

THE THREE TENSES IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD: GOD OF ISRAEL OR OF THE WORLD

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The passage in *Pesukei de-Zimra* section of the morning prayer service which begins *Yehi Khevod* consists of various verses from different books of the Bible. However, one verse is actually a composite of three biblical verses rather than a complete verse in itself: *Ha-Shem melekh* (Ps. 10:16), *Ha-Shem malakh* (Ps. 93:1), and *Ha-Shem yimlokh le-olam va'ed* (Ex. 15:18): "God reigns, God has reigned, God shall reign for all eternity." This passage is one of the most familiar in the entire liturgy, but, surprisingly enough, it is not found as a complete verse in Scripture. Rather, each phrase comes from a different part of the Bible. In combination, the three phrases express the eternity of God's reign.¹

Two questions arise: When Scripture uses past, present, and future with regard to God, does the choice of tense have any particular theological meaning? Or do we have here representation of different aspects and variant temporal reflections in relation to a concept of similar eschatological connotation embodied in the well-known phrase, the *Kingdom of God*? It should be noted that this phrase is not found in the Tanakh but is derived from statements in the Writings and Prophets; for example, *And the Lord shall be King over all the earth and in that day there shall be one Lord with one name* (Zech. 14:9).

There is a great contrast between the prominence of the Kingdom of God in the Prophets and Writings on the one hand, and the paucity, indeed almost total absence, of the concept in the Torah. The Torah had already established God as the eternal ruler when Moses and the children of Israel sang the verse *Ha-Shem yimlokh le-olam va'ed – The Lord will reign forever and ever* (Ex. 15:18) as the sudden, incidental conclusion at the Song at the Sea. This verse is the single expression in all of the Torah – abbreviated, at that – as to the vision of His eternalness.

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Though eschatological, it seems to celebrate a single set of His miracles on behalf of a single nation. It follows upon the verse: *You [God] will bring them [the people] and plant them upon the mountain of Your inheritance, Your established residence which You have formed, O Lord, a Sanctuary O Lord, that Your hands have set up* (Ex. 15:17). Is this the *Kingdom of God*? Has God decided to narrow Himself, at best, to the national kingdom of Israel, over which He will rule forever from His Sanctuary, His residence, His mountain? Or does the verse prophesy by implication a Kingdom that covers His creation, the entire earth? The word *le-olam* [forever and ever] in Exodus 15:18, seems to refer not to the entire world, but to eternal time.

In his book on Moses, Martin Buber reinforces the translation that the Lord will reign in Time and Eternity. He goes on to interpret this Kingship, not in terms of the world, but in terms of Israel. "Whoever recognizes the one effective power on every given occasion, must desire that the whole life of the community should be made subject to that power." "The life of the community" obviously refers to Israel, who had just been saved by a God whom Moses wished to be King over the people He had saved. Buber continues on the theme of the Kingdom of God in the context of the Song at the Sea, and in the context of kingship over Israel:

The *melekh* [King] proclamation stands with full meaning at the close of the hymn which deals with the miracle on the sea. Under the echo of this miracle the children of Israel [just now rescued after 200 + years from a polytheistic Egypt] learned that they had a God Who, alone among all the protective gods of the peoples, could really perform miracles. Whereas all the neighbors, who had no such lords and leaders, are gripped with fear when He acts, so Israel renders homage to Him as being the One to whom alone Kingship is due.²

Also, in Moshe Greenberg's abridgement of Yehezkel Kaufmann's *Religion of Israel*, we are given a national interpretation of the Kingship verse:

The desire of the tribes to return to Canaan . . . was at bottom an ethnic-political one . . . Possession of the land is the earliest eschatological motif of Israelite religion . . . the land is the sanctuary of God, His dwelling place on earth (Ex. 15:17).³

Emphasizing the lack of universalism in the Torah in the idea of the Kingdom of God, Kaufmann says: "There is a promise of kingship But this is the limit of the Torah's historical horizon."⁴ The Torah speaks of Israel being a *Mamlekheth Kohanim* [kingdom of priests] (Ex. 19:6), and also of the setting up of a king, (Deut. 17:15), but it does not extend the concept of the Kingdom of God beyond His Kingship over Israel.

These modern scholars were preceded by some of the traditional commentators on Torah. Rashi on Exodus 15:17 may be understood as limiting the Kingdom of God to the rebuilt Temple in Israel:

The Temple is beloved, for the world was created by the one hand, as it is said: *My Hand has founded the earth* (Isa. 48:13). But the Temple is made with two hands. And when will it be built with two hands? In the time when the Lord will reign forever, in the future, when all Kingship will belong to Him.

Similarly, in the commentary of Abarbanel on Exodus 15:17 we find: "In that place, the Lord will reign forever, for always will His Kingship be over His people in that Holy place."

However, other traditional sources prefer to see in Exodus 15:18 more than God's Kingship over Israel alone. Thus in *Yalkut Me-am Lo'ez* on Exodus we find:

After Israel witnessed the miracles wrought for them by God . . . they said one to another: "Come, let us place a crown of beauty upon the head of our savior and patron, who removes kings from their thrones, but He cannot be removed, for He is the King of Kings of Kings [*Melekh Malkhei Ha-melakhim*]. So is He in this world and He will be the Only One in the coming world and for eternity."⁵

Likewise Rashbam, of the *peshat* [literal] school of interpretation, is able to go beyond the boundaries of Israel for the Kingship of God: "After you are settled in the land of Israel, His Kingdom will be known in all the kingdoms." Sforno sees here a vision of God being the only God. "May it be the [Divine] Will, that He alone will reign forever, and no strange god will be with Him."⁶

Ramban, too, takes the universal vision:

It has been shown that He is King and ruler over all, for He helped His servants and destroyed those who rebelled against Him. So may it be the Will before Him, to do the same in all the generations for-

ever. May the righteous always be visible to Him, and may He be aware of the wicked who do evil.

Thus, Ramban, like the other traditional commentators, connects the geo-theological universal extent of the Torah Kingdom of God with the visions of the prophetic and hagiographic Kingdom of God which foretold the eternal extent of His Lordship. Ramban quotes three verses to establish this connection, *May the Lord reign forever, your God, O Zion, from generation to generation* (Ps. 146:10), *May the Name of the Lord be blessed from now and forever* (Ps. 113:2),
And the Lord will King over all the earth (Zech. 14:9).

Keli Yakar (Ex. 15:18) joins the others in seeing the Kingdom in the future for Israel and for the entire world:

Pharaoh had questioned the Kingdom of the Almighty when he said, *Who is the Lord?* (Ex. 5:3). If God had not performed judgments against Pharaoh [opines the Keli Yakar], we could fear that in future generations there would arise rebellious sons and deny His Kingdom. But now that judgment was performed against Pharaoh, there will never be any to question and undermine the Kingdom of the Almighty . . . for the entire world will see what happened to the horses of Pharaoh, his chariots and riders in the Sea . . . and since then it will not occur to anyone to throw arrogance upwards.

The Midrash also associates the Kingdom of God in Torah with the Kingdom of God in the Prophets. *Midrash Hasefer ve-Yeter* asks why the word *yimlokh* is written in the text of Exodus 15:18 without a letter *vav*. Since it refers to the Kingdom of God, should not it be written with a complete spelling?

Is it possible that the Kingdom of God is not complete? But as long as the seed of Esau are in the world, and they take upon themselves the reign of idolatry, it is as if His Kingdom is not complete. When will it be complete? When God will perform judgment upon them, as it is said: *The saviors will come up to Mount Zion to judge Mount Seir and the Kingship will belong to the Lord* (Obad. 1:21).

Similarly, Rabbi Eleazar of Worms, in his commentary on the prayer book, sees a clear indication that the future spoken of in the single Torah reference to the Kingship of God is to be understood as speaking also of universal Divine Lordship: "Because Moses said at the end of his Song, *The Lord will*

reign forever and ever – when? When the nations will fall, then He will reign."⁸

Finally, several sources go back to the relationship of Creation to the time elements in the Kingship of God. In *Sefer Abudarham: Seder Tefillat Rosh Hashanah*, we find specific reference to the triple-tensed version of the Kingship of God: "We praise God for He knows the past, the present and the future," similar to the passage *The Lord rules, The Lord ruled, The Lord will rule*. Abudarham adds in His praise and says:

It is not necessary that it is revealed before Him, who is today in the belly of his mother, as we said, but also those destined to be created in the future, until the end of the world, and are not yet in the bellies of their mothers; He knows All for He looks and sees till the end of all generations.

ADDENDUM

Parallels to *Melekh, Malakh, Yimlokh* are found in Rambam's "Thirteen Articles of Faith," Article 2: *Hayah Hoveh ve-Yiheyeh* [He was, He is, He will be] and Article 1: *Asah, ve-Oseh, ve-Ya'aseh* [He created, He creates, He will create]. The "Kingship" trio in *Yehi Khevod* sets the order of the tenses as: present, past, future. In the "Being" trio, the order is: past, present, future. So, too, in the "Creation" trio. We have discussed above the implications of the Kingship triple expression. However, I have not found any Scriptural basis for Rambam's variation in the "Being" trio, and only one reference to the "Creation" trio, in the book of Responsa, *Afarkesa de-Anya*, vol. 4.⁹

It is the Lord, the Creator, who leads all creatures, has done, does, and will do, or made, makes, will make, all the doings or creatures. In any and all cases inspired by any or all of the parallels, "It is wonderful in our eyes."

NOTES

1. *ArtScroll Siddur*, (Brooklyn NY: Mesorah Publications) p. 66.
2. Martin Buber, *Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant* (New York: Humanity Books, 1988) p. 73.
3. Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel from Its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, trans. and abridged Moshe Greenberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 241.
4. *Ibid.* p. 203.
5. *Yalkut Me-Am Lo'ez*, Exodus Vol. 1, p. 355.

6. The rationalist Ibn Ezra may also agree with the universal interpretation, depending on whether *eretz* is understood to mean the whole world, or just the Land of Israel: "When the Temple will be built for Him, then His Kingdom will be revealed in the world (*ba-aretz*)."

7. *Midrash Haser ve-Yeter*, in *Otzar Midrashim*, ed. J.D.Eisenstein (New York: Noble Offset Printers, 1915) p. 196.

8. *Peirushei Siddur ha-Tefillah la-Roke'ah*, ed. Moshe Hershler and Yehudah Hershler (Jerusalem: Makhon ha-Rav Hershler, 1992) section 107, p.600.

9. *Responsa, Afarkesa de-Anya*, vol. 4, various subjects, 381.



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