

Why Jesus cannot reign on the earth

© Evert van Voorthuizen, November 2024.

Email: preteristadvocate@gmail.com.

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Introduction

Premillennialists claim that Jesus will soon return to set up his millennial kingdom.

Apparently, the promised kingdom failed to be inaugurated with Jesus' first coming.

Only with his second coming will the kingdom be properly established.

Then we will see Old Testament kingdom prophecies fulfilled very literally:

The temple will be rebuilt and the priesthood reinstated; people will go to Jerusalem to worship the Lord and offer sacrifices and so forth.¹

Jesus' reign from Jerusalem will (supposedly) last for 1000 years before a final rebellion takes place.²

The notion of an earthly kingdom was the very error that first-century Jews clung to.

They longed for a kingdom like that of David and Solomon.

But Jesus utterly repudiated their carnal (worldly) aspirations.

Yet he did insist that the kingdom would come in their generation (Mt 4:17; Mk 9:1; Lk 21:31-32).

It cannot be emphasized enough that the kingdom is spiritual in nature — that it comes through the gospel as people willing submit to Jesus as Savior and Lord.

The world and its cultures are transformed through the gospel.

Jesus indeed reigns over the world, but not upon it.

Jesus is prohibited from reigning as king on earth

The promises that God made to David in 2 Samuel 7:11-16 had ultimate reference to one unique royal heir who would reign forever.

This fact becomes evident from consideration of subsequent promises, including the following:

Psalms 2, 72, 110; Isaiah 9:6-7; 11:1-5; Jeremiah 33:14-17; Ezekiel 37:24-25; Micah 5:2.

Now in order to reign eternally, this king must live forever; he will have to overcome death itself.

King Jehoiachin, also known as Coniah and Jeconiah, reigned in Jerusalem for just three months — from December 598 to March 597 BC. During those months the Babylonian army was besieging the city.

¹ The following passages are adduced in support: Isaiah 2:3; 56:7; Jeremiah 33:15-18; Ezekiel chaps. 40 – 46; Zechariah 14:16.

² The (supposed) 1000-year period is based on a literal interpretation of Revelation 20:1-10.

Recorded for us in the 22nd chapter of Jeremiah is a word of judgment against King Jehoiachin (22:24-30):
Not only would he be permanently exiled in Babylon, but he would also be “childless” (22:30).
Not literally childless, for Jehoiachin had seven sons (1Chr 3:17-18).
But rather the fact that none of his descendants would ever sit on David’s throne or rule again in Judah.

Yet despite this curse, the very next chapter of Jeremiah foretells the coming of a king from David’s line who will reign over the restored nation — over Judah and Israel together (Jer 23:5-6).
(These promises are reiterated and enlarged upon in Jeremiah 33:14-26.)
So, how might this contradiction be resolved?

After forcing Jehoiachin into exile in Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar placed his uncle Zedekiah on the throne.
King Zedekiah ruled in Jerusalem for 11 years until the city’s destruction by the Babylonian army in 586 BC.
Zedekiah’s rule clearly did not violate the divine curse on Jehoiachin.

Following the Babylonian exile, no king from David’s line ever again reigned in Jerusalem, thereby fulfilling Jeremiah’s prophecy to the letter.³
However, Jehoiachin’s grandson, Zerubbabel, served as the Persian governor of Judah around 520 BC (Hag 1:1).
Though not actually king, he was the Davidic heir through whom God’s purposes would be accomplished.
Along with the high priest Joshua, Zerubbabel was tasked with rebuilding the temple (Hag 1:14; Zec 4:6-9).
God further chose Zerubbabel as his new “signet ring” in place of his discarded grandfather, thereby marking him out as possessing special honor and royal authority (Hag 2:23; cf. Jer 22:24-30).⁴
Through him Davidic kingship would be finally restored!

The curse on Jehoiachin does mean, however, that the promised king cannot reign on the earth.
But the Old Testament itself hints at where this king would rule from:
He would rule from God’s right hand in heaven (Ps 110:1; Dan 7:13-14).
In other words, from the heavenly Jerusalem (Ps 110:2; cf. 2:6).

Jesus was a descendant of both King Jehoiachin and governor Zerubbabel (Mt 1:11-16; Lk 3:27).
He is the promised King who reigns over God’s people.
Gabriel at the Annunciation declared (Luke 1:32-33):

³² *“... And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David,*
³³ *and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”*

Nevertheless, the curse placed on Jehoiachin precludes Jesus from reigning as king on earth.

³ The Hasmonean leaders (ethnarchs and kings) who ruled Judea from ca. 142 to 37 BC, many of whom also served concurrently as the Jewish high priest, were not descendants of King David, nor were they even from the tribe of Judah.

⁴ A signet ring was worn by the king’s representative who exercised his royal authority. Used to stamp documents, it marked them as authentic and authoritative (Gen 41:42; Est 8:8). It could further serve as a pledge or guarantee of full payment.

Jesus is also prohibited from serving as a high priest on earth

Along with his royal authority, the Old Testament also anticipates Messiah's priestly role.

Both sacred offices would be combined in one Person. See Psalm 110:1-4; Zechariah 6:11-13.

However, Jesus' origination from the tribe of Judah (rather than Levi) prohibits him from fulfilling this role on earth (Heb 7:13-17; 8:1-4).

King David evidently appreciated the fact that if his royal heir were to serve also as a priest, he must belong to an entirely different order from that of Levi. An order based on Melchizedek (Ps 110:4) — David's predecessor in Jerusalem a millennium earlier (Gen 14:18).

(Psalm 110's superscription attributes authorship to David.)

As for his role as king, so also it is only from heaven that Messiah can serve as our high priest.

It is from the right hand of the Father that Jesus intercedes for his people (Rom 8:34; Heb 7:25; 1Jn 2:1).

If ever Jesus returned to reign on earth, as many Christians believe, he would be unable to continue in his capacity as our high priest. His interceding role before the Father would cease.

Nor would people be able to pray to him. Rather, they would have to travel to Jerusalem and stand in a queue for long hours in order to talk to and plead their case with him.

But thankfully, the truth is much better:

God's kingdom has indeed come — his eternal kingdom promised in the Old Testament.

Of this kingdom Jesus is (and will remain) the king-priest "forever" (Ps 110:1-4; Heb 6:20; 7:21, 24).

And since he is king forever (Ps 72:5; Isa 9:7; Dan 7:14; Lk 1:33; Rev 11:15), the world itself must continue on, if not literally forever, certainly for a very long time.

Sinners (on earth) will always need a priestly mediator to intercede for them (Heb 7:25).

Conclusion

Jesus can be neither king nor priest on earth.

But he presently serves in both capacities at the Father's right hand in heaven, as Psalm 110 makes clear.

And he will continue to do so "forever" (Ps 110:4).⁵

The promise of lasting kingship and an eternal priesthood in Jeremiah 33:14-26 is fulfilled not in some future millennial kingdom, but in Jesus' ongoing heavenly reign over, and intercession on behalf of, his people.

⁵ It's not for nothing that Psalm 110 is the Old Testament passage most frequently cited by the New Testament writers.

For they were convinced that Psalm 110:1 was fulfilled in Jesus' ascension.

See Matthew 26:64; Mark 16:19; Acts 2:33-34; 5:31; 7:55-56; Romans 8:34; 1 Corinthians 15:25; Ephesians 1:20; Colossians 3:1; Hebrews 1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; 1 Peter 3:22; cf. Revelation 3:21; 22:1, 3.