

A Response to
*“The Postponement of the New Exodus Theory in Non-
Dispensational Hermeneutics”*

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First, I want to say that I have genuine admiration and appreciation for Dr. Cushman; his humble demeanor and gracious spirit are not only exemplary, but crucial to my survival as his employee.

Second, I do not come to this issue with what I would consider any professional degree of expertise; I know what I believe (for the most part) and why (for the most part). And I am confessedly interested in issues related to prophecy. That’s about all the qualification I have for this response. So for the sake of clarity and full disclosure, I wish to define my own position as precisely as I can: I am a non-postponement, not-quite-progressive, but not-really-traditional, new-covenant-inaugurated, small-d dispensational, capital-p Premillennialist. Make of that what you will, just so you know the perspective from which my observations are coming.

Before I begin a running interaction with a few specific points throughout the paper, let me offer some notes of appreciation and agreement.

Dr. Cushman has done an excellent job clarifying both the language and the concept behind what is commonly called the postponement theory, and correcting misconceptions connected to those terms and concepts. This paper is a sound reminder of the inaccurate oversimplification to which some views are reduced, and the abuse to which certain labels are often unjustly subjected.

Dr. Cushman also models an appropriate demeanor for theological engagement. I mentioned the tendency to oversimplify and abuse views with which we disagree. That, of course, is a two-way street, and the golden rule applies as much to theological dialogue as it does to personal relationships. Dr. Cushman reflects that commitment.

A third point of agreement I will save for my conclusion. Now for some points of engagement. Dr. Cushman writes early on,

Traditional dispensationalists . . . agree that there must be an offer, a rejection, and a postponement of the kingdom to the Jewish people.

This raises one of my central questions—and perhaps it is too big to discuss within the parameters specified for this paper—namely, why? Why “must” there be an offer

of the kingdom? Moreover, the very language of an “offer” of the kingdom strikes me as incongruous, even self-contradictory. Kingdoms, by definition, are not “offered” (a word that appears 47x in the paper); a sovereign does not tentatively suggest the possibility that he would be willing to reign if it is okay with the subjects. (I am reminded of a bumper sticker that I have seen that reads, “Elect Jesus King of your life.”) People don’t elect kings; they submit to them, or don’t and face the consequences.

This seems clear not only experientially and definitionally, but scripturally as well. Jesus told a parable of a man who “went to a far country to receive a kingdom for himself, and to return” (Lk. 19:12), but “his citizens hated him, and sent a delegation after him, saying, ‘We will not have this man to reign over us’” (Lk. 19:14). When he returned to rule, he did not offer his kingdom; he established it, adding “bring here those enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, and slay *them* before me” (Lk 19:27). If Jesus will do that at his second coming, one wonders why he wouldn’t have done it at his first coming if, in fact, it was his intention. Kings conquer, claim, and establish their dominion; they don’t offer. But perhaps this is more attributable to a weakness of terminology.

Regarding Stanley Toussaint’s collection of examples of postponement, it occurs to me that proving that postponement is an actual phenomenon in Scripture (which is certainly not difficult) seems to me to fall far short of proving an “offer, rejection, postponement” scenario of the kingdom. Dr. Cushman summarizes Toussaint’s argument as follows:

if these examples are frequent enough in scripture, then the case for interpreting the Gospel writers’ offer of the kingdom to Israel as a genuine offer that was rejected and thereby postponed would be strengthened.

This seems to me to be a (probably unintentional) form of begging the question, by assuming that there is an “offer of the kingdom” in the Gospels that must be interpreted somehow. The question at issue is, *do* the Gospel writers, in fact, “offer the kingdom to Israel”?

Regarding the argument about Moses’ death, I was confused. Dr. Cushman writes,

One might ask, if Israel had believed the Lord, and had entered the promised-land at that point, how would Moses have died? ... For since Israel rejected God’s offer of the land, its inheritance was postponed, and Moses was forced to face a situation in which he failed to treat Yahweh as holy (Num 20:13).

Israel’s unbelieving failure to enter the land is recorded in Num. 13-14. God’s decision that Moses would not enter the land comes 39 years later in Num. 20,

during Israel's wandering *because* of their unbelief. So, "if Israel had believed the Lord and had entered the promised-land at that point," the timing of Moses' death would never even have been an issue. Under those circumstances, "speculation on the timing of Moses' death would be" not merely "pointless" (as Dr. Cushman notes) but irrelevant to the issue at hand. But perhaps I'm missing something in the argument.

That leads Dr. Cushman to draw a comparison:

Likewise, traditional dispensationalists believe that it is pointless to raise questions about the death of Messiah had national Israel repented and accepted Jesus at his first advent.

As Dr. Cushman observes, the Messiah's death was soteriologically necessary and prophesied; it would have happened. The difficulty, however, lies in the fact that the Messiah had to die *by the hand of the Jews* (e.g., Zech. 12:10, *then they will look on me whom they have pierced*; cf. Jn. 19:37, Rev. 1:7). What seems challenging to envision or explain is not just how or when Jesus would have died, but how the *Jews* would have crucified him in the wake of a national repentance and acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah at his first advent. Granted, potential scenarios might be devised; but prophetic scripture requires that any such scenario must meet the criterion of a death at the hands of (at least) the house of David and the house of Jerusalem (the minimal antecedents to the "they" in Zech. 12:10).

I'll also pause here to note that I disagree with Kaiser (fn 10) that this issue of the death of Christ is the major obstacle to the postponement theory. The larger obstacle, it seems to me, is the lack of a compelling case from either prophecy or from the Gospels that an offer of the kingdom must (have) be(en) made.

Dr. Cushman cites

... Jesus' offer of the kingdom at the beginning of his ministry. Mark writes, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). In this announcement Jesus does not offer individual salvation or even a spiritual kingdom; he does not announce the beginning of the church. The offer that Jesus presents is the inauguration of the Jewish earthly kingdom with the Messiah as its king.

I have always been intrigued by the fact that the chronologically earliest reference to the kingdom by Jesus is not in Mark 1:15, but in John 3. The first time Jesus ever talked about the kingdom of God to anyone, he made regeneration the prerequisite for entrance into this kingdom. Might that suggest that the kingdom Jesus was presenting was, *from the very beginning*, not the "offer" of the Jewish kingdom but the establishment of spiritual qualifications for admission into a spiritual kingdom?

In the second half of the paper regarding non-dispensational schemes that include some form of postponement, Dr. Cushman cites the proliferation of “‘already/not yet’ schemes in biblical studies.” If I am following the argument correctly, he seems to be equating or at least comparing an “already/not yet” conception with the dispensational idea of kingdom postponement. To me, the two seem very different. The whole point of postponement, as I understand it, is that there is no “already” in place. The kingdom is not “already” because it was rejected and therefore postponed/withdrawn. But again, perhaps I am missing the intended correlation.

After exploring several non-dispensational New Exodus theologies, Dr. Cushman concludes,

I have endeavored in this paper to show how non-dispensationalists interpret postponement language related to the kingdom’s delay. . . . Finally, this paper has presented clear examples [in] which non-dispensationalists tend to agree that there is an offer from God, a rejection by his people, and then an interval between its offer and its fulfillment.

Again, as with my earlier point that examples of postponement in the OT don’t necessarily parallel a *kingdom* postponement in the NT, there seems to be a qualitative difference here: these were *exodus* offers, not *kingdom* offers. Not all offers—and therefore not all postponements—are equal. Dr. Cushman continues,

Furthermore, the New Exodus approaches . . . indicate that arguments that support various non-dispensational hermeneutical frameworks contain elements of prophetic delay, yet no critique on this point occurs in scholarly literature.

That gives me the opportunity to end my response on a note of agreement. The lack of critique that he notes on this point demonstrates, in my opinion, a significant inconsistency when it comes to covenant theological arguments that insist that virtually all new covenant promises must be presently fulfilled in conjunction with Christ’s first coming. For example, the gap between Isaiah 61:1-2a (the passage Jesus pronounced in the Nazareth synagogue as “fulfilled”) and 61:2bff. is broadly recognized, even though all the elements in the prophecy seem tightly “intertwined with one another and, from the OT vantage point, were to occur simultaneously” (Beale 2011, 771). Yet they didn’t. That means the inauguration of a prophecy does not necessarily equal the present fulfillment of all the details of that prophecy; some aspects of a given prophetic package may, in fact, be postponed.

Addendum: A Summary of Reasons I Remain Unconvinced of the Dispensational Postponement View

Postponement advocates, of course, have answers to these points. To date, I have found the cumulative impact of these observations more convincing than the answers offered.

- Significant OT prophecies of Israel's rejection of her own Messiah, and even their direct participation in his crucifixion
- Jesus' first reference to kingdom is clearly spiritually-oriented (Jn. 3)
- The expression "kingdom of God"—Christ's repeated and consistent mode of reference to the kingdom—is a distinctive, new phrase unprecedented in the OT
- Jesus' premiere message on the kingdom (Mt. 5-7) is entirely internal and spiritually oriented, with no hint of a political kingdom
- Jesus resisted explicit efforts to make Him a king (Jn. 6:15)
- Israel's rejection of Messiah was prophesied (Mk. 4:12; Isa. 6:8-13)
- The absence of a compelling narrative that includes the Messiah's death at the hands of the Jews
- Jesus told a parable in explicit response to—i.e., specifically to *correct*—public anticipation of the kingdom's imminent establishment (Lk. 19:11ff.).
- At his Second Coming, Christ will effectually establish his Kingdom in the heart of Israel via the nationwide fulfillment of the New Covenant; if He can and will do that then, why would He not have done so at the first, if that was his intent?
- The offer of a kingdom is a *non sequitur*. A monarchy is not a democracy. A true king does not *offer* a kingdom; he *claims* it and *establishes* it.
- It seems clear that the divine intent was to *inaugurate* the new covenant as the basis for establishing the spiritual dimension of God's mediatorial kingdom in this age, intending the earthly, geo-political, millennial kingdom in connection with his return.
- McClain: "if He came to establish on earth a purely 'spiritual kingdom,' how simple it would have been for Him to say so" (*Greatness of the Kingdom*, 279). It seems clear to me that he did.
 - Did he ever speak publicly in geo-political terms about the kingdom? To the *disciples*, yes—*rarely*, in *private*, and *eschatologically* (Mt. 20:20-23; Lk. 22:28-30).
 - But from his very first mention of the kingdom (Jn. 3), the emphasis in public ministry (and almost all private ministry) is spiritual.
 - Regeneration was not a prerequisite for entrance into the OT mediatorial or Davidic kingdom; it is not even a prerequisite for presence in the millennial mediatorial kingdom, since it will end with a rebellion from within on the part of those who obviously are not regenerate.
 - Jesus even spoke expressly to correct the notion that he had any intention of offering or announcing a kingdom (Lk. 19:11ff.)