

# Divine Sovereignty

Divine sovereignty refers to God's all-encompassing rule over the entire universe.

## Concept Summary

The divine sovereignty of God is a central theme throughout the Bible. God delegates authority, establishes kings and kingdoms, and brings to ruin any king or kingdom that fail to submit to his authority. The Bible presents Yahweh as the Creator God, with a sovereign right to rule over all creation ([Psa 104](#)). Yahweh is the “great king (מֶלֶךְ, *melek*) over all the earth” ([Psa 47:2](#)) who “reigns (מָלַךְ, *mālak*) over nations” ([Psa 47:8](#)). In [Genesis 1](#), as God creates all things, he also delegates authority, such as by making greater and lesser lights to rule (מְשַׁלָּה, *memšālā*) night and day and by giving man dominion (רָדָה, *rādā*) over creation ([Gen 1:16, 18, 26, 28](#)).

Divine sovereignty is viewed both in the OT and NT as God's all-encompassing rule (מְשַׁלָּה, *māšal*; [Psa 103:19](#); βασιλεύς, *basileus*; [1 Tim 6:15](#)). God's sovereignty is displayed in his divine kingship over Israel. He rules over them (*memšālā*; [Psa 114:2](#)), but he will also judge all nations ([Isa 2:4](#); [Psa 96:13](#)) for rejecting him and worshiping idols ([Isa 2:12–22](#); [Rom 1:21–25](#)). Even foreign kings confess the ultimate sovereignty of the God of Israel. In the book of Daniel, both Nebuchadnezzar and Darius proclaim the enduring dominion (שְׁלֹטָנָה, *šālṭān*) of the God of Israel ([Dan 4:2–3](#); [6:26](#)).

In the NT, God's sovereignty is revealed through the presence of Christ who ushers in the kingdom (βασιλεία, *basileia*; [Mark 1:15](#); [Matt 4:23](#); [12:28](#); [Luke 17:21](#)) and exercises his divine authority over all realms of creation.

## Theological Overview

The Bible continually asserts God's sovereignty and authority ([1 Chr 29:11](#)), emphasizing that Yahweh alone is the true God and that all human authority is *delegated* authority ([Dan 5:21](#); [Rom 13:1](#)). Upon delivering Israel from Egypt, God made it known that he was their king (*melek*; [Deut 33:5](#)). When Israel insisted on a human king, God made clear that they were rejecting him as king (*mālak*; [1 Sam 8:7](#)).

Although Israel did not always recognize God's sovereign authority, even foreign kings would come to recognize the divine rule of God, not just over Israel, but all nations. After God humiliated Nebuchadnezzar, he confessed that Israel's God has an everlasting dominion (שְׁלֹטָנָה, *šālṭān*) that extends to all peoples and inhabitants of the earth ([Dan 4:34–37](#)). Following this confession, Daniel describes a coming day when the Son of Man will ride upon the clouds and receive all authority (שְׁלֹטָנָה, *šālṭān*), glory, and a kingdom ([Dan](#)

[7:13–14](#)). Those who have recognized God’s authority desire to learn his ways ([Psa 143:10](#)), enjoy carrying out his will ([Psa 40:8](#)), and honor God through their covenant loyalty ([Psa 103:21](#)).

In the NT, the sovereign rule of God is revealed in the person and work of Jesus. God’s power and authority, embodied in Jesus, are clearly displayed—sometimes before a select few, and other times before large crowds. As Jesus expels demons, it is the result of the kingdom of God drawing near ([Matt 12:28](#)). The kingdom is the central message of the NT. It is portrayed as God’s sovereign rule, present in the OT law and embodied in Christ. During his earthly ministry, Jesus demonstrated the power and reality of God’s sovereignty and made the Father’s will his mission: “May your kingdom come, may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” ([Matt 6:10](#)). By demonstrating obedience to the will of the Father, Jesus served as an example to those who would submit to the sovereignty of God. Jesus’ ministry also revealed the eschatological hope of humanity’s future. In the coming age, evil will be destroyed ([Rev 19:17–21](#)), heaven and earth will be made new ([Rev 21](#)), and Jesus will reign forever ([Rev 11:15](#); compare [Exod 15:18](#)). He will be recognized as the “Lord of lords and King of kings” ([Rev 17:14](#)), and his kingdom will have no boundaries ([Rev 11:15](#)).

## Lexical Information

### Old Testament

**רָדָה** (*rādâ*). vb. **to exercise dominion, rule, authority**. *Refers to act of exercising authority, especially mankind exercising authority over creation, kingdoms, or people.*

*Rādâ* indicates that God gave mankind the responsibility to exercise dominion over his creation ([Gen 1:26, 28](#)). As God delegates the task of dominion to mankind, he displays that he has ultimate sovereignty over all creation—including over humans, who are called to rule over (*rādâ*) the creatures of the earth. However, *rādâ* is primarily used to speak of people exercising authority over other people ([Lev 25:43, 6, 53](#); [1 Kgs 4:24](#); [5:16](#); [Psa 49:14](#); [Isa 14:2](#)).

**מָשַׁל** (*māšal*). vb. **to rule, to have dominion**. *Refers to exercising ruling power over others.*

While people can “have dominion” (*māšal*; [Prov 12:24](#)) over others, the ultimate right to exercise dominion (*māšal*; [Job 25:2](#)) belongs to God alone. The verb *māšal* does not only refer to divine sovereignty, but is regularly used to assert that God rules over all nations ([Pss 22:28](#); [103:19](#); [2 Chr 20:6](#)) and over all creation, including the sea ([Psa 89:9](#)). [Psalm 8:6](#) describes the wonder of God’s consideration of mankind and how God gave mankind “dominion” (*māšal*) over his creation.

**מְשָׁלָה** (*memšālâ*). n. fem. **rule, dominion**. *Refers abstractly to the domain over which a ruler has control.*

In [Gen 1:16](#), God commands the two great luminaries to have dominion (*memšālâ*; see also [Psa 136:8–9](#)) over day and night. The Psalms display a high theology of God and his sovereign authority. There is no place where God’s rule is not present (*memšālâ*; [Psa 103:22](#)), and his dominion (*memšālâ*; [Psa 145:13](#)) extends to all generations.

מֶלֶךְ (*melek*). n. masc. **king**. *Refers to an authority figure who rules over others.*

The noun *melek* is quite common for human rulers and can be used in reference to God, as well. He became the Israelites' king and demonstrated his sovereignty over them by giving them his law ([Deut 33:5](#)). The psalmist described God as the king of glory who is strong and mighty in battle ([Psa 24:7–10](#)) and recognized that God was his king ([Psa 145:1](#)). Similarly, Nebuchadnezzar, who was regarded as king of kings ([Dan 2:37](#)), confessed that Israel's God was the king of heaven with the sovereign power to humble those who walk in pride ([Dan 4:37](#)). The prophet Zephaniah spoke of a future restoration that Yahweh, Israel's true king, would bring ([Zeph 3:13](#)).

מָלַךְ (*mālak*). vb. **to reign, to rule, to become king**. *Refers to being king or exercising kingly authority and power.*

The OT indicates that God reigns as king not just over Israel ([1 Sam 8:7](#); [Isa 52:7](#)) but also over the nations ([Exod 15:18](#); [Pss 47:8](#); [96:10](#); [97:1](#)). It is by his exercise of his ruling authority that kings are established ([1 Sam 15:11](#)) or removed ([1 Sam 16:1](#)).

שְׁלִטָּן (*šālṭān*). Aram. n. masc. **dominion, sovereignty**. *Refers abstractly to absolute ruling power such as that held by a king or other supreme ruler.*

The noun *šālṭān* is used 14 times (all in the book of Daniel) to refer to the absolute rule of a king or God. The related Aramaic verb שָׁלַט (*šēlēt*, “rule over”) appears seven times (again, all in Daniel) but never describes God's rule. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon declares that Israel's God is the “Most High” and has an everlasting dominion (*šālṭān*; [Dan 4:34](#)). The word is used for the dominion of God or the dominion delegated to others representing God ([Dan 4:3](#), [34](#); [6:26](#); [7:14](#), [27](#)).

רָצוֹן (*rāṣôn*). n. masc. **will, pleasure**. *Used for God's will, obedience to which represents an acknowledgement of his divine sovereignty.*

In the Psalms, God's will and pleasure represent his rule, which the psalmists desire to see carried out ([Pss 40:8](#); [51:18](#)). Those who obey God's will (*rāṣôn*; [Psa 103:21](#)) demonstrate a unique loyalty that honors and blesses God. However, the Lord's will is not something that is carried out instinctively—it is something that must be taught ([Psa 143:10](#)). When God's people do not carry out his will, repentance is necessary and a recommitment to his will is in order ([Ezra 10:11](#)).

## New Testament

βασιλεύς (*basileus*). n. masc. **king, ruler**. *Refers to a king or ruler who has sovereign authority over a people or nation.*

*Basileus* is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew term *melek* (king). In the NT, Jesus is recognized as king ([John 6:15](#); [12:13](#)), often in a messianic sense ([John 1:49](#); [Mark 10:46–52](#)). In Matthew's Gospel, wise men visit King Herod, seeking the one born as “king of the Jews” ([Matt 2:1–9](#)). Matthew and Luke depict Jesus riding into Jerusalem as a king (*basileus*; [Matt 21:5](#); [Luke 19:38](#)). However, people also call Jesus “king” in

Douglas Mangum, Derek R. Brown, Rachel Klippenstein, et al., eds., *Lexham Theological Wordbook*, Lexham Bible Reference Series (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014).

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a mocking fashion ([Matt 27:42](#); [Mark 15:18, 32](#); [Luke 23:37](#); [John 19:3, 14](#)). When Jesus is crucified, the inscription on his cross reads, “This is the king of the Jews” ([Luke 23:38](#)). The NT also teaches there will be a day when all people will recognize that Jesus is the King of kings, exercising the sovereign authority of God over all things ([1 Tim 6:15](#); [Rev 15:3](#); [17:14](#); [19:16](#)).

βασιλεύω (*basileuō*). vb. **to reign, to be king, to rule**. *Refers to the activity of one exercising dominion over an individual or a people.*

Paul says that Jesus will reign (*basileuō*) until all of his enemies submit to him ([1 Cor 15:25](#)). His kingdom will span the entire world, and he will reign (*basileuō*) forever ([Rev 11:15, 17](#); [19:6](#); [22:5](#)). Furthermore, those whom Christ raises from the dead will reign (*basileuō*) with him, reflecting again how God delegates authority to mankind ([Rev 20:4, 6](#); compare [Gen 1:26](#)).

βασίλεια (*basileia*). n. fem. **kingdom**. *Refers to the domain over which a king rules.*

*Basileia* is theologically significant in the phrases βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ (*basileia tou theou*, “kingdom of God”) and βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν (*basileia ton ouranon*, “kingdom of heaven”), both referring to the reality of God’s rule over all creation. The “kingdom of God” is the central theme of the gospel message ([Mark 1:15](#)). The kingdom of God is proclaimed ([Luke 16:16](#)); it “comes upon” people ([Luke 11:20](#)) and comes “near” ([Luke 21:31](#)); it involves not mere “talk,” but rather “power” ([1 Cor 4:20](#)). The kingdom of God can be given to people by God, but it can also be taken away by God ([Matt 21:43](#)). God’s sovereign kingdom is demonstrated as demons are cast out ([Matt 12:28](#)) and as the sick are healed ([Luke 10:9](#)). The kingdom belongs to those who have submitted to the rule of God, recognizing their spiritual poverty ([Matt 5:3](#)) and suffering persecution ([Matt 5:10](#)). The mystery of the kingdom is extensively discussed in [Matt 13](#), where Jesus speaks of God’s rule as something that is good, expanding, treasured, and all encompassing.

θρόνος (*thronos*). n. masc. **throne**. *Refers literally or figuratively to the seat of authority.*

*Thronos* occurs 62 times throughout the NT, mostly in a genitive construct relating to the throne of God or Christ. The resurrected Christ “has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” ([Heb 12:2](#)). God’s throne is described as eternal ([Heb 1:8](#)) and is associated with grace ([Heb 4:16](#)). Throughout Revelation, Jesus is described as the one “seated on the throne” ([Rev 4:2](#); [5:1, 7](#); [7:10, 15](#)). Creatures encircle his throne and praise him perpetually; 24 elders cast down their crowns before the throne ([Rev 4:6–10](#); [5:11–14](#)).

θέλημα (*thelēma*). n. neut. **will, desire**. *Refers to God’s sovereign will that he will bring about.*

*Thelēma* occurs 62 times in the NT and primarily refers to the will. In [Matthew 6:10](#), Jesus’ prayer indicates that God’s will is currently being carried out in heaven but is longed for here on earth. Shortly before his arrest, Jesus acknowledges that the Father’s will must be done ([Matt 26:42](#); [Luke 22:42](#)). Jesus was motivated by the Father’s will and made every effort to obey the Father’s command ([John 4:34](#); [5:30](#); [6:38–40](#)). In Revelation, the one seated on the throne is praised because all things came into being through his creative will ([Rev 4:11](#)).