Lk 9:2).

Jesus, therefore, like John, operated in the context of preparation for the coming significant event he called the kingdom of God. As in the parable of the tenants and also in the second-century novel we have described above, the son is the last and the highest-ranking in the sequence of those who preceded the landlord's arrival. The son signals the imminent arrival of the landlord. In our novel, the landlord arrived only two days after the son. Likewise, Jesus was proclaiming the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God. It is about to arrive shortly. With John the Baptist and Jesus, the preparation for the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God is in full swing. The people should repent and prepare themselves. A major event is about to happen. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand" (Mk 1:15).

Now that we have gained insight into the basic setup and background of the mission of John the Baptist and Jesus as introduced in the opening of our earliest Gospel, Mark, it is time to explore the two Old Testament passages associated with John the Baptist in order to address the question of who was coming and whose visit was being prepared.

## Who Is Coming?

In the previous two chapters, we have briefly surveyed the figure of John the Baptist and explored the context of social conventions associated with aristocratic households, a context in which John the Baptist and Jesus were operating. We will now use the two Old Testament passages (Mal 3:1, Is 40:3) that are associated with John the Baptist as a springboard to explore the Old Testament background. These two passages are the bridge provided by the Gospel writers to link John the Baptist to the Old Testament background and thus require our full attention. Studying these passages in their original context is one of the crucial tasks that we intend to do in this section to really understand whose coming was being prepared by John the Baptist, the messenger, and Jesus, the son, and what the essence of the kingdom of God is all about.

Let's start with Malachi. "Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple ..." (Mal 3:1). God promised to send his messenger to prepare the way "before me" and suddenly the Lord would come to his

temple. The social background of the visit of a landlord, which we looked at in the previous chapter, provides us with a basic framework for understanding this passage. Just as a landlord would send a messenger before visiting his estate, God promised to send a messenger before returning to his temple. A messenger of a landlord would come before the landlord, and God said that his messenger would come “before me.” But where was God during the time of Malachi that he promised to come back? In order to answer this question and also to get the full picture, we need to look at the historical background of the Book of Malachi.

Most scholars date the book of Malachi near the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, after the rebuilding of the second temple. When the prophet Malachi delivered his message, thousands of Jews had already returned to Judea from exile, while many remained in Babylon. The return was humble and occurred in different phases (Ezra 2:64–65, 8:1–32), unlike when the people of Israel came out of slavery in Egypt and crossed the Jordan River to the promised land, led by the Ark of the Covenant, on which the presence and glory of God rested. When they departed Babylon, they returned to Judea, which was under the occupation of Persia. The Persian king, Cyrus, conquered Babylon in 539 BCE and allowed the Jews to return from Babylon to Jerusalem, primarily to rebuild the temple (Ezra 1), which had been destroyed and looted by the Babylonians.

The people, who had returned from exile, started rebuilding the temple. Before laying out the temple’s foundation, the priests built the altar of the God of Israel and started offering daily burnt offerings (Ezra 3:1–7). They were eager to resume practicing their ancient religion and rituals once again, while the temple was still in ruins. This is a far cry from the installation of the first temple and the start of the daily burnt offering in the

first Solomonic temple or during the inauguration of the Tabernacle of the tent of meeting when the glory and presence of God, the *Kabod*, filled the Tabernacle (Ex 40:34–35) and the first temple (1 Kgs 8:10–11), and when a fire from God consumed the sacrifices (Lv 9:24, 2 Chr 7:1). There was no fire from God this time, even after they completed the rebuilding of the second temple and resumed its service.

Overall, the second temple was markedly modest compared to the first. “Many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers’ houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid” (Ezra 3:12). Even after the completion and restoration of the temple and during its dedication, this temple was no match for the first Solomonic temple in size and glory. “Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? How do you see it now? Is it not as nothing in your eyes?” (Hg 2:3). More importantly, there was no sign of the entry of the presence and glory of God, the *Kabod*, to the rebuilt temple, and there was no fire from God. There was no sign that the *Kabod*, which left the first temple (Ezek 10:18–19, 11:22–23) just before the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar destroyed it, had indeed returned to the new temple to make the temple yet again God’s abiding and resting place. Thus, the people were yearning for God to return to the rebuilt temple. “The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple” (Mal 3:1). They were hoping for God to return to the rebuilt temple and live among them. Moreover, the kingdom of Israel and the rule of the house of David were not restored. Israel was still under the occupation of Persia, with Persia appointing rulers for the people of Israel. Nehemiah captures the sentiments of the people in his prayer following their return from exile: “Behold, we are slaves this day; in the land that you gave to our fathers to enjoy its fruit

and its good gifts, behold, we are slaves. And its rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins. They rule over our bodies and over our livestock as they please, and we are in great distress” (Neh 9:36–37).

It is thus understandable for the people of Israel to feel abandoned by God. Malachi, the last classical prophet of the Old Testament, addresses these sentiments and others held by the people. The returnees from exile rebuilt the temple and started sacrificing to God, resuming their religious rituals. However, God didn’t seem to be impressed, showing no sign of response. This seems to lead the people to doubt God’s love (Mal 1:2) and become disillusioned, asking if it’s even worth it to serve God after all (Mal 3:13–15).

Malachi’s response to the disillusioned and discouraged people resembles that of previous prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah, who lived before the Babylonian exile. He accused the priests of despising God’s name by presenting defiled animals upon the altar in the temple (Mal 1:6–14 NASB). They sacrificed lame, sick, or blind animals that had little worth and that even their governor would not accept. God called this practice evil and wished the temple gates would be closed (Mal. 1:10). God would rather see the temple service cease than witness such “evil” practice in the temple (Mal 1:8-10). Malachi also accused the people of practicing social injustice, which includes dealing treacherously against their brothers, and also against their wives, by divorcing them and marrying “daughters of a foreign god” (Mal 2:10–16). There were also those who “oppress the wage earner in his wages or the widow or the orphan, and those who turn away the stranger from justice” (Mal 3:5 NASB). All this injustice and other rebellion against

God resulted in profaning the covenant and “the sanctuary of the Lord” (Mal 2:10–11).

Israel is back to her old habits of the pre-exilic period. The social injustice, the tolerance for other gods, the breaking of the covenant with God, etc., had defiled the first temple forcing God’s presence to leave the temple resulting in the temple being destroyed, the people exiled, and the land occupied (Is 1:10–17, Jer 7:1–15, Ezek 10:18–19, 11:22–23). Malachi’s response shows that Israel continuing to do the old corrupt practices was the reason that God’s presence had not yet returned to the second temple. Instead, God wished the temple gates to be closed and the temple service to cease (Mal 1:10 NASB). After losing the presence and glory of God, the *Kabod*, the destruction of the temple, and the exile and the occupation of the land, one may expect Israel to learn her lesson and finally be obedient to her God. Unfortunately, that was not the case. Israel is back to her old ways, showing that the people and the profaned temple (Mal 2:10–11) were not ready for the return of God and his presence to his resting place.

Yet, not all is lost! Malachi has a message of hope for the people. God still loves them (Mal 1:2), and one day he will indeed return to his temple. A messenger will be sent ahead of the coming of God to his temple, to prepare *the way* for God (Mal 3:1). In fact, the name Malachi means “my messenger” and is possibly pointing to the importance of the messenger who would come ahead of God. “Behold, I send my messenger, and he will *prepare the way* before me. And the Lord whom you seek will *suddenly* come to *his* temple” (Mal 3:1). The verse reveals the longing of the people. This is about the return of God to his temple. But there’s a twist: the Lord will not suddenly come to *the* temple but to *his* temple. Malachi already



pointed out that the rebuilt temple was profaned and not ready to be the resting place of God (Mal 2:10–11). Some preparation work is needed before the Lord can come to *his* temple. Hence, a messenger will be sent ahead of the coming of God to his temple to “prepare the way.”

It appears that following God’s departure from the first temple, there is no established pathway or road for him to return. A new way or road needs to be built and prepared for him to return to his temple. Once the preparation is completed, the coming of the Lord to his temple will happen suddenly and without delay, that is, immediately after the preparation is finished (Mal 3:1). The old way that was marked by repeated social injustice, tolerance of other gods, and the breaking of the covenant, etc., will not bring the presence of God back to the temple. Even if God tries to return, the same rebellion that profaned the first temple and forced him to depart will happen again. A new way or road is needed for God to return to *his* temple.

Interestingly, the expression translated as “prepare the way” is the Hebrew term *panah derek*, which conveys the concept of clearing out obstacles from a road to prepare and make it ready for travel. This same Hebrew term appears in Isaiah 40:3, the second Old Testament passage that the Gospels associate with John the Baptist. The Gospels refer to John the Baptist as the voice from the Book of Isaiah that cries about “preparing a highway for God in the wilderness” (Mk 1:3, Lk 3:4, Mt 3:3, Is 40:3):

“A voice cries: ‘In the *wilderness* prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a *highway* for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the

rough places a plain. And the glory [*Kabod*] of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken’” (Is 40:3–5).

Isaiah speaks of a highway, a road, that needs to be prepared for God. A highway must be made straight. Valleys shall be lifted and mountains and hills be made low. The uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. This is a description of the construction of a highway or a road. “The image is drawn from the march of Eastern kings, who often boast, as in the Assyrian inscriptions of Sennacherib and Assurbanipal (*Records of the Past*, i. 95, vii. 64), of the roads they have made in trackless deserts.”<sup>19</sup> It is a “well-known Eastern practice of repairing the roads for a royal journey.”<sup>20</sup> Before a royal visits a place, the king would send his servants to prepare a road for his visit. Kings and royals don’t come alone, but are accompanied by their armies and a host of their servants. As there were no suitable public roads for the movement of armies, roads needed to be prepared before a royal visit.

Likewise, the highway in Isaiah would be prepared “for our God.” It is a highway for God to be able to travel. “Prepare the *way of the Lord*; make straight in the desert a *highway for our God*.” Just like royals would order their servants to prepare a road for their visit, the voice in Isaiah is proclaiming a decree of God. God is ordering a highway to be built for God to travel. According to the Gospels, John the Baptist was the voice from Isaiah, who was proclaiming the decree of God that the time had come to build a road, a highway for God to come.

What happens after the completion of the highway also points to its main purpose. “And the glory [*Kabod*] of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together” (Is 40:5). When God comes, his glory and presence, the *Kabod*, will be revealed. This is the imagery of God coming to his sanctuary when the glory and presence of God, the *Kabod*, filled the Tabernacle (Ex 40:34–35) and the first temple (1 Kgs 8:10–11). Just like Malachi, Isaiah speaks of a highway or road to be prepared for the return of God, but this time the glory of God will be revealed to all flesh.

In the same chapter, Isaiah speaks about the good news, that is, the gospel (*Euangelion* in the Greek Septuagint) and those who proclaim it, thereby clarifying precisely what the good news is. The Septuagint is the earliest surviving Greek translation of the Old Testament Bible from the original Hebrew, translated roughly two centuries before the birth of Jesus.

“Go on up to a high mountain, O Zion, *herald of good news* [*euangelizomenos*]; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, *herald of good news* [*euangelizomenos*]; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, “*Behold your God!*” *Behold, the Lord God comes* with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young” (Is 40:9–11).

Isaiah urges Zion (Israel) to proclaim the good news (*Euangelion* in Greek) and to say, “Behold your God! Behold, the Lord God comes with might,” “Behold your God!,” or “Here is your God” (Is 40:9 NASB), that is, the good news! The message of the coming of God is the good news, the gospel, according to Isaiah. God comes to rule — that is the good news. “The Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him.” This is what Jesus calls the coming of the kingdom of God! God comes to establish his rule, that is, his kingdom.

All the preparation of a highway or a road in Isaiah and Malachi and the proclamation of Jesus stating, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mk 1:15) was in the context of preparation for the imminent coming of God to rule. God, who left the temple before the destruction of the first temple, is about to return. The time is fulfilled for the highway and road to be prepared because the coming and arrival of God is imminent. God is about to come to rule, that is, to establish his kingdom. The kingdom of God is at hand.

Hence, the overall picture we get from both Malachi and Isaiah is that the messenger from Malachi and the voice from Isaiah, that is, John the Baptist, is the one that proclaims the decree of God to start building and preparing a highway for God so that God can come back to *his* temple and reveal his glory, the *Kabod*, to *all flesh*. The good news that Jesus proclaimed is the imminent coming of God to establish his kingdom.

According to Isaiah, God doesn’t come just to “rule” (Is 40:10). He also comes to live among his people. “He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom and gently lead those that are with young” (Is 40:11). Thus, the kingdom of God means God coming, ruling, and living among his people. Almost six

centuries after the destruction of the first temple, from which God and his presence departed, John the Baptist and Jesus proclaimed that God was about to return yet again. God comes to abide among his people and to establish his rule, his kingdom. God abiding among his people and ruling is the kingdom of God. The permanent presence and glory of God among his people is the kingdom of God.

At this point, two crucial questions remain unanswered. First, what is this new way, road, or highway that needs to be built before the coming of God that allows God to travel and facilitates his return journey? Second, where would his abiding and resting place, the temple, be in which his presence and glory, the *Kabod*, would be resting? We will address these questions in subsequent chapters. For now, we know that Malachi already gave his verdict on the second temple, which was rebuilt by those who came from exile in Babylon. That temple was profaned and God wished it to be closed (Mal 1:6–14, 2:10–11). This is definitely not the temple that is ready for God to return to and become his abiding place.

## Highway in the Wilderness

We have seen that the Gospels depict John the Baptist as the voice of Isaiah 40 that cries about a highway in the desert. As ancient Near Eastern kings used to order their servants to get the roads ready before they visited a city, the voice heralds the decree of God to start preparing the highway for God. In the Gospels, John the Baptist is the prophet and the voice who triggered the events in the New Testament by proclaiming the decree of God that the time for building the highway has finally arrived. The voice is the herald that echoes the decree of God. It's time for the long-awaited road to be prepared for God to come and establish his kingdom.

In Isaiah 40:3, the highway is associated with the wilderness (desert): “A voice cries: In the *wilderness* prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the *desert* a highway for our God.” As noted above, John the Baptist also alludes to the highway in the wilderness with his appearance in the *desert* and his “desert diet” consisting of locusts and wild honey (Mk 1:4–6). The key to understanding the highway is thus to understand these allusions to “the desert”. The message of Isaiah 40 was for those still in exile in

Babylon and about to return to Judah. Of course, no actual highway was built in the wilderness between Babylon and Judah. We have to look elsewhere to find the real meaning.

Luckily, Isaiah had already delivered a similar message to those Israelites from the northern kingdom of Israel who were exiled to Assyria before the Babylonian exile. We find the same imagery of a highway that could give us a clue. “And there will be a *highway* from Assyria for the remnant that remains of his people, as there was for Israel when they came up from the land of Egypt” (Is 11:16). This clarifies that when the Book of Isaiah talks about a highway in the wilderness, it is using imagery and metaphor to point to Israel’s journey in the desert of Sinai after God delivered them out of Egypt. That was the first and only time God came to the people of Israel to dwell among them.

The highway in Isaiah 40 alludes to what happened in the Sinai desert when God came down to live among humans for the first time since the Garden of Eden. Certainly, the Israelites did not build an actual highway or a road in the Sinai Desert. Nevertheless, they still did something that paved the way for God to come and dwell among them.

After the Israelites came out of Egypt and crossed the Red Sea, Moses took them to Mount Sinai. “And the Lord said to Moses, ‘Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments, and be ready by the third day; for on the third day the Lord will come down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people’” (Ex 19:10–11).

“On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled. Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God; and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. And Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire; and the smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain quaked greatly. And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. And the Lord *came down* upon Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain; and the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up” (Ex 19:16–20).

God “*came down* upon Mount Sinai” accompanied by a loud trumpet sound, a thick cloud, thunder, fire, smoke, etc. For the first time since the Garden of Eden, God “came down” to live among humans. He could have just freed the people of Israel from the slavery in Egypt and left them alone in the promised land, but God wanted to come and live among them permanently. Indeed, one of the primary reasons why God delivered them from Egypt is so that he could come and live among them. “And I will dwell among the sons of Israel and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the Lord their God who brought them out of the land of Egypt, so that *I might dwell among them*; I am the Lord their God” (Ex 29:45–46 NASB). The purpose of delivering the people of Israel out of Egypt was



beyond that they would inherit the promised land; it was also so that God “might dwell among them.”

But before God could dwell among the people of Israel, certain preparations were necessary to facilitate his dwelling among them. These preparations opened the door for God to live among his people, which we should pay attention to. The preparations contained two essential elements. The first is the establishment of a covenant between God and the people of Israel. A covenant is a binding contract between two parties. In the ancient Near East, the foundational idea behind covenant-making is “fictive kinship.” Covenants were used to establish kinship ties and durable relationships among those who were not related.<sup>21</sup> At Mount Sinai, God and the people of Israel entered into a covenant relationship based on the Mosaic law, which includes the Ten Commandments.

“Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and the other half of the blood he sprinkled on the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it as the people listened; and they said, ‘All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!’ So Moses took the blood and sprinkled it on the people, and said, ‘Behold the blood of the covenant, which the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.’” (Ex 24:6–8 NASB).

The people promised to obey the law and God promised to be their God, dwell among them, give them the promised land, and bless them (Ex 19:5–6, Dt 28). The covenant was ratified with blood (see also Heb 9:18). Moses

sprinkled half of the covenant blood on the altar and the remaining half upon the people. Finally, the people's representatives ate and drank the sacrificial meal before God to celebrate the inauguration of the covenant.

“Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abi’hu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel; and there was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank” (Ex 24:9–11).

The law of Moses contains the covenant conditions and rules. This is a conditional covenant. Only if the people of Israel followed the law would they be able to enjoy the presence of God among them and the blessing of the promised land. Otherwise, if the people defile the land by their disobedience, God warned them that they would be exiled from the promised land for the land would “vomit them out,” as it vomited out the nations that were before them (Lv 18:24–28).

Throughout the Bible, God establishes permanent relationships using covenants. A binding agreement with God is the basis for God to be in a permanent relationship with an individual or a people. God's covenant with the people of Israel at Mount Sinai paved the way for God to dwell and operate among the people permanently. The covenant is the highway in the desert that facilitated a way for God to come and live among his people. The Mosaic covenant was the only highway that opened the door for God to

come to a people, as Israel was the only people who made the covenant with God.

After God and the people of Israel ratified the covenant with blood, it was time for God to dwell among his people. This is where the second essential part of the preparation comes in. Immediately after God made a covenant with the people, he ordered the Israelites to build him a sanctuary so that he could dwell among them. “And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst” (Ex 25:8). The sanctuary of God is so important that the Book of Exodus dedicates almost seven chapters to it while only four chapters focus on the instruction of the law. Moreover, one of the twelve tribes of Israel, Levi, was chosen to serve God and his sanctuary exclusively. A whole book, the Book of Leviticus, describes the service of Levites and the priests at the sanctuary. God dwelling among humans is a major part of the history of the people of Israel. The primary responsibility of the tribe of Levi was to safeguard the sanctuary of God from defilement, ensuring his continuous presence among his people.

For the first time since the Garden of Eden, God started to dwell and live among humans. He was no longer a distant God who sat only on his throne in heaven; he had now become a “neighbor” who lived amid the Israelites. He has his own “home” and “address” among his people. In doing so, God intended Israel to become his kingdom on earth. “Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex 19:5–6).

The Mosaic covenant and the sanctuary laid the foundation for God to establish his kingdom in Israel. Just like all power in a democracy is derived from the people, all state power in Israel originated from God. God

was the one who appointed kings and removed them using his prophets. The prophet Samuel, for example, was the one who appointed Saul to be Israel's first king. He was also the one who dismissed Saul due to disobedience and anointed David to be king in his place. In Israel, even kings must obey the prophet of God. The law of the covenant was the basis for all life in Israel. It was the constitution of the state. Israel cannot live as it wishes and kings are not free to do whatever they like. In Israel, there was always someone who lived among the people and was greater and more powerful than the king. Israel became a covenant people, a kingdom of God, a theocracy. Its possession of land and its very security depended upon her obedience to the law of the covenant. Therefore, one of the central responsibilities of Israel's priests and kings was to lead the people in faithful obedience to God, protect the sanctuary from defilement, and ensure that God's presence remained among his people. What makes Israel unique among other nations is that God dwelled among them. Without the presence of God, Israel loses God's glory, the *Kabod*, and would be left vulnerable (1 Sm 4:21).

Furthermore, Israel was supposed to be a "kingdom of priests" (Ex 19:6). It should be a light to the world, guiding and helping the nations to know the God of Israel. The people of Israel were called to operate as priests to other peoples. The temple of God should be open to other nations and "it shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples" (Is 56:7).

Unfortunately, Israel could not live up to the expectations of the covenant and failed constantly. Prophet after prophet accused the people, the priests, and the kings of Israel of rebellion against God and lamented that Israel had failed to abide by the law of her covenant with God.

The people broke the law of the covenant through their disobedience. They filled the land with injustice, some turned to foreign gods, and defiled the temple. This left God with no other option but to abandon the first temple, resulting in its destruction and looting by the Babylonians. Israel, that started at Mount Sinai with the “coming down” and dwelling of God among her, ended up in exile in Babylon.

As we have seen in the Book of Malachi, even after the return of the exile and after the rebuilding of the temple, Israel was unable to repent but rather found herself in the same place where she was immediately before the destruction of the temple. Just like the old prophets, the last prophet of the Old Testament, Malachi, also accuses the people and priests of Israel of the same old transgressions. The old covenant is broken and the rebuilt temple is already defiled. The only hope that Malachi gives to the people is that a new way would be prepared before God comes to his temple (see previous chapter).

As Israel continuously finds herself practicing her old habits of breaking the covenant, Malachi and other prophets before him had no cure other than to point to the future. The prophet Jeremiah, who operated just before and during the destruction of the first temple and who warned the people of Israel about the coming destruction of the temple by the Babylonians, already lamented about the broken covenant that couldn't be fixed.

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out

of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: ‘I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people’” (Jer 31:31–33).

Israel’s prophets confirmed that the old highway, the old covenant, was broken beyond repair! God’s covenant with the people of Israel that was inaugurated in the desert of Sinai is ruined. God also abandoned his sanctuary. There was no way or road anymore for God to come and there was no sanctuary worthy enough for God to dwell among his people. According to Jeremiah, a new covenant is the solution forward.

We can now see why John the Baptist employed desert imagery—preaching in the wilderness, living on a ‘wilderness diet,’ and baptizing in the Jordan River—all allusions pointing to the events in the Sinai Desert. When John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, he was proclaiming the decree of God to start preparing a new highway, that is, a new covenant, for God. God can no longer come using the old highway as it was broken. Likewise, God cannot come to the rebuilt temple as it was already defiled. A new highway must be built and John the Baptist is the herald and voice proclaiming the start of the building of the new highway so that God can come and dwell among his people again. He was preparing the people for the coming event.

Days before the “coming down of God” at Sinai, the people of Israel were told to prepare themselves to meet God. “Go to the people and consecrate

them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments, and be ready by the third day; for on the third day, the Lord will come down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people” (Ex 19:10–11). Likewise, John the Baptist urged the people to repent and be baptized to be ready for the coming of the kingdom of God.

However, he is not the one who will construct the new highway, that is, the new covenant, nor is he the one who will build the new temple for God. These two crucial tasks, which will facilitate the coming and dwelling of God among his people, are left for “the one coming” after John, the Son of God.

## The King of the Jews

It is now time for us to examine how Jesus built the new highway, that is, established the new covenant, as part of preparing for the imminent coming of God. The kingdom of God is not from this world and its king looks nothing like kings we know. In this chapter, we will look at how Jesus, the Son of God, built the new highway for God and how his method of building was so unexpected and shocking for his disciples. Understanding this and its impact on the disciples requires exploring the historical context, something often missed by modern readers.

Between the prophet Malachi and the appearance of John the Baptist, the people of Israel lived under the occupation of the Persians, Hellenistic Greeks, and finally, the Romans, under which John the Baptist and Jesus operated. More than five centuries after the Babylonian exile, the glory and presence of God, the *Kabod*, still had not returned to the temple and the kingdom and house of David had not been restored. One can only imagine what the people under the occupation of the Roman Empire felt when hearing about the imminent coming of the kingdom of God. Sent as part of



the preparation for the coming of God and his kingdom, John the Baptist, as the voice of Isaiah, was the announcer of the decree of God according to the Gospels. The time for the building of a new highway for God has begun. He urged the people to repent and be baptized. Jesus also called the crowd to repent and prepare for the coming major event, which he called “the kingdom of God.” “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mk 1:15).

Even though both John and Jesus were urging people to repent and prepare for the coming of the kingdom of God, there is nonetheless a major difference between the two. John the Baptist is not the one who would build the new highway, that is, establish the new covenant with God so that God would come to his temple. All John can do is to announce the decree of God that the time has come to build the highway for God and urge the people to prepare for the coming event through true repentance. He is not the one who builds the new highway and brings the presence of God. That is the job of the “one who is to come” after John. The “one who is to come” after John is greater and will baptize the people with the Holy Spirit (Mk 1:8).

According to the Gospels, John the Baptist seems to know his limitations and was looking for the day when the “one who is to come” after him would undertake the actual task of building the new highway and bring the Spirit of God. He appears to have high expectations for the “one who is to come,” that John not only preached about him while he was operating, but even inquired about him while sitting in prison. The one thing John was eager to know, by sending his disciples to Jesus, was about the “one who is to come” after him. “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” (Mt 11:2–6 NASB). John seems to know that the one who was to

come was the one who would build the new highway, which John, as the voice, was alluding to with symbolic acts. Jesus's answer makes it clear that Jesus was indeed the one who was to come after John, "Blessed is any person who does not take offense at Me" (Mt 11:6 NASB). Jesus was the one who would build the new highway, that is, establish the new covenant, and pour out the Spirit of God. He is the one who would build the new highway so that God can come to *his* temple. John's question about the "coming one" was triggered by what he heard about the works of Jesus. "Now while in prison, *John heard about the works of Christ*, and he sent word by his disciples" (Mt 11:2). John the Baptist was not the only one who was compelled to ask who Jesus was after seeing and hearing about Jesus. Jesus's teachings and deeds compelled people to ask who he was on different occasions (Mk 1:27–28, 4:41). Jesus's words, "Blessed is any person who does not take offense at Me" (Mt 11:6 NASB), show how important it is for Jesus that people know his identity. This is even truer for his disciples. He wanted to ensure that the disciples, more than anyone else, understood his identity before he revealed his mission of building the new highway, that is, establishing the new covenant.

"And Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' And they told him, 'John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets.' And he asked them, 'But who do you say that I

am?’ Peter answered him, ‘You are the Christ.’ And he strictly charged them to tell no one about him” (Mk 8:27–30).

Most scholars agree that these verses mark a turning point in our earliest Gospel, Mark. Before this incident, Jesus was casting out demons, healing sick people, teaching crowds, performing miracles, etc., forcing both his disciples and the crowd to question who he was and come up with a verdict. When we finally come to the turning point of the Gospel of Mark at the end of chapter 8, Jesus asked his disciples what people said who he was. After seeing the miracles and hearing Jesus teach, people thought Jesus was maybe John the Baptist or Elijah, or one of the prophets. Jesus then asked the disciples directly what they thought about who he was. Peter answered him, “You are the Christ” (Mk 8:29).

Jesus seems to be satisfied with Peter’s answer. There were no further follow-up questions or explanations from him. He can now reveal his true mission, since the disciples have understood who he was to his satisfaction. From this time on, Jesus turned his focus from teaching the crowd and performing miracles to the one main mission of his life, that is, going to Jerusalem and dying on the cross. This is indeed a turning point in Jesus’s ministry.

“And he [Jesus] asked them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered him, ‘You are the Christ.’ And he strictly charged them to tell no one about him. 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. And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, ‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man’” (Mk 8:29–33).

But the idea of „the Christ“ suffering and dying caused big trouble for the disciples, so much so that Peter felt the need to rebuke Jesus. Usually, a disciple in the Jewish culture obeyed his master like a servant and did everything the master told him to do.<sup>22</sup> A disciple rebuking his master is unheard of! Peter likely believed Jesus was making a grave mistake, prompting him to feel the need to take action before things got out of hand. Peter, a disciple, taking Jesus, the master, aside and rebuking him, is a crucial incident that we who live in the modern era may have difficulty grasping its full significance. Accordingly, Jesus’s rebuke came swiftly and with great severity: “Get behind me, Satan!”

It looks like this incident was so dramatic that during Jesus’s transfiguration, which followed, God had to speak directly to the disciples and tell them to listen to Jesus. “This is my beloved Son; listen to him” (Mk 9:7). The disciples may have thought that Jesus had lost his mind when he said that Christ had to suffer and die, but God nevertheless told them to listen to Jesus, confirming that what Jesus is saying is God’s plan.

To grasp the magnitude of Jesus’s statements regarding the suffering and death of the Christ, it is essential to first understand what the term “Christ”

meant to the average Jew in the first century, as this context highlights the extraordinary and perplexing nature of Jesus's statements. The word "Christ" comes from the Greek word *Chrīstós*, a loanword from the original Hebrew word *Mašíaḥ* (*Messiah*), meaning "anointed." When Peter said, "You are the Christ," he was saying, "You are the Messiah." The Messiah, the anointed one, has a long history in the Jewish culture. Anointing with oil is a reference to consecrating a person or an object for the service of God throughout the Old Testament. But later the term Messiah, the anointed, came to refer to a future Jewish king from the Davidic line who would be the king in the coming kingdom of God.

"And as Jesus taught in the temple, he said, 'How can the scribes say that the Christ is the son of David? David himself, in the Holy Spirit, declared, 'The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet.''" David himself calls him Lord. So how is he his son?' And the great throng heard him gladly" (Mk 12:35–37).

Jesus asked why the scribes said that the Christ, the Messiah, is the son of David. This gives us an insight into how people in the first century viewed the Messiah. They see him as "the son of David" — that is, he is the king from the line of David. When people in the Gospels talk about the son of David, they don't mean to refer to a random son of David, but what they are referring to is the Messiah, the king from the line of David.

“And they came to Jericho. And as he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a great crowd, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the roadside. And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, ‘Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!’ And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he cried out all the more, ‘Son of David, have mercy on me!’” (Mk 10:46–48).

To the average Jew in the first century, Christ meant mainly the Messiah, the king from the line of David, whom the prophets of the Old Testament foretold about his future righteous kingdom.

“There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse [*David’s father*], and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins” (Is 11:1–5).

The prophet Isaiah talks about the coming king from the “stump of Jesse.” Jesse was the father of David, indicating the Davidic line of the coming righteous king. Note that the king is also called “a branch,” a term that other prophets also use to refer to the Messiah, the king from the line of David.

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for *David a righteous Branch*, and he shall reign as *king* and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: ‘The Lord is our righteousness’” (Jer 23:5–6).

Jeremiah said that God will raise up “a righteous Branch” for David. He also calls him a king who executes justice and righteousness. Other instances in the Gospels also display the association of the term Christ, Messiah, with a king. When Jesus was suffering on the cross, the chief priests mocked him, saying, “Let the *Christ, the King of Israel*, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe” (Mk 15:32). Clearly, Christ (Messiah) for them meant the king of Israel. Luke also tells us how the chief priests and scribes accused Jesus before Pilate by saying, “We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that *he himself is Christ, a king*” (Lk 23:2). Christ meant the Messiah, the promised king from the line of David. If someone claims to be the Christ, it means he is claiming to be king.

All the mocking of Jesus by Roman soldiers, such as clothing him with a purple cloak, putting a crown of thorns on him, and saluting him like a king, was directed at his claim to be the Messiah, the king: “And the soldiers led him away inside the palace (that is, the governor’s headquarters), and they called together the whole battalion. And they clothed him in a purple cloak, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on him. And they began to salute him, ‘Hail, King of the Jews!’” (Mk 15:16–18). Furthermore, the charge against him and the reason why the Romans crucified Jesus was because they believed he claimed to be king, as his trial of Jesus before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate (Mk 15:2, 15:9, 15:12) and the inscription on the cross confirms: “And it was the third hour when they crucified him. And the inscription of the charge against him read, ‘The King of the Jews’” (Mk 15:25–26).

When Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey, Matthew tells us that Jesus was claiming to be king by alluding to the prophecy in the Book of Zechariah. “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your *king* is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey” (Zech 9:9, Mt 21:4–5). The crowd also understood what Jesus was doing, that is, claiming to be the Christ (the Messiah, the king). They “spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches” and shouted “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming *kingdom of our father David*! Hosanna in the highest!” (Mk 11:8-10). Hosanna means “save now.” The crowd seem to be hoping that Jesus, the Christ (the Messiah, the Davidic king), would save them from the Roman occupation and restore the “*kingdom of our father David*”!



Therefore, when Peter said Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, he meant that Jesus was the promised King from the line of David who would rule Israel and the world in justice and righteousness. The ordinary Jew in the first century expected the Messiah, the king, to defeat Israel's enemies and restore the kingdom of Israel (Lk 24:21, Acts 1:6, Mk 11:8-10). The mission of the Christ, the king, the branch of David was to sit on his throne and rule, and not to be humiliated and die. King David defeated all his enemies and established the kingdom of Israel. He was not famous for being captured, humiliated, and killed by his enemies. Jesus, on the one hand, was satisfied with Peter's answer that he was the Messiah, the Christ, the king. But immediately after the disciples confessed his kingship, Jesus announced that the king would be captured, humiliated, and killed by his enemies. Jesus's statement was appalling for Peter and his disciples. A captured, humiliated, and killed Messiah?

For Peter, this must have felt like Jesus didn't understand the meaning of being the Messiah. It is time to take Jesus aside and rebuke and lecture him about the Messiah. Jesus must have missed something big! Correction is needed! No one will believe in a defeated and humiliated Messiah. That seems to be the reason why the disciples on the road to Emmaus were disappointed with Jesus after he, their Messiah, died on the cross. "Our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. *But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel*" (Lk 24:20-21). Peter also seems to sense that the disciples may stop following a Messiah who would end up being humiliated and killed. This is a make-or-break moment, and Peter has to do something and correct Jesus.

However, Jesus was unwavering and insisted on the king's humiliation and death, rebuking Peter: "Get behind me, Satan!" Perhaps we can now

appreciate the importance of God speaking directly to the disciples during the transfiguration of Jesus following the disagreement between Peter and Jesus. “This is my beloved Son; listen to him” (Mk 9:7). What Jesus was saying about the suffering and dying king may sound absurd and perplexing, but the disciples should know that Jesus is speaking the plan of God. The king of the coming kingdom of God is not your usual king, who came “to lord over the people and exercise authority over them.” On the contrary, “*the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*” (Mk 10:42–45). The servant-king does not look or operate like ordinary kings and tyrants. He is a humble king who comes riding on a donkey, “a righteous branch” (Jer 23:5), a shoot from the stump of Jesse (Is 11). He rather fits the suffering servant, who “grew up like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground” and who is “despised and rejected by men” and was led to the slaughter like a sheep, willing to give his life for many (Is 53).

Jesus reiterated and insisted on different occasions that “the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him” (Mk 10:33–34). The Christ (the Messiah), the king of God’s coming kingdom, came to give his life as a ransom for many. He came to build the highway, that is, establish a new covenant, with his death to open a path for God to come and establish his kingdom.

“And as they were eating, he took bread, and after blessing it, broke it and gave it to them, and said, ‘Take; this is my body.’ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and they all drank of it. And he said to them, ‘This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many’” (Mk 14:22–24).

Unlike the old broken highway, the covenant at Sinai, which was ratified with the blood of animals, the new covenant is inaugurated with the blood of the Messiah, the king. The king, appointed to be the ruler in the coming kingdom of God, ratified the new covenant with his blood, saying, “This is my *blood of the covenant*, which is poured out for many.” Just as the elders of Israel ate the covenant meal before God, the disciples ate the bread and drank the wine, celebrating the inauguration of the new covenant. Normally, people bring the sacrificial meal to the priest, but the Christ brought himself as a sacrificial meal per the order of Melchizedek, who brought bread and wine to Abraham (Ps 110:4, Gn 14:18, Mk 12:35–37). The Messiah, the king of Israel, who was expected to sit on his throne and rule the world, ended up giving his life as a ransom for many and ratifying the new covenant with his blood. The King of the Jews (Mk 15:25–26), the lion of the tribe of Judah and the root of David, revealed himself as the slaughtered Lamb of God.

“And one of the elders said to me, ‘Stop weeping; behold, the Lion that is from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has overcome so as to be able to open the scroll and its

seven seals.’ And I saw between the throne (with the four living creatures) and the elders a Lamb standing, as if slaughtered” (Rv 5:5–6 NASB).

That Jesus is the Christ (the Messiah, the king) was not easy for everyone to accept and was rejected by the Jewish leaders. But the idea of the Messiah, the king, being captured, humiliated, and killed was a hard pill to swallow even for Jesus’s closest disciples. It is foolishness and a stumbling block for many until this day, yet Jesus insisted on it and it later became the central and most important message of the church (1 Cor 15:1–4). It is a line that divides those who are part of the new covenant and those who are not. “For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:22–24).

Unlike other kings, who do everything to sit on their thrones, Jesus focused on God, for there can be no kingdom of God without the presence of God. The Messiah, the king, made it his top priority to construct the new highway—establish the new covenant—to make way for God to come and set up his kingdom. Jesus built the new highway for God to come, a covenant that provides the opportunity for people to have a permanent relationship, a kinship, with God.

The first highway, that is, the covenant made in the desert of Sinai, opened the road for God to come and live among his people. God, however, left his temple before its destruction by the Babylonians. Since then, the old highway has been broken. The last classical prophet of the Old Testament,

Malachi, confirms this fact. God can't use the same old broken highway to return to his temple. A new road, that is, a new covenant, is needed for God to come again. Jesus insisted that his death was the new covenant, the new highway. The new highway that Isaiah and John the Baptist announced was the death of the Messiah, the king. A covenant that was ratified by the blood of Jesus, the Christ. This new highway would open the road for God to return to his temple. But to which temple? That is the question we will try to answer in the next chapter.

## The Cornerstone

As discussed above, God comes to live among his people. Following the first covenant he made with the people of Israel at Sinai, God ordered the people to build him a sanctuary, a resting place, to be able to live among his people. The new covenant opened the way for God to return to his temple. But to which temple? To answer this question, it is essential to examine in detail the actions and words of Jesus within the temple in Jerusalem during the final week preceding his death. Moreover, to fully comprehend his symbolic acts and words, it is crucial to explore the historical context surrounding the temple in Jerusalem and the Old Testament background behind Jesus's actions and words.

According to the Gospel of Mark, Jesus mostly operated in the northern region of Galilee. He taught in various synagogues, and his main rivals were the Pharisees, a religious group *committed to “the tradition of the elders” as supplementing or amending biblical law.*<sup>23</sup> This was one of the reasons that Jesus and also the Sadducees rejected them.<sup>24</sup> After Jesus made sure the disciples saw him as the Christ and revealed that he (the

Messiah, the king) must suffer and die, he began his journey to Jerusalem through the southern region of Judea (Mk 10:1, 10:32).

Jerusalem, a prosperous and bustling city, was the seat of the temple, which occupied about one-tenth of the city area. Rebuilt after the Babylonian exile and massively enhanced by King Herod, who ruled the region during Jesus's birth (Mt 2:1), the temple was the center of life in Jerusalem. It stood on a top hill and its huge outer wall dwarfed contemporary pagan temples. Josephus characterized it as "the most prodigious work that was ever heard of by man."<sup>25</sup> The disciples also marveled at the "wonderful" stones and buildings of the temple (Mk 13:1). Much of the vast area enclosed by the outer wall was the Court of the Gentiles, into which anyone, including non-Jews, could enter. The Court of the Gentiles was separated from the area reserved for Jews by a chest-high inscription on which warning notices in Greek and Latin were placed. One of the Greek notices has been found, and it reads: "No foreigner is to enter within the forecourt and the balustrade around the sanctuary. Whoever is caught will have himself to blame for his subsequent death."<sup>26</sup> In contrast to the original Solomonic temple, the temple did not contain the Ark of the Covenant within the Holy of Holies, an object that symbolized the presence of God. When the Roman general Pompey entered the Holy of Holies during his conquest of Jerusalem in 63 BCE, it was empty.<sup>27</sup> After the destruction of the first temple by the Babylonians in 586 BCE, the whereabouts of the Ark of the Covenant remain unknown to this day. The Second Book of Maccabees, written in the second century BCE, claims that the prophet Jeremiah, who witnessed the destruction of the first temple, hid the Ark of the Covenant in a cave on a mountain (2 Macc 2:4–5). The claim

indicates that for over a century before Jesus, Jews commonly thought the Ark of the Covenant had been lost.

The requirements for the temple service directly or indirectly generated most of the city's business. Some produced stone vessels for building; others imported large amounts of incense for the temple service. There was a thriving business in linen, used for the priests' robes. Each year, a multitude of Jews traveled from various parts of the globe to worship in the temple. They required large numbers of animals for sacrifices.<sup>28</sup> Typically, the visitors did not transport the animals with them; instead, they purchased animals at the temple, which had already been inspected by priests to ensure their purity and validity.<sup>29</sup> The worshippers also needed the money changers for their temple taxes (Mt 17:24), offerings, and vows. The temple authorities accepted only specific coins and all the different coins from various regions had to be converted. The temple maintained a treasury to deposit money (Mt 27:6, Mk 7:11–12). It had vast wealth: cash, precious furnishings, and estates. When, for example, the Roman general Crassus looted the temple, he lifted nearly a hundred tons in coins.<sup>30</sup>

Judaism during that period was a sacrificial religion, with a primary focus on sacrifices that could only be performed at the temple in Jerusalem. It was also a religion based on the law of Moses, the Torah. The centrality of the Torah and animal sacrifices in the life of the common Jewish people resulted in priests in Jerusalem being traditionally the legal and religious authorities in Judaism.<sup>31</sup> The high priest, along with the chief priests—predominantly belonging to the Sadducees (Acts 5:17)<sup>32</sup>—served as the people's natural leaders and the temple's main administrators. Jerusalem was governed by the high priest and his council, the Sanhedrin.<sup>33</sup> The powerful aristocratic chief priests, who were mostly Sadducees, and also



the Pharisees, used to take part in the Sanhedrin meetings (Acts 5:34, 23:6). However, the historian Israel Knohl makes a plausible case that during Jesus's trial, the Sanhedrin meeting most likely was held without the participation of the Pharisees.<sup>34</sup> The chief priests had their guards, and the Sanhedrin could imprison or punish people, but only Roman authorities could impose the death penalty. The chief priests are the ones who arrested Jesus and brought him to their council, the Sanhedrin. They also later jailed the apostles (Acts 4:1–3, 5:17–18). The aristocratic priests were mediators between the Roman political rulers and the people. Due to their significant role and influence among the Jews, political leaders usually controlled the power to appoint the high priests. For example, Valerius Gratus, the governor of Judea and predecessor of Pontius Pilate, is known for the frequent changes he made in the appointment of the high priesthood.<sup>35</sup> He also appointed Caiaphas, the high priest who presided over Jesus's Sanhedrin trial.

Under Roman rule, high priests were often replaced, typically within one to two years, although there were exceptions, such as Caiaphas. Caiaphas held the position of the high priesthood for eighteen years, ten of which were under Pontius Pilate. This is a testimony to his good relations with the governors of Judea. The first-century historian Flavius Josephus informs us that Pontius Pilate used the temple's treasury to fund the construction of an aqueduct.<sup>36</sup> There were various accusations against the powerful chief priests during that period. High priests were accused of bribing political leaders to be appointed (2 Macc 4:7–8). Further, the priesthood was accused of adultery, bringing menstrual blood into the temple, plundering the temple treasury, etc.<sup>37</sup>

Thousands of Jews flocked to Jerusalem from all over the world during Passover. Jesus and those with him who came from Galilee were among them. Just like John the Baptist, who employed symbolic acts and allusions to convey his message, Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey, alluding to the humble king from the Book of Zechariah (Zech 9:9, Mt 21:4–5). According to the Gospel of Mark, when Peter confessed that Jesus was the Christ (the king, the Messiah), Jesus “strictly charged them to tell no one about him” (Mk 8:30). Claiming to be a king without the approval of the Romans was very dangerous. During his entrance to Jerusalem, however, Jesus openly claimed to be the king, the Messiah, although only employing Jewish allusion. As previously noted, the crowds with him seem to have gotten the message as they accompanied him, spreading their cloaks and leafy branches on the road and shouting about the coming kingdom of David (Mk 11:9-10).

Jesus is entering Jerusalem, the center of power and wealth, unlike Galilee, where he used to argue with the Pharisees, who hold no formal power. When Jesus ultimately entered the temple, the confrontation with the chief priests began to unfold. Two incidents in this confrontation are particularly notable, as they appear to upset the chief priests greatly and compel them to get rid of Jesus. The first incident happened when Jesus entered the temple.

“And they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. And he

would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. And he was teaching them and saying to them, 'Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers.' And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and were seeking a way to destroy him, for they feared him, because all the crowd was astonished at his teaching" (Mk 11:15–18).

Jesus entered the temple and drove out the sellers, overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of the pigeon sellers, and blocked parts of the temple service briefly by not allowing anyone to carry anything through the temple. One can imagine the disturbance Jesus's action may have caused. Remember, the chief priests are the temple administrators, and Jesus came and created a disturbance inside the temple. When the powerful chief priests and their scribes heard his explanation for his shocking action, they decided to "destroy him" (Mk 11:18).

Jesus explained his action by quoting two verses from the Old Testament. "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations" is a quotation from Isaiah 56:7 which talks about how God would accept God-fearing Gentiles. As we have noted above, the vast area within the temple walls was called the Court of the Gentiles, and it seems that this was where the business activities were happening. Israel is called to be a light to the world and the temple should be a house of prayer for all the nations. Jesus seemed to think the temple was malfunctioning and not serving its purpose.

His second quote may have been the most alarming for the temple authorities. "You have made it [the temple] a den of robbers." He accused

the temple authorities by employing the words of the prophet Jeremiah (Jer 7:11). The prophet Jeremiah operated before and during the destruction of the first temple. The Assyrians had long destroyed the northern kingdom with its capital, Samaria. They were also able to attack the southern kingdom of Judah and siege Jerusalem during the reign of King Hezekiah. The prophet Isaiah reassured the king that God would save the city and ultimately the Assyrians failed to conquer the city (2 Kgs 18:13–19:37). This story seems to have given the impression that God would always save Jerusalem under any circumstances for the temple's sake. When later the Babylonians were about to march to Jerusalem, the authorities in Jerusalem hoped that God would save them yet again for the sake of his temple.

God sent Jeremiah to the temple gates to warn them: “Do not trust in these deceptive words: ‘This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord’” (Jer 7:4). Jeremiah then warned them that they can’t do whatever evil they wanted and expect God to protect the temple from destruction. The temple has become “a den of robbers”!

“Behold, you trust in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, ‘We are delivered!’—only to go on doing all these abominations? *Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes?* Behold, I myself have seen it, declares the Lord.” (Jer 7:8–11).

A den of robbers is a place where robbers hide after committing their crimes. It gave them safety and assurance that they would not face the consequences of their evil actions. Likewise, Jeremiah said that the temple had become a place of safety and assurance for all evildoers. After doing all the things that angered God, they say, “We are delivered” when they enter the temple. Surely God would not let his temple be destroyed, was their attitude. Jeremiah warned them that God would destroy the temple just like he destroyed Shiloh, the former seat of the Tabernacle (Jer 7:12–14)! Instead of listening to God’s prophet Jeremiah and repenting, the authorities refused to listen. Therefore, God told them that the temple will be destroyed: “I will do to the house that is called by my name, and in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your fathers, as I did to Shiloh” (Jer 7:13–14).

When Jesus quotes Jeremiah, he was prophesying about the coming destruction of the temple, which in Jesus’s eyes had become “a den of robbers.” The overturning of the tables and seats, and disruption of the temple service, was a symbolic act<sup>38</sup> for the destruction of the temple.<sup>39</sup> Jesus is not trying to reform the temple but employs prophetic symbols to give his verdict: the temple has become a den of robbers and will be destroyed! One accusation later laid against Jesus also confirms this view. “And some stood up and bore false witness against him, saying, ‘We heard him say, “I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands”’” (Mk 14:57–58). “And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, ‘Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!’” (Mk 15:29–30).

Of course, Jesus never said he would destroy the temple. However, his opponents understood his words and actions as being about destroying the temple. Even though they got the core message right that Jesus was talking about the destruction of the temple, they, however, seem to understand his action as a threat rather than a prophecy. Jesus's message was that the temple would be destroyed, not that he and his followers would destroy it.

Just like in the days of Jeremiah when the leaders refused to listen to God and repent before the destruction of the first temple, the temple authorities and those with power refused to listen to God's prophet John the Baptist and repent (Mk 11:27–33). Jesus then comes and gives his verdict: the temple can't be reformed. It has become a den of robbers that gives false safety and assurance. It will be destroyed just like the first temple!

As we have seen above, Malachi gave his verdict on the second temple, rebuilt after the Babylonian exile. God would rather see the temple service cease than witness "evil" practice in the temple (Mal 1:8-10 NASB). More than four centuries after Malachi, Jesus enters the same temple and gives his final verdict, which is even more devastating than Malachi's. This is not the temple where God is going to return to. It is a den of robbers and will be destroyed! "And as he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, 'Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!' And Jesus said to him, 'Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down'" (Mk 13:1–2).

The second incident that seemed to have deeply troubled the temple authorities began when they came and challenged Jesus. "And as he was walking in the temple, the chief priests and the scribes and the elders came to him, and they said to him, 'By what authority are you doing these things,

or who gave you this authority to do them?’” (Mk 11:27–28). According to the Gospel of Mark, this incident follows the first incident when Jesus drove out the sellers, overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of the pigeon sellers, and blocked parts of the temple service briefly. The temple authorities perceived Jesus’s actions and words as a threat to destroy the temple and decided “to destroy him” (Mk 11:18). As already noted, the chief priests were the administrators of the temple. However, Jesus acted as if he had some authority over the temple.

On the following occasion, the temple authorities questioned Jesus about where he got the authority to act in this way. To understand their question, one has to appreciate the association between royalty and the temple. David brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem and did the planning and preparation for the first temple. King Solomon built the first temple. After the Babylonian exile, Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah, rebuilt the second temple under Persian occupation. And finally, King Herod expanded and refurbished the second temple. *When Solomon built the temple, he established the pattern that would remain true for all subsequent generations up to and including the first century: temple-builder was the true king, and vice versa.*<sup>40</sup> Moreover, the prophet Zechariah wrote that the Branch, whom the prophets identify as the king and Messiah, would build the temple. “And say to him, ‘Thus says the Lord of hosts, “Behold, the man whose name is the *Branch*: for he shall branch out from his place, and he shall build the temple of the Lord. It is he who shall build the temple of the Lord and shall bear royal honor, and shall sit and rule on his throne’”” (Zech 6:12–13).

We have seen that Jesus’s action was a prophetic symbol for the coming destruction of the temple, but if the temple is destroyed, then Jesus must

have a new temple in mind and the builder of the new temple is understood to be the Messiah, the king. Thus, when the temple authorities questioned Jesus about the source of his authority, they were setting a trap to force Jesus to confess publicly that he was the Messiah, the king, who would build a new temple. This would have allowed them to report him to the Roman rulers and “destroy him.”

Instead of falling for their trap, Jesus replied by posing a question that would have put them in a difficult position, no matter how they responded.

“Jesus said to them, ‘I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man? Answer me.’ And they discussed it with one another, saying, ‘If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ But shall we say, ‘From man?’—they were afraid of the people, for they all held that John really was a prophet. So they answered Jesus, ‘We do not know.’ And Jesus said to them, ‘Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things’” (Mk 11:29–33).

John the Baptist was widely seen as a prophet. Josephus also provides evidence for his popularity among the general Jewish population.<sup>41</sup> The temple authorities, however, didn’t accept him as a prophet, nor did they repent and seek baptism from him. Yet, they remain hesitant to express their true opinion about John the Baptist, fearing repercussions from the public. The temple authorities wanted to know whether Jesus was claiming to be



the king, the Messiah, who would build the new temple. Jesus, instead of answering their question, pointed out the fact that they rejected God's prophet and refused to repent and be baptized. Moreover, they are now actively trying to trap Jesus and "destroy him." This is the background for the parable of the wicked tenants Jesus told following this encounter (Mk 12:1–12), a parable that seemed to have upset the Jewish authorities.

The parable is about a landlord who planted a vineyard, leased it to tenants, and went to another country. During the harvest season, he sent his servants to the tenants to get some of the fruit from the vineyard. The tenants refused to give the fruits and instead beat, "shamefully" treated or killed servants. Finally, the landlord sent his beloved son, hoping the tenants would respect his son. But the tenants killed the son and "threw him out of the vineyard." Jesus concludes his parable by talking about the fate of the wicked tenants.

"What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. Have you not read this Scripture: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes'? And they were seeking to arrest him but feared the people, for they perceived that he had told the parable against them. So they left him and went away." (Mk 12:9–12).

The fate of the wicked tenants is sealed. They will be destroyed when the landlord comes. The temple authorities understood the parable was about

them: “They perceived that he had told the parable against them.” They wanted to arrest Jesus on the spot and deliver him to the Roman authorities, but feared the public. Later, the chief priests will use Judas Iscariot to find out Jesus’s whereabouts and arrest him at night without causing a public disturbance (Mk 14:10–11, 43–46). Indeed, the parable was about them, who rejected God’s prophet John the Baptist, and were in the process of “destroying” Jesus, the Son of God.

Jesus’s prophetic action in the temple about its destruction, his reference to the rejection of John the Baptist by the temple authorities, and the parable of the tenants draw a picture of judgment. Not only will the temple face destruction, but the office of temple authorities will also end. It will be destroyed with the temple. It has no place in the new temple, for the new temple is built upon the stone that they, the builders, rejected.

The phrase about the rejected stone is a quote from Psalm 118:22–23. The Hosanna song, which the followers of Jesus sang during Jesus’s entry into Jerusalem while riding a donkey, is found next to these verses. The Psalm is a song that most likely pilgrims joyfully sang when they went to the temple.<sup>42</sup> Thus, Jesus’s allusion to the rejected stone that became the cornerstone points to the new temple. Jesus’s followers later understood the rejected stone to refer to Jesus himself. “This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone” (Acts 4:11).

His opponents also understood that Jesus implied he would build a new temple that was not made by hand. “And some stood up and bore false witness against him, saying, ‘We heard him say, “I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands”’” (Mk 14:57–58). We have already noted that Jesus didn’t say

he would destroy the temple, but rather employed a prophetic symbol to point to the coming destruction of the temple. However, his allusion to the rejected stone that becomes the cornerstone is understood by his opponents and followers alike to be a reference to the building of a new temple (Acts 4:11). “As you come to him, a *living stone rejected by men* but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like *living stones* are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pt 2:4–5).

Jesus is the stone that the builders, that is, the temple authorities, rejected and delivered to death. He is the stone that the building experts “threw out of the vineyard” as the wicked tenants did to the landlord’s son (Mk 12:8). The rejected stone has no use for the current temple except being rejected and thrown out. However, this is not the end of the story. The rejected stone miraculously becomes the first cornerstone of the new temple. A cornerstone is a foundational stone that gives a building its shape in all three dimensions: width, length, and height. Every stone is shaped after the cornerstone to fit into the building.

The temple authorities came to Jesus to question his authority over the temple, that is, whether he was claiming to be the Messiah, the king, who would build a new temple. Jesus’s answer is clear from the context. Yes, he is the Messiah, the king, who will build the new temple. Even though the king will be rejected and killed, he will nonetheless be resurrected and become the cornerstone of the new temple that “is not made by hand.” This is of course impossible for men. Indeed, “this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes” (Mk 12:11).

As we have already seen, Jesus’s death builds the highway by establishing the new covenant, thereby preparing a way for God to come and live among

his people. God, however, can't return and dwell in the second temple. Jesus's verdict is clear: the temple has become a den of robbers and will be destroyed. Instead, Jesus's resurrection lays the foundation for the new temple when the rejected stone becomes the cornerstone of the new temple "in three days". God would then come to the new temple that "is not made by hand." For God no longer dwells in houses made by hands (Acts 7:48-50, 17:24). Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, everything that is needed for God to come and live among his people is accomplished. The new highway is prepared through his death and the new temple is built through his resurrection.

In a tragic turn of events, Jesus's predictions were fulfilled some forty years after his crucifixion, during the First Jewish–Roman War in 70 CE, when the Romans crushed the First Jewish Revolt. After standing for more than five centuries, the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Roman soldiers. The Roman commander Titus, who led the siege of Jerusalem and would later become emperor, took the temple's "precious vessels" such as "two candlesticks, like to those that lay in the holy house, with tables, and cisterns, and vials, all made of solid gold, and very heavy." "A great many other treasures were also delivered to him [Titus], with sacred ornaments of the temple."<sup>43</sup> Titus not only destroyed the temple but also didn't spare even famine-stricken priests who came to him begging for their lives. He justified his action by saying that the office of the priest demands that they should also perish with the temple.

“On the fifth day afterward, the priests that were pined with the famine came down, and when they were brought to Titus by the guards, they begged for their lives; but he replied, that the time of pardon was over as to them, and that this very holy house, on whose account only they could justly hope to be preserved, was destroyed; and that it was agreeable to their office that priests should perish with the house itself to which they belonged. So he ordered them to be put to death.”<sup>44</sup>

With the destruction of the temple, the priesthood and Judaism of sacrifices came to an end. The Sadducees, to whom most of the aristocratic chief priests belonged, also ceased to exist. The First Temple was rebuilt relatively soon after the Babylonian exile—around seventy years after its destruction. However, the Second Temple has remained destroyed to this day. God, however, had already laid the foundational cornerstone for his new temple.

## Suddenly, God Came from Heaven

After Jesus's confrontation with the temple authorities, they paid Judas Iscariot to find out Jesus's whereabouts (Mk 14:10–11, 43–46) and arrested him at night. It was not the Roman soldiers who arrested Jesus but the guards of the temple authorities (Mk 14:43). Jesus was brought before the powerful council of the Jewish authorities, the Sanhedrin. The accusations against Jesus focused on the destruction of the temple and the building of a new temple that is “not made with hands” (Mk 14:58). The rumor of Jesus threatening to destroy the temple seems to be widespread (Mk 15:29–30) and lasted even after Jesus's earthly lifetime (Acts 6:14). This may explain the reaction of the crowd at Jesus's trial before Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, as the chief priests most likely used the rumor to “stir up the crowd” (Mk 15:11–14). The issue surrounding the temple's destruction seems to have been the main concern of the chief priests as well. However, they also knew the Roman rulers would not give much attention to religious disputes. They had to bring Jesus to the point where he would publicly

claim to be the Messiah, the king. This would put Jesus in direct conflict with the Roman authorities.

Thus, after hearing the accusations about the temple's destruction, the high priest finally stood up and asked Jesus: "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" And Jesus answered, "I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven" (Mk 14:61–62). Clearly and definitively, Jesus finally confirmed that he was truly the Messiah, the anointed king. The temple authorities now got what they had been seeking all along. They can now condemn him to death and deliver him to the Roman authorities as someone who claims to be a king without the approval of the Roman Emperor, and that is exactly what they did (Mk 14:64, 15:1–15). Jesus was sentenced to death by crucifixion for claiming to be "the King of the Jews" as his trial of Jesus before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate (Mark 15:2, 15:9, 15:12) and the official *inscription of the charge against him* by the Romans confirms, "The King of the Jews" (Mk 15:26).

Jesus not only unequivocally affirmed that he was the Messiah but also did so by alluding to two quotes from the Old Testament. "The Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power" and "coming with the clouds of heaven" are allusions from Psalm 110 and Daniel 7, respectively. The idea of God having a son and a human elevated to such divine positions is blasphemy to the Sadducees, to whom most of the chief priests belonged.<sup>45</sup> This explains why the high priest tore his garments and accused Jesus of blasphemy (Mk 14:63–64). Remember that the Sadducees reject the resurrection of the dead, which was first introduced in the Book of Daniel (Dn 12:2, Mk 12:18). As chief priests, the Sadducees accept mainly the written Torah, that is, the five books of Moses. While not dismissing the Old Testament books

of the prophets and writings, the Sadducees nonetheless did not see them as sources of doctrine.<sup>46</sup> This may also explain why Jesus referred to the book of Moses when discussing the resurrection of the dead with them, rather than citing the Book of Daniel, which addresses the topic directly (Mk 12:26–27).

Jesus, the humble king, the Messiah, instituted the new covenant, that is, the new highway, through his death, declaring: “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many” (Mk 14:24). He also laid the foundation for the new temple through his resurrection, as we discussed above. He was raised from the dead as the cornerstone of the new temple, a temple that is made from living stones (1 Pt 2:4–5). After Jesus’s death and resurrection, every necessary work was completed and prepared for God to come and dwell in his temple. Now that the highway is built and the new temple is established, the time has arrived for God to come and dwell among his people.

After his resurrection, Jesus told his followers to wait in Jerusalem (Acts 1:4). On the fiftieth day following Jesus’s resurrection, on the day of Pentecost and in alignment with the prophecy in Malachi regarding God’s sudden return to his temple, God suddenly came from heaven and rested in his new temple.

“When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they



were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:1–4).

“Suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind.” This is not a normal wind that usually blows in the horizontal direction. This is “a sound like a mighty rushing wind” that came suddenly *from heaven*. The sound brings to mind the “sound of the trumpet” at Mount Sinai when God came down to live among the people of Israel (Ex 19:19). Further, “the mighty rushing wind” that filled “the entire house where they were sitting” reminds us of when the presence of God filled the Tabernacle (Ex 40:34–35) and the first temple (1 Kgs 8:10–11). Finally, the fire of God as divided tongues evokes memories of the fire of God that consumed the sacrifices during the inauguration of the Tabernacle and the first temple (Lv 9:24, 2 Chr 7:1).

Unlike the Tabernacle and the first temple, there is no Holy of Holies this time that the Spirit of God would fill to make it his resting place. This time, the temple of God is made out of the living stones of the disciples, and thus “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit.” The fire too is not a fire that consumed the sacrifices but a fire of tongues that “rested on” each of the disciples enabling them to become the light to the dark world by preaching “the mighty works of God” (Acts 2:11). The believers of Jesus are called golden lampstands and the light of the world (Mt 5:14–16, Rv 1:20). On the day of Pentecost, God lit the fire on the lampstands. The new temple of living stones was filled with the Spirit of God and the fire of God “rested on” the believers and made them God’s new resting place and sanctuary.

The imagery of “a sound like a mighty rushing wind” coming “from heaven” and filling the house, a fire of God “resting on” each of the disciples and the infilling of them with the Holy Spirit is a description of the manifestation of God’s presence and the inauguration of the new temple. It is also the inauguration of the kingdom of God that Jesus announced was at hand. God came from heaven to rest on his people and make them his dwelling place, his temple. God is establishing his kingdom as the permanent presence of God is a fundamental aspect of his kingdom, a concept that will be further explored in subsequent chapters. For the third time in human history after the Garden of Eden and Sinai, God came from heaven to live among his people permanently and establish his kingdom. This time, the sanctuary of God is not a temple made with hands but the living stones of believers. God no longer dwells in houses made by hands (Acts 7:48-50, 17:24).

Moreover, the imagery of God coming down and causing people to speak in different tongues, that is, languages, may remind us of the “Tower of Babel” (Gn 11:1–9). The story of the Tower of Babel, when read in its historical context, is not an attempt of people to reach God, as many modern readers assume. According to ancient Mesopotamian religion, the sky or heaven is a dwelling place of the gods and not a place for humans to live.<sup>47</sup> Old Testament experts such as John H. Walton urge us to read the story in its historical background of southern Mesopotamia, where places like Babylon and “the land of Shinar” (Gn 11:2) are located.

According to Walton,<sup>48</sup> the Tower of Babel taken in its southern Mesopotamian historical context is to be identified as a ziggurat. A ziggurat is a rectangular stepped tower, usually part of a temple complex. It played a central role in city planning. Archaeologists have uncovered nearly thirty

ziggurats in Mesopotamia, highlighting their considerable importance in the region's history. Ziggurats are of varying sizes, with bases ranging from twenty meters on a side to over ninety meters on a side. A ziggurat is dedicated to the city's patron god or goddess. As part of a temple complex, they were built for gods to come down and enter their temples. Thus, ziggurats are sacred places and were not meant for ordinary people to reach the gods but rather for the gods to come down to their temples.

The highest ziggurat discovered is Etemenanki, which means "temple of the Foundation of Heaven and Earth" in Sumerian, the world's first written language. It is found in Babylon, now in ruins, and is estimated around three hundred feet (91 meters) high. Many scholars identify this ziggurat in Babylon as the "likely inspiration for the biblical story" of the Tower of Babel.<sup>49</sup>

If the scholars are correct, then the story of the Tower of Babel is a story of building temple towers for patron gods so that they would come down and live in the temples. Indeed, in the biblical story of the Tower of Babel, God came down, not to live in their temple tower, but rather to confuse the language of humanity (Gn 11:7). Adam and his wife were expelled from God's presence in the Garden of Eden. Building a city and a Tower was an attempt by humanity to have their own secure "garden," a city, and bring back the lost presence of God by building a temple complex. Thus, the Tower of Babel is a symbol of exile from the presence of God and humanity's attempt to bring God back from heaven. It is the work of men to build an impressive dwelling place for the gods in an attempt to bring the lost presence of God. The Tower is like the Garden of Eden, but made by men. It is an attempt to control and "bring deity down to the level of man." The practice at the Tower of Babel became widespread all over the globe

with cities being built with temples for the city's patron god or goddess. God rejected this practice of building temples driven by human ambitions (Gn 11:4) and confused the languages of the nations. Instead, he started his own attempt to bring his presence back by calling Abraham in the next chapter (Gn 12).

As we have already seen, God later came down at Sinai and dwelled in his temple among the people of Israel. With the first temple in its midst, Jerusalem became the final resting place of God and the city of God (Ps 87:1–3). When the first temple was destroyed, the people of Israel ended up in exile in Babylon. The true exile was not simply from the city of Jerusalem but from God's presence that left the first temple. Even after their physical return, the presence of God, the *Kabod*, never returned and the kingdom of the house of David was never restored.

Therefore, when John the Baptist appeared in the desert, both Israel and the Gentiles were living in "Babylon," in a true exile from the presence of God. As we already explored, John, as the voice from the Book of Isaiah, announced the return of God, that is, the end of the exile, through the new highway that was about to be built. Isaiah 40 was a message for those in Babylonian exile, which in reality both Jews and Gentiles were living when John the Baptist launched his ministry. The good news is that a highway and a new temple for God were built through the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Messiah. God can now come down and live among humanity! Unlike a temple complex like the Tower of Babel that was built driven by human ambitions (Gn 11:4), the new temple is not made with hands but of living stones having the rejected Messiah as its cornerstone.

On Pentecost, when God came down to his temple, he caused the disciples to speak different languages. This time, however, it was not to

“confuse their languages” like at the Tower of Babel but to make them preach “the mighty works of God” (Acts 2:11). The disciples preached in different languages to “devout men from every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5). Most of the then-known languages seemed to be represented and each of them was listening “in his own native language” (Acts 2:8). Later in Acts 10, the disciple Peter was led by the Spirit of God to preach the Gospel to a Gentile named Cornelius. While Peter was still speaking, “the Holy Spirit fell on” Cornelius and his family. The disciples, who until that moment were all Jews, were amazed that Gentiles could also receive the Holy Spirit.

“While Peter was still saying this, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, ‘Can any one forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?’ And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ” (Acts 10:44–48).

Jesus, the Messiah, didn’t give his life to redeem people only from Israel but “from every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (Rv 5:9) as he is the light of the nations. “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (Is 49:6).

On the day of Pentecost, God lit the fire on the lampstand, and starting from that day, the followers of Jesus Christ preached the gospel to the known world at an unprecedented pace. Non-Jewish cities then had temples and idols of Greco-Roman gods, as is evident in the Book of Acts (14:13, 17:22–23, 19:23–35). The message of the crucified Messiah brought thousands of Gentiles across the known world to a relationship and knowledge of Yahweh, the God of Israel.

God indeed made the new covenant with the “house of Israel and the house of Judah” (Jer 31:31) and not with Gentiles. Israel was represented by the twelve apostles at the night when Jesus made the new covenant (Mk 14:17–24). The number of the first apostles was exactly twelve, representing Israel (Mt 19:28) and thus it was also necessary to find a replacement for Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:26).

Unlike the old covenant, however, the status of Gentiles is very different in the new covenant. In the former covenant, Gentiles were “alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and [were] strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph 2:12). But in the new covenant, Gentiles are “no longer strangers and aliens, but are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (Eph 2:19). Moreover, they are fellow living stones of the new temple of God.

“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the

whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit” (Eph 2:19–22).

The new temple does not have a Court of Gentiles or an area reserved only for Jews. Furthermore, there is no dividing wall with a warning inscription that separates the two (see previous chapter). “For he [Jesus] is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility” (Eph 2:14). “Through him we both [Jews and Gentiles] have access in one Spirit to the Father” (Eph 2:18).

What happened on Pentecost was the “outpouring” of the Spirit of God on “all flesh” (Acts 2:17), that is, “the promise of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:33). The prophet Isaiah also told us that after the preparation of the highway for God, God would reveal his glory, the *Kabod*, to all flesh (Is 40:5). This is the fulfillment of the promise of the baptism by the Holy Spirit that was predicted by John the Baptist (Acts 1:4–5, 2:33). It is also the fulfillment of John’s other prophecy that said, “From these stones God is able to raise up children for Abraham” (Lk 3:8 NASB). Indeed, God made the dead stones, the Gentiles, become “Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” (Gal 3:29) and revealed his glory to all flesh.

The promise of “the gift of the Holy Spirit” is for all who repent and become followers of Jesus, the crucified Messiah, as Peter’s preaching in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost shows. “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and *you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*. For the promise is for you and

for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself” (Acts 2:38–39).

The early Christians understood themselves to be the temple of God, the resting place of God’s Spirit, as the earliest Christian writings such as Paul’s letters, which are typically considered being written before the Gospels, confirm (1 Cor 3:16–17, 6:19). The permanent presence and dwelling of the Spirit of God in and among the believers played a significant part in their understanding of themselves as the temple of God (2 Cor 6:16). Moreover, in Paul’s letters to the Galatians and Romans, the Spirit of God is seen as the central part of the Christian life (Gal 5:16–25, Rom 8). This seems to be why the first disciples were eager to help new believers receive the Holy Spirit following their conversion (Acts 8:14–17, 19:1–7).

After the long awaited highway—the new covenant—was built and the new temple established by Jesus, the crucified Messiah, suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind. God finally poured out his Spirit and rested—not in a building made by hands, but in his new temple: a dwelling built with living stones—the followers of Jesus.



## God's Cherubim

The prominent presence of cherubim (singular cherub) in the Tabernacle and later in the first Solomonic temple is a feature that often puzzles the modern mind and is frequently overlooked. Cherubim were placed next to the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies, the holiest part of the first temple, and capture what the temple of God is at its core. Therefore, we will look at them in this chapter to understand the fundamental nature of God's temple.

“In the Most Holy Place he made two cherubim of wood and overlaid them with gold. The wings of the cherubim together extended twenty cubits: one wing of the one, of five cubits, touched the wall of the house, and its other wing, of five cubits, touched the wing of the other cherub” (2 Chr 3:10–11).

Likewise, cherubim were placed on the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies of the Tabernacle.

“And you shall make two cherubim of gold; of hammered work shall you make them, on the two ends of the mercy seat. Make one cherub on the one end, and one cherub on the other end. Of one piece with the mercy seat shall you make the cherubim on its two ends. The cherubim shall spread out their wings above, overshadowing the mercy seat with their wings, their faces one to another; toward the mercy seat shall the faces of the cherubim be. And you shall put the mercy seat on the top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the testimony that I shall give you” (Ex 25:18–21).

Furthermore, cherubim were skillfully woven into the veil of the First Temple and the Tabernacle. “And he made the veil of blue and purple and crimson fabrics and fine linen, and he worked cherubim on it” (2 Chr 3:14). “And you shall make a veil of blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen. It shall be made with cherubim skillfully worked into it” (Ex 26:31). Even the walls and entrance doors of the first temple were covered with engraved figures of cherubim.

“Around all the walls of the house he carved engraved figures of cherubim and palm trees and open flowers, in the inner and outer rooms. The floor of the house he overlaid with gold in the inner and outer rooms. For the entrance to

the inner sanctuary he made doors of olivewood; the lintel and the doorposts were five-sided. He covered the two doors of olivewood with carvings of cherubim, palm trees, and open flowers. He overlaid them with gold and spread gold on the cherubim and on the palm trees” (1 Kgs 6:29–32).

The cherubim, palm trees, and open flowers in the temple remind us of the Garden of Eden, where cherubim were first mentioned in the Bible (Gn 3:24, Ezek 28:13–14). The Garden of Eden was where God’s presence dwelled. It is said to be a place where the “sound of the LORD God” was “walking” in it and where Adam and Eve tried to hide themselves among the trees of the garden from “the presence of the Lord God” (Gn 3:8).

There is a lack of comprehensive description regarding the appearance of the cherubim placed in the Holy of Holies, and no specific details were provided when God instructed Moses to make them. This was also the case when the first temple was built later; a detailed description is missing. The only description we find is that they had wings. It seems that people were already familiar with what cherubim looked like.

The appearance of cherubim was first described much later by the prophet Ezekiel during the Babylonian exile after the destruction of the first temple. Ezekiel, in his vision, described them first as “the likeness of four living creatures” (Ezek 1:5) and later called them cherubim (Ezek 10:15). Each of the cherubim had two wings and four distinct faces: that of a human, a lion, an ox, and an eagle.

“As for the likeness of their faces, each had a human face. The four had the face of a lion on the right side, the four had the face of an ox on the left side, and the four had the face of an eagle. Such were their faces. And their wings were spread out above. Each creature had two wings, each of which touched the wing of another, while two covered their bodies” (Ezek 1:10–11).

We find a similar description of cherubim in the Book of Revelation (Rv 4:6–8). They are also called “four living creatures.” Each creature looks unique though: the first one resembles a lion, the second looks like an ox, the third has a human face, and the fourth appears as an eagle. Even though the descriptions found in the two books differ, we can still see common features of cherubim. They are creatures with wings and have the appearance of a human, a lion, an eagle, an ox, or a combination of the above. These kinds of figures were widely known in the ancient Near East. Archaeologists have uncovered various statues and artifacts displaying these creatures known by names such as *karibu*, *lamassu*, *sheddu*, etc.

In the Bible, cherubim mainly serve two roles: they guard the royal presence and support God’s throne. When God expelled Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden and from his presence, he placed cherubim at the east gate “to guard the way to the tree of life” (Gn 3:24). Furthermore, as we have seen above, the entrance of the first temple was covered with engraved figures of cherubim, and cherubim were skillfully woven into the veil of both the first temple and the Tabernacle, pointing to the fact that cherubim are guarding the royal presence of God in the temple. This is in

line with archaeological findings from the ancient Near East. Huge cherubim-like statues were placed at the gates of royal palaces. The Lamassu located in Nimrud, Assyria, and “The Gate of All Nations” found at the entrance of the palace of Darius I in Persepolis, Persia are two good examples.

Moreover, archaeologists have discovered various throne artifacts displaying cherubim-like figures supporting the thrones of kings. One example is the throne of the king of Tyre on the sarcophagus of Ahirom in Byblos.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, many verses in the Bible describe God as sitting on or above the cherubim. “And David arose and went with all the people who were with him from Baale-judah to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the name of the Lord of hosts who sits enthroned on the cherubim” (2 Sm 6:2).

Other passages (see, e.g., 2 Kgs 19:15, 1 Chr 13:6, Ps 80:1, Ps 99:1, Is 37:16) also describe God as sitting enthroned upon cherubim. Ezekiel sees the throne of God “over the heads of the cherubim” (Ezek 10:1) and in Revelation, the four living creatures were “around the throne [and] on each side of the throne” (Rv 4:6). Cherubim-like figures were known as guardians of royal palaces and supporters of the thrones of kings throughout the ancient Near East. They inspire reverence, fear, and awe toward the king. The temple was the palace of God, where his presence dwelled. In the Holy of Holies of the temple, we find cherubim indicating God’s presence and his throne. “There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel” (Ex 25:22). The temple serves not only as God’s dwelling place, where his presence resides but also as his royal palace, where he sits

on his throne and reigns. “The Lord reigns; let the peoples tremble! He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake!” (Ps 99:1).

Getting closer to the temple and seeing cherubim at the entrance door reminds visitors that they are approaching a royal palace, prompting them to conduct themselves with the utmost reverence and respect. The presence of cherubim convey a message to visitors that they are nearing the royal palace, the throne, and the presence of God. Wherever cherubim appear in the Bible, they signify the presence of God’s throne.

The Garden of Eden and the temple were God’s “resting place.” When the Bible says in Genesis that God rested on the seventh day, it doesn’t mean God was tired and needed some sleep, etc. In its ancient context, it means he was seated on his throne.<sup>51</sup> What makes the seventh day special is that it is the day when God began to dwell and rule among his people. Similarly, words like “walking,” which we saw above in the Garden of Eden and “dwelling,” etc., refer to God sitting on his throne in his temple and ruling his people. “I will make my dwelling among you, and my soul shall not abhor you. And I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people” (Lv 26:11–12). “This is my resting place forever; here I will dwell, for I have desired it” (Ps 132:14).

When God walks, dwells, and makes his resting place among his people, he comes with cherubim and his throne above them. God comes with his throne, that is, he comes to rule. God doesn’t come just to be with his people; he comes with his throne to reign among them. His permanent presence is tied to his throne and his reign.

When the Book of Isaiah talks about the good news or gospel, it says that following the construction of the new highway, God will come to rule. “Behold your God! Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm

rules for him" (Isa. 40:9-10). Jesus called the good news of the coming of God, "the kingdom of God". "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15).

Many New Testament scholars think the word "kingdom" (of God or heaven) translated from the original Greek *basileia* (Aramaic: *malkuth*) is misleading. John P. Meier<sup>52</sup> notes that the phrase is "*a vague and abstract-sounding locution that, if it conveys anything, conveys the idea of a set territory or realm over which God rules. Both connotations—abstractness and emphasis on territory—create a false impression.*" The kingdom of God is better understood as the rule and reign of God over his people and creation.

The rule of God is where all power is derived from God, analogous to a "perfect" democracy in which the people are understood to be the source of all state power. In a true democracy, the people exercise power indirectly through their representatives, whom they, at least in theory, can appoint and remove at will. Of course, this is not a perfect analogy as we are aware of the many flaws of democracies around the globe. Nonetheless, it illustrates the idea of being the source of power and exercising it through delegates. The rule of God is where God is the source of all power. He also rules indirectly through his appointees. God first appointed Adam and Eve to rule over the Earth (Gn 1:26–28). Later, he ruled over the people of Israel through judges and kings he appointed. It was because Israel was ruled by God that prophets (i.e., spokesmen of God) like Samuel could appoint and dismiss kings. Adam had to know that there were cherubim, the throne of God, in the Garden of Eden. Likewise, the kings of Israel had to understand that there was a throne of God in the temple alongside the throne in their palace. God is the one that granted the throne held by the kings since it is

God's kingdom, not theirs as King David correctly understood. "And of all my sons (for the Lord has given me many sons) he has chosen Solomon my son to sit on the *throne of the kingdom of the Lord* over Israel" (1 Chr 28:5).

Jerusalem had two palaces, one for God and one for the kings. Parallel to the palace of the kings, there was the temple, the palace of God, where God dwelled. "Thus Solomon finished the *house of the Lord* and *the king's house*. All that Solomon had planned to do in the *house of the Lord* and in *his own house* he successfully accomplished" (2 Chr 7:11). Moreover, alongside the throne of the kings, there was the throne of God, represented by the cherubim reminding the kings that this is the kingdom of God in which God is the source of all power. This is also true of the humble Messiah, who God told to sit at his right side, indicating that the Messiah sits next to God's throne on a throne prepared for him by God (Ps 110:1, Mk 12:35–36, Rv 3:21).

The one essential requirement for Adam and the rulers of Israel was their obedience to God, who sits on the throne and is the ultimate source of their authority. Both Adam and the rulers of Israel failed miserably. Finally, God sent the promised Messiah, who was "obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Phil 2:8). Even when faced with a horrible death on the cross, he put God's will before his own, saying: "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done" (Lk 22:42).

Thus, at the core of the kingdom of God, we find his presence and rule among his people. The stories of the Garden of Eden, Israel, and Pentecost show us that God rules his people while living and dwelling among them. In the story of creation in Genesis, God prepared a habitat not only for animals and humans but also for himself in the Garden of Eden, his temple.



Later, God came to Sinai to live among and rule over the people of Israel. After Jesus prepared the new highway and established a new temple that was not made by hand, God yet again came to dwell among his people. It is not a coincidence that the new Jerusalem is described as “the dwelling place of God is with man” because the final dwelling place of God is with his people. That is the essence of the kingdom of God. “And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God’” (Rv 21:2–3).

God, however, does not come just to live with his people. He comes with his throne! Besides his presence, his rule makes up the essence of the kingdom of God. God comes to rule! He comes not to fulfill our will but his will. When God comes, he brings his throne, that is, his kingdom/rule, with him to fulfill his will as we find in the Lord’s prayer. “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt 6:10). For there is no kingdom/rule of God without his throne and his presence among his people.

## The Essence of the Kingdom of God

Think back to the analogy we came across in the first chapter regarding learning about lakes—how one could learn everything about them yet overlook the most essential element: water. In a similar way, many discussions about the kingdom of God often miss what is most central, God and his presence. There is no kingdom of God without the presence of God, the *Kabod*.

From God's perspective, the kingdom of God is his people, a people who have become God's kin and have access to his presence through a covenant. Israel was called to be the kingdom of God if she kept the Mosaic covenant. God's people (both Jews and Gentiles), through the new covenant of Jesus, are now called the kingdom of God (Ex 19:5–6, 1 Pt 2:9, Rv 1:6, 5:10). God's people are God's final home, his dwelling place, his ruling domain, his kingdom. "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God" (Rv 21:3).

From the perspective of his people, the very essence of the kingdom of God is God's coming, living, and ruling among them. As previously mentioned, the entire tribe of Levi in Israel was set apart to protect the house of God from defilement, ensuring that God's presence would remain in the temple. The main responsibility of the Levites and priests was to prevent defilement of the temple and the land, and the Book of Leviticus is devoted to detailing how this was to be done in order to maintain the *Kabod*—God's presence—in the temple. The temple and the priesthood were at the core of Israel's religion and were considered the most important elements.

In the New Testament, receiving the Spirit of God is the promise that was made at the beginning by John the Baptist. "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom 14:17). The new covenant of Jesus gives us direct access to God through his Spirit (Eph 2:18). When Jesus spoke about God's Spirit and presence in his life and work, he said, "The kingdom of God is among you" (Lk 17:21 NRSVUE) and in another incident, Jesus associates the kingdom of God with the working of God's Spirit. "But if I cast out the demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Mt 12:28 NASB). God poured out his Spirit on the day of Pentecost and started to dwell in his new temple, the followers of Jesus. The kingdom of God for his people is having access to his presence and living under his rule. God is our home, as we are God's home. God living among us and becoming our shepherd is the kingdom of God. In Isaiah 40, we see what happens when God comes after the highway for him is prepared. "He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will

carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young” (Is 40:11).

As a shepherd lives among his flock, God also wants to live among his people. There is no shepherding from a distance. Starting from the Garden of Eden and later Israel and up to the new Jerusalem, God’s intention was always to live among his people and become their shepherd. But after Adam was expelled from the Garden of Eden and after God left the first temple, because Israel broke the covenant, a new highway, a new covenant, was needed so that God can yet again come and live among his people and become their shepherd. God dwelling among his people and becoming their shepherd is the kingdom of God. “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (Rv 21:3–4).

Hence, the real meaning of exile is exile from the presence of God. Just as humanity lost the access to the presence of God in the Garden of Eden and ended up confused at the Tower of Babel, Israel too lost the presence of God to be captive in Babylon weeping about Zion, the city of God, where God’s presence once used to dwell. “By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion” (Ps 137:1).

Yes, the people of Israel were missing their land, but the destruction of the temple and the loss of the *Kabod*, the presence of God, seemed to break their hearts the most. That is why they were weeping for Zion, Jerusalem, where the temple used to stand. They were weeping about the temple and the lost presence of God. That is true exile. As we have observed, their first

mission upon returning from Babylon was to rebuild the temple. Unfortunately, nothing could bring the presence of God back to the second temple and they remained in a true exile even after physically returning from Babylon. Returning to the land doesn't end exile. It is the return of God and his presence, the *Kabod*, to his people that heralds the end of exile. God is the final home and destiny of his people and his people are the final home of God.

As water is the most essential element of a lake, the presence of God is the essence of the kingdom of God. Adam and Eve had lost this direct access to God's presence in the Garden of Eden. The people of Israel had the presence of God among them in the temple, even though the access was not direct, since God's presence dwelled in the inner part of the temple, the Holy of Holies, where the people had no direct access. They too had lost the presence of God. It was only through the new covenant of Jesus that both Jews and Gentiles once again gained direct access to the Spirit and presence of God. "For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (Eph 2:18–19).

Entering the kingdom of God is having access to the Spirit and presence of God. It is getting a new citizenship and becoming part of the people of God, his kingdom. It is the end of exile and coming home, for God is our true home and we are his sanctuary. This new citizenship, however, didn't come lightly but had cost Jesus a heavy price. After Israel broke the old Mosaic covenant, and after even the second temple was defiled, there was nothing in the world that was worth a value that could buy the citizenship of the kingdom of God.

The issue is not just about getting forgiveness of sins. No, it is about entering the kingdom of God and having access to the presence of God. God is merciful and can forgive sins, as we already saw with the baptism of John the Baptist. All those who were baptized by John received the forgiveness of sins, but entering the kingdom of God, becoming a citizen, is a different matter. As the Roman official told Paul that he “bought this [Roman] citizenship for a large sum” (Acts 22:28), the citizenship of the kingdom of God must be first bought. However, there was nothing of value that could be used as a currency to buy it. Only the heavy price paid by Jesus on the cross is worthy enough in the sight of God to accept it as ransom money that is acceptable to purchase the citizenship of the kingdom of God.

As the Psalmist tells us, “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints” (Ps 116:15). God values the death of his son on the cross as the most precious item on earth that is acceptable to purchase the citizenship of the kingdom of God. The death of Jesus is the ransom money that can buy us out of exile into the kingdom of God. “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45).

The King of the Jews (Mk 15:25–26), the lion of the tribe of Judah and the root of David (Rv 5:5), who was expected to sit on David’s throne and rule, gave his life on the cross as a ransom for many. Jesus is the Messiah, the king of the kingdom of God. As God ruled in Israel by appointing judges and kings, God has appointed Jesus to be the king of the kingdom of God, a kingdom that was made possible by Jesus’s sacrifice. Therefore, anyone who wants to be part of the kingdom of God by purchasing its citizenship must accept Jesus as the Messiah, the king, and believe in him.

Jesus is the only one who has the ransom money that is acceptable and worthy enough in the sight of God to buy the citizenship of the kingdom of God. Allegiance to the king, Jesus, is the necessary precondition to be part of God's kingdom. The crucified king, who was humiliated and killed, is a stumbling block for many, but is God's precious currency and the ultimate solution for those who believe. Jesus is the wisdom of God with which he solved the problem of the exile of humanity from the presence of God. "For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1:22–24).

While the king on the cross looked like a failed Messiah, he in reality was paying the price, the only price worthy enough to be used as ransom money to purchase the citizenship of the kingdom of God. A ransom money that can buy out humanity from exile and captivity into the kingdom of God. "He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son" (Col 1:13). Hence, anyone who is in search of a fine pearl, that is, the kingdom of God, must accept the crucified Messiah as his king and lord. God rules his people through his appointed king, Jesus, and everybody must pay allegiance and bow to the king and confess him as Lord.

"...God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the

earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Phil 2:9–11).

Finally, those who repent, and accept Jesus, as the Messiah, are promised “the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38) to enable them to access and live in the presence of God. “And Peter said to them, ‘Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.’” (Acts 2:38–39). Receiving the Holy Spirit is real, yet most Christians are often unaware of its existence. Think about your African friend and his family, who struggled to imagine frozen rivers. It would be unwise for them to dismiss the concept of frozen rivers just because they have never seen one and cannot envision such a phenomenon. Despite their own reality suggesting otherwise, cold winters and frozen rivers do indeed exist. They are tangible realities, although from a foreign land!



## Endnotes

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29. Ibid., 86.
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