RESPONSE TO BAKKER

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Introduction

I am grateful for the privilege of participating in this symposium and for the opportunity to respond to such a substantive and thought-provoking paper. As a white male who was raised and educated in evangelical spaces in the American south and is still connected to many family members and friends from that world, I regard Dr. Bakker's critique as fair and accurate throughout. Numerous times I reacted to one of her insights by writing "yes!" in the margin of her manuscript, though I must admit that my more consistent reaction while reading was one of depressed resignation. The polarization she identifies is as depressing as its underlying motivations are pernicious. Systemic racism—which, by definition, is discrimination embedded within our systems, laws, and institutions—has enabled a number of identifiable phenomena here in the United States. First, it has allowed for unwitting participation in discriminatory acts by a populace that is largely oblivious. Second, it has further relegated those who are already on the margins, and in a way that renders its mechanisms for marginalization nearly invisible. Third, it has engendered a debate among Americans as to what constitutes racism and activated a uniquely American mantra which objects by proclaiming, "I'm not racist." Considering the *subtle* ways racism can be enacted in our culture, it is jarring then to see how *openly racist* and how *unapologetically rooted in white supremacy* significant pockets of American evangelicalism have become in the Trump era. Dr. Bakker gets at the heart of why the so-called "culture wars" have become the perfect vehicle for ushering in such an era and how it is possible for those who profess to be followers of Jesus to fall under the spell of those who look and sound nothing like him. In what follows, I want to amplify a few insights from Dr. Bakker's paper, while also offering a brief critique of her treatment of the *basileia tou theou* ("kingdom of God").

America, the New Israel?

First, in the section of her paper entitled, "Not Your Parents' Culture Wars," Dr. Bakker does an admirable job of situating our current political crises in their immediate and proximate historical contexts. However, I wonder if we might also extend our reflections on this problem to a period a bit earlier in the American experiment. In particular, I am led to reflect on the idea of our "Manifest Destiny," and its rootedness in the assertion that America is somehow the new Israel, or God's new chosen nation.[1] Manifest Destiny is that doctrine that promoted the inevitability of westward expansion accompanied by the belief that this dominion/domination had been prepared or even ordained by God. The belief that America was a new Israel was foundational to early American expansion and there is no doubt that this sort of rhetoric continues today, even if only under the surface. Further, this mentality is largely unquestioned within some displays of American civil religion. To have this confirmed, one need only attend church service on a July Fourth Sunday, hear the pastor speak of "praying for *our* troops," (as if the church had troops) and then witness the congregation launch into a rousing rendition of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic"—a hymn which boldly proclaims God's goodness in "civilizing the savages" as we march ever westward:

> Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord
> He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored
> He hath loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword
> His truth is marching on.

As an aside, I submit that if these words were attributed to a national hymn written within an Islamic context, they might quickly be denounced and likely even labeled as Jihadist by many here in the United States.

As a New Testament scholar who reflects often on Israel and its centuries-long history of subjugation, it is hard for me to deny that the United States has historically behaved much more like Rome during the time of Jesus and Paul, or Babylon under the reign of Nebuchadnezzar II.[2] America is not now, nor has it ever been

1. "The belief that America has been providentially chosen for a special destiny has deep roots in the American past, and it is a belief that still finds expression in our so-called 'secular age.' It has resided at the heart of the attempt by Americans to understand their nation's responsibility at home and abroad. It is a conviction that has manifested itself most vividly in occasions of public worship when American citizens have met to share common religious sentiments," see "Introduction," in *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny*, ed. Conrad Cherry (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998) 1.

2. After the northern kingdom (Israel) was overtaken by Assyria in 722 BCE, the southern kingdom (Judah) was conquered by Babylon in 605 BCE. Babylonian rule (605–539 BCE) gave way to Persian rule (539–331) which then gave way to Hellenistic rule (331–143 BCE). The Maccabean revolt

God's new Israel.[3] However, as long as American Christians (in general) and white evangelicals (in particular) are tempted to see themselves as the recipients of God's holy promises and as the object of God's divine affection, they will have little problem advancing their own ends in the political realm. I am convinced that this way of thinking—which is deeply embedded in the American psyche at both the secular and sacred levels—needs to be challenged every bit as much as some of the more recent political motivations Dr. Bakker identifies.

She closes this section of her paper by noting: "While white Christian nationalists seek to promote *their vision* of the social order in both the church and state, their agenda is principally political (emphasis added)." All this leads me to wonder: How much of this *vision* is determined by a desire to adhere to things Jesus is known for saying and how much of it is driven simply by the desire for power and influence? If one of the primary goals of the "culture wars" is to gain control of our narratives and our civic institutions, then evangelical zeal to win these wars is simply misplaced. If we examine the pursuit of power and influence through New Testament lenses, we will undoubtedly discover that its teachings are at odds with the aims of many white American evangelicals.[4]

The "Kingdom" through Various Lenses

The final section of Dr. Bakker's paper is entitled, "The *Basileia tou theou* as a Vision for Christian Public Engagement." Here she discusses New Testament language related to the "kingdom of God" and examines its implications for how the church should function in the world. Since her reading of the kingdom is an attempt to challenge the egregious misreading of New Testament kingdom language on the part of influential public figures such as Senator Josh Hawley and others, it seems prudent to spend a little time here. While surveying a handful of gospel quotations attributed to Jesus, Dr. Bakker emphasizes the centrality of the ethic we see repeated throughout the Hebrew Bible, and manifested in depictions of Jesus's ministry in the New Testament: caring for the poor, the widow, the stranger, and the outcast, and

resulted in an 80-year period of "home rule," where the Judeans had religious and political autonomy for the first time in nearly six centuries (143–63 BCE). However, in 63 BCE, the Roman general Pompey sieged Jerusalem during his eastward military campaigns, and this resulted in Roman rule over Palestine, which lasted until 192 CE. If we are going to think honestly about Israel's historical legacy, it is mostly one of being dominated, and only rarely one of exerting power over others.

3. At one level, the idea that America is the new Israel seems rooted in supersessionism, but it also makes evangelical support for the modern state of Israel seem quite ironic.

4. In John 18:36, Jesus himself acknowledges: "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my followers would be fighting so that I might not be handed over . . . But as it is, my kingdom is not from here" (author's translation).

protecting the dignity of all people.[5] She notes, "Appearing more than 100 times in the Gospel accounts, usually in the words of Jesus, the *basileia tou theou* refers to the domain of God's love and justice." Like many theologians and ethicists I have read on the subject, Dr. Bakker treats these texts, at least in places, as if they speak with univocality on the kingdom of God, but the truth is a bit more complicated than that. To be sure, there are areas of overlap, but each gospel also has its own distinctive take on the kingdom.

Scholars largely agree that the kingdom of God was central to Jesus's teaching and is one of the more historically secure elements of his ministry.[6] However, they are also careful to note that these texts are not in complete agreement with one another about the nature of the kingdom. Jesus never offers a definition or explanation of his particular understanding of the kingdom of God in any gospel text, and as a concept, it appears to be quite malleable. When we speak of the kingdom, are we looking forward to something concrete that will emerge in a future eschatological moment? Or is the kingdom here, right now? Should we think of the kingdom as a realm or domain in which to enter? Or should we think of something that resides within us? Is the kingdom a mindset, or an ethical agenda? If we consider the words of Jesus in the various gospel narratives, each one of these seems to be a possibility.

Let us first consider the Gospel of Mark, which likely emerged around the year 70 CE, just after the destruction of the Second Temple. The "kingdom of God" in the preaching and ministry of Mark's Jesus differs significantly from notions of the kingdom present elsewhere within Second Temple Judaism. The picture here is not of the establishment of an actual, literal kingdom where God rules as king on earth and subjugates all enemies under his feet. Rather, the "kingdom" or "reign" of God in the Gospel of Mark is more akin to the in-breaking rule of God in the here-and-now.[7] In the early chapters, Jesus preaches, heals, and casts out unclean spirits (e.g., 1:21–45; 2:1–12; 3:1–11, among others). By means of these paradigmatic behaviors,[8] God's reign enters the human realm decisively and with immediacy. This is likely

5. Since many theologians and ethicists look to Matthew 5–7, the "Sermon on the Mount," as a basis for determining an ethics of Jesus, it was surprising to me that of the nineteen biblical texts cited in Dr. Bakker's paper, only one of them (Matthew 6:10) is from that discourse.

6. On this claim, see John Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol 2., Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1994) 237–43.

7. In Mark 1:15, Jesus proclaims that the kingdom of God is "at hand" (Greek: *ēggiken*). Adela Yarbro Collins notes that this verse, "implies that the prophecies of scripture and the hopes of the people are in the process of being fulfilled" (*Mark: A Commentary*, Hermeneia [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007] 154).

8. These specific behaviors—proclaiming, healing, and casting out unclean spirits—not only define Jesus's ministry in the early chapters, but these are the very acts for which he commissions (3:13–15) and sends out (6:7–13) his disciples.

one reason for Mark's continued use of the term "immediately," especially throughout the early chapters of the gospel.[9]

We do not have space here to rehearse the distinctive features of each gospel's take on the kingdom, but a few cursory comments are in order. First, except for four instances,[10] Matthew's Gospel (ca. 75–80 CE) famously prefers the more mysterious, and potentially more confusing phrase, "kingdom of heaven."[11] When I survey students in my own classes, the vast majority indicate that they think immediately of "heaven" when they hear the term "kingdom" used in a Christian context. I suspect that Matthew's Gospel is at least one reason for this. Noting that Matthew's differences from the other two Synoptics extend beyond simply the choice to substitute "heaven" for "God" in this critical phrase, Jonathan Pennington writes:

> The answer is found in recognizing that Matthew's "kingdom of heaven" language is but one part of an elaborate theme of "heaven and earth" woven all throughout the First Gospel. Recognizing this theme sheds light on Matthew's choice to speak of the kingdom in this unique way, and it also reveals a deep and powerful theological point—the apocalyptic and eschatological contrast between heaven and earth.[12]

While Matthew's presentation of the kingdom is similar to Mark in some ways, he also departs from Mark in other significant ways.

Luke's Gospel (ca. 80–85 CE), while overlapping with the other two Synoptics and clearly reliant on Mark for both structure and content, includes a passage elsewhere unattested in the New Testament, where Jesus proclaims: "the *kingdom of God is within you*" (Luke 17:21, my translation). While this is only one part of Luke's larger presentation of the kingdom, it is certainly noteworthy for its difference.[13] Finally, the Gospel of John (ca. 95–100 CE), easily our most enigmatic gospel narrative, differs markedly from the other three. The phrase, "kingdom of God" appears

9. The Greek term *euthus* ("immediately," "at once") appears in all but three chapters of Mark's gospel, with its strongest concentration in chapters 1 and 4—both of which feature a great deal of ministerial activity. See 1:10, 12, 18, 20, 21, 23, 28, 29, 30, 42, 43; 2:8, 12; 3:6; 4:5, 15, 16, 17, 29; 5:2, 29, 30, 42; 6:25, 27, 45, 50, 54; 7:25; 8:10; 9:15, 20, 24; 10:52; 11:2, 3; 14:43, 45, 72; 15:1.

10. The phrase, "kingdom of God" appears in Matt 12:28; 19:24; 21:31, 43. Otherwise, Matthew prefers "kingdom of heaven."

11. Scholars recognize that this is a Semitism but debate whether there is a qualitative difference between the phrases "kingdom of God" and the "kingdom of heaven" in Matthew's understanding. For an authoritative treatment of why Matthew prefers this title, see Jonathan Pennington, *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew,* NovTSup 126 (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

12. Jonathan Pennington, "The Kingdom of Heaven in the Gospel of Matthew," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 12.1 (2008) 46.

13. For a full treatment of the theme in Luke's Gospel, see Karl Allen Kuhn, *The Kingdom according to Luke and Acts: A Social, Literary, and Theological Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015).

only two times in the entire text—both in the infamous conversation with Nicodemus (John 3:3, 5), and both appear to suggest that the kingdom is a realm or sphere to be entered, not unlike heaven. In fact, there does not appear to be any ethical element to the kingdom of God in the Fourth Gospel whatsoever.[14] Noting these minor differences is only scratching the surface of a much larger discussion, though these differences should suffice to demonstrate that the presentation of the "kingdom" across the four canonical gospels is complex and variegated and should be handled with care.

Conclusion

Dr. Bakker has helpfully highlighted some of the important political motivations of contemporary white evangelicals. She has also identified some contours of the various NT presentations of the *basileia tou theou*, though I believe there is still room for additional nuance on this question. Against that backdrop, I would like to conclude by calling for each of us to engage the biblical text with greater care on issues of politics and kingdom. I am convinced that an approach to Bible reading that lacks nuance is one of the factors contributing to the political and religious polarization Dr. Bakker has so ably described in her paper.

14. In addition to the question of the role of the "kingdom" in John, scholars have long debated the very presence of ethics in the Fourth Gospel. On this question, see the various chapters in Sherri Brown and Christopher W. Skinner, eds., *Johannine Ethics: The Moral World of the Gospel and Epistles of John* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017).