



Matthew's Kingdom of Heaven is No Modern Kingdom of God

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Abstract: The essay begins by providing important background information about the essential general characteristics of Matthew's Gospel related to authorship, motivations, and audience. Then it proceeds to closely examine some of the central features of its literary structure by identifying and addressing the interplay of its core motifs such as antagonistic religious authorities and Satanic forces, among others. The focus on theological motifs represents an effort to determine whether Matthew's narrative was simply a slapdash stylistic modification of Mark's Gospel, or unique in its own right. Particular attention is subsequently devoted to one of Matthew's core theological organizational themes, 'Kingdom of Heaven', with the aim of examining to what extent it may improve understanding of important aspects of the Christian doctrine he wanted to emphasize. Matthew's 'Kingdom of Heaven' is then contrasted with the 'Kingdom of God' concept to note similarities and differences, if any. After reviewing how the kingdom of heaven motif runs through all of Matthew's five great discourses (Sermon on the Mount, mission, parables, church discipline, and End-Times), the essay concludes by suggesting that Matthew's concept is radically different from the 'Kingdom of God' concept employed in much of contemporary biblical scholarship especially in the heavy emphasis upon its spiritual dimensions.

Keywords: Authorship, audience, literary structure, core motifs, five great discourses, kingdom of heaven, kingdom of God, Matthew, Mark.

Introductory Remarks

While the scope and depth of Matthew's Gospel are simply too wide and profound to be exhaustively captured within the limitations of an essay, perhaps what can be done is to begin by providing some rudimentary outlines of its essential features. Accordingly, this essay reviews some of the general characteristics which can be known about the author, the contents of this particular Gospel, and the motivations which appeared to fuel Matthew's writing. In doing so, particular attention is directed towards the kind of Christian community for which Matthew composed his work (Nickle, 2001).

From there, we will examine some of the main features of its literary structure by identifying and addressing key theological themes and interests that can be determined along the way. Among other goals, the aim is to determine whether Matthew was simply "a haphazard revision" of Mark's Gospel aiming to provide only "stylistic improvements" (Perkins, 2007, p. 176), or whether he made his own unique contributions while borrowing important selective features.

Lastly, particular focus will be placed upon one of the core theological organizing themes of Matthew's Gospel, namely the "Kingdom of Heaven", in order to help us understand better some of the important aspects of the Christian doctrine he wanted to emphasize. In turn, this approach may help us to determine any

key departure points from mainstream modern "Kingdom of God" Christian perspectives.

Matthew the Apostle

The New Testament refers to Matthew as one who was "sitting in the tax collector's booth" as Jesus was passing by at the time, at which time Jesus urgently said to that man, "Follow Me!", and the man responded by getting up and following Him (Matt 9:9/10:3). There are passages in other parts of the New Testament which also refer to the calling by Jesus of the tax collector named "Levi" (Mark 2:14/ Luke 5:27), but they don't specify this "Levi" as one of the twelve apostles.

In any case, "Matthew" did come to be known as one of the twelve apostles of Jesus Christ, also known as Saint Matthew and possibly as Levi (Aune, 2001; Burkett, 2002; Allison, 2010). As author of the Gospel of Matthew, he also came to be known as Matthew the evangelist in Christian tradition since he was one of the four evangelists commissioned by Christ to teach the 'good news' to all the nations, a disputed claim by some biblical scholars (Allison, 2010). Still, he is firmly cited in the New Testament as one of the twelve disciples of Christ (Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13) who followed Jesus in His teachings and preaching activities and who was one of the many witnesses to His Ascension.

Both the Gospels themselves and biblical research suggest that Matthew was probably born in Galilee. At that time,

Galilee was not considered to be a part of the Roman province of Judea. So, it is unlikely that he would have been educated, let alone literate. He may have known Greek by virtue of circumstance, but not at any kind of sophisticated level since it wasn't a necessary part of his function as a "tax collector". Church fathers from Papias to Eusebius to Irenaeus to Clement of Alexandria confirm beyond doubt that "Matthew" preached the Gospel of Christ to the Jewish-Christian community in Judea.

Almost certainly, members of his Jewish cultural community would not have viewed him in a very favorable light by virtue of his job as a monetary extractor and especially since he was essentially functioning as a collaborator supporting the domination of gentile Roman occupiers (Ehrman, 2009, 1999; Jacquier, 2015). What's more, shortly thereafter even Jesus Himself was criticized heavily by the Scribes and the Pharisees for sitting down to eat with "tax collectors" at Matthew's house (Mark 2:16). So, then, surely the fact that Matthew spent a considerable portion of his time and effort preaching the Gospel of Christ to a Jewish-Christian community becomes a key point in our understanding of the Gospel according to Matthew.

The Gospel According to Matthew

Since the author of this gospel is not specifically identified or named within the text itself and does not claim to have been an eyewitness to any of the events described within, most biblical scholars prefer to consider it anonymous. It is widely believed that the inscription 'according to Matthew' in the book was added at some point considerably later than it was actually written, probably in the second century (Harrington, 1995; Nolland, 2006; France, 2007).

The Church historian Eusebius quotes the early Christian bishop Papias saying that it was Matthew the disciple who had collected all the sayings of Jesus in the Hebrew language from different sources, after which each one was interpreted or translated as best as could be done. But since Matthew's Gospel as we know it doesn't read like a 'translated' text from a technical point of view, most biblical scholars still believe that Matthew was originally written in Greek, not Hebrew or Aramaic, and then translated into Greek. This is another reason why Matthean authorship tends to be rejected (Allison, 2004; Muddiman and Barton, 2010).

Regardless of who actually authored the text of Matthew's Gospel, it still functions as a fascinating narrative about the life and teachings of Jesus Christ as understood in very early Christian settings. As Nickle (2001) points out, it operates independently as a unique narrative in its own right quite apart from other factors such as the original Christian audience it was written for or translational issues.

When we read Matthew, for example, it's not like reading through the cut and dry factual approach of Mark's Gospel where descriptions of key events, activities, and behaviors are greatly abbreviated with no extended exegeses. Matthew delves into the details of how Jesus transformed the self-perceptions of early Christians who felt they were in the presence of God simply by living and breathing and behaving righteously (**1**).

Core Motifs in Matthew's Gospel

Almost from beginning to end, there are several core themes driving Matthew's narrative about Jesus quite beyond all of

the miraculous healings, exorcisms, and supernatural behaviors (Jesus walking on water or Satan tempting Jesus on the mountain, for example). One important theme running through Matthew is the rather explicit antagonism between Jesus and Jewish religious authorities (the Pharisees and the chief priests and scribes as well as the elders).

It is shocking to read in Matthew 2:4 that the "chief priests and scribes of the people" had gathered with King Herod trying to figure out where the future "Messiah" was to be born, the same king that would eventually slaughter many babies in search of the infant Jesus and would also order the beheading of John the Baptist based on the whimsical comments of a very young girl dancing for him during a feast!

So, then, in Matthew it is clear where the power lines are drawn between Jesus and Jewish religious authorities (not to mention political authorities). Other similar examples are abundant throughout Matthew's Gospel. When Jesus healed a paralytic, the scribes were quoted as saying to themselves about Jesus, "This fellow blasphemes", viewing His activity with evil in their hearts. Again, when Jesus goes to Matthew's house to eat with many tax collectors and sinners, the Pharisees who are there confront the disciples demanding to know why Jesus is eating with tax collectors and sinners (Matt 9:11).

Still later when Jesus is walking through the grainfields with His disciples who became hungry and started to eat the heads of grain, the Pharisees complain to Jesus that His disciples were doing "what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath" (Matthew 12:2). Another much more blatant example of the conflict of authority between Christ and Jewish religious authorities is when Jesus heals the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath. Matthew tells readers that when the Pharisees saw this, they immediately left that place and conspired against Jesus "as to how they might destroy Him" (Matthew 12:14).

Then later the Pharisees and the scribes complain to Jesus about the disciples eating bread without washing their hands as tradition demands, to which Jesus responds that they themselves constantly invalidate the word of God for the sake of their traditions (Matthew 15:1-6). The antagonisms and conflict between Jesus and religious authorities even goes so far as to include attempts to trap or test Jesus into saying things that could be used against him legally in a religious court or in a secular court of law. For example, Matthew comments on how "some Pharisees came to Jesus testing Him and asking, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all?'" (Matt 19:3).

Matthew even talks about direct confrontation between Jesus and religious authorities in the temple itself. One day upon entering the temple to begin teaching, the chief priests and the elders immediately confronted Jesus demanding to know, "By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?" (Matthew 21:23). Later, Jesus makes clear in Matthew what is His own perspective of Pharisees and by logical extension the chief priests, scribes, elders, and other religious authorities at the time.

When he is speaking to large crowds and to His disciples, to warns them all to do and observe "all that they (the Pharisees) tell you, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them...for they do all their deeds to be

noticed by men” (Matt 23:3-5). Just in case the reader or listener may still not be clear about Jesus’s particular view of religious authorities, Matthew proceeds to list in great specificity the “eight woes” which He delivers against scribes and Pharisees that take up an entire page in Matthew’s book (Matt 23:13-36)! It is such an important theological refrain in Matthew that nothing even comes close to it in the other gospels.

The question arises as to why unrelenting antagonism from established Jewish religious authorities in the form of constant ploys, lies, deceits, entrapments, and hypocrisies toward Jesus is such a dominant theme in Matthew’s Gospel? Nickle (2001) points out that Matthew goes to great lengths to prove through genealogy, teachings, prophets, and other means that Jesus is the long-awaited-for Messiah who is God incarnate come to save his creation and restore God’s sovereign rule. The one cardinal rule to follow, therefore, is to obey Jesus because by doing so the law of God is obeyed. The clear implication here is the only authentic interpreter of God’s law is Jesus.

However, Jewish religious leaders have claimed for themselves the sole authority to interpret Jewish law. Jesus is constantly rebuking them for saying one thing about the law but not following it themselves, which is why He repeatedly condemns them as hypocrites. These religious leaders claim to know the word and will of God, and they use this claim to exert control and power over the Jewish people. But their lies are obvious because they refuse to see the will of God in the person of Jesus. They refuse to accept Jesus as the instrument of God, so they plan and ploy to subvert Him at every turn.

In doing so, Matthew seems to suggest that the religious authorities are Satanic adversaries. The heavy focus upon Satanic beings and behaviors is another dominant theological theme running through Matthew, of course. Like Nickle states (2001) and Matthew makes quite clear, the opposition of Jewish religious leaders is “not just unfortunate, it is demonic”. In opposing Jesus, they put themselves “in the service of Satan” by promoting “Satan’s claim to rule in the place of God”. Through resurrection God authenticates and ratifies Jesus’s Messiahship. What Matthew is offering his Jewish-Christian readers is the option to accept Jesus’s invitation into communion with Him.

Another core theme in Matthew’s Gospel is the constant effort to show how Jesus is an extension and verification of Judaic law, not its destroyer, what may be referred to as the ‘Jesus-fulfillment’ theme. Right from the first verse of the first chapter, Matthew puts Jesus on record as “Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham” and then goes through the genealogy all the way to “Jacob was the father of Joseph the husband of Mary...” (Matt 1:1-17).

The very birth of Jesus itself occurred in order “to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet” (Matt 1:22). The chief priests and scribes are there by Herod’s side (2) when he inquires with great consternation where the ‘Messiah’ was to be born, and they answer him: “In Bethlehem of Judea; for this has been written by the prophet” (Matt 2:5). There are constant ‘fulfillments’ references in Matthew’s talk about the prophets (Matt 2:23/3:3/4:14/8:17/12:17/13:14,35/26:54).

Even in between all of these ‘fulfillment’ references, there are many other references tying Jesus firmly into Judaic law

and Hebrew writings such as when both Joseph the husband of Mary and Jesus himself are addressed as ‘Son of David’. After Jesus revives the dead daughter of the synagogue official, two blind men ran to Him crying out, “Have mercy on us, Son of David!” (Matt 9:27). At another point after Jesus heals a deaf and blind man who was demon-possessed, the large crowds who had witnessed the healing were starting to address Jesus as, “This man cannot be the Son of David, can he?” (Matt 12:23).

This is precisely where the Pharisees respond to the crowd by accusing Jesus of being under the spell of “Beelzebub the ruler of the demons”, and Jesus promptly rebukes them. By the end of Matthew 12, the reader knows surely that the Pharisees, chief priests, scribes, and elders are the established Jewish religious authorities relentlessly conspiring against Jesus to secure His downfall in whatever way they can.

Later, when Jesus withdraws to the district of Tyre and Sidon, a Canaanite woman approached Him crying out, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-possessed” (Matt 15:21-22). Still later, as Jesus and His disciples were leaving Jericho with a large crowd following Him, two blind men who were sitting by the roadside hearing Jesus pass by suddenly twice cried out even after the crowd attempted to silence them, “Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!” (Matt 20:30-31).

Then again, when Jesus entered the temple in Jerusalem the crowds going on ahead of Him were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” (Matt 21:9). Shortly thereafter, after Jesus enters the temple and overturns the money tables and heals all the blind and lame people that come to Him, the children start shouting in the temple, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” (Matt 21:15). Here once again, the battle lines are drawn between Jesus and the chief priests and scribes who became intensely indignant.

What is Matthew’s point here in making all these references to Judaic genealogy and Mosaic law in the Judaic faith? Did not Matthew agree with Mosaic law, with Jewish law? Did he not agree that it played a central role in the Judaic faith? Yes, he agreed that Mosaic law was the heartbeat of the Judaic faith; it was the will of God revealed to Moses. The teachings and preaching of Jesus were not an attempt to correct or substitute or destroy that law as the Jewish religious leaders were perceiving it to be. They just didn’t live according to it, as Jesus said, “they do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them...they do all their deeds to be noticed by men” (Matt 23:3-5).

Matthew seems to suggest that only Jesus was competent enough to provide authoritative interpretations of Judaic law, not Jewish religious leaders. Jesus knew Moses much better than the religious leaders did because of the way He actually lived by applying the unconditional love that had been the essence of Mosaic law, whereas the Pharisees and scribes did not embody that law in the way that they lived. This is what Matthew meant to show, that the actual teachings in the behavior of Jesus represented a completion or fulfillment of the law God gave to Moses, not a correction or replacement of Mosaic law (3).

Matthew is telling his Jewish-Christian members that the teachings of Jesus are a fulfillment of the Torah, and Jesus and His disciples are charged with providing proper authoritative interpretations of Judaic law. And to become a true scribe capable of making authoritative interpretations of Judaic law, Jesus says

that one must “become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven...” (Matt 13:52). That’s precisely what the Sermon on the Mount was all about, according to Matthew, a radical restatement of Judaic law in terms of God’s sovereign rule in the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, it is not by coincidence nor mistake that Matthew repeats the ‘kingdom of heaven’ phrase more than 30 times, firmly employing it to mean a spiritual kingdom rather than an earthly kingdom or some kind of heavenly kingdom transferred to earth through human means or instruments as in some modern conceptions.

Among the many passages in Matthew’s Gospel that both makes this distinction clear and demonstrates that Jesus came to fulfill the Mosaic law and not to replace or destroy it is in Chapter 8 when Jesus cleanses a leper and rewards the Roman centurion’s faith. It begins when Jesus is coming down from a mountain followed by large crowds and a leper suddenly bows in front of Him asking to be made clean if He is willing.

Of course, Jesus was willing and, so, the leper was immediately healed. But then Jesus tells him, “See that you tell no one; but go show yourself to the priest and present the offering that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them” (Matt 8:4). These are the very priests conspiring against Jesus throughout Matthew’s Gospel, but Jesus sends the leper to them as “testimony” in homage to Mosaic law – a total contradiction of their claims that Jesus is blasphemous!

More importantly, what happens next is pivotal. Jesus enters Capernaum and a Roman soldier approaches, begging Him to cure his servant who is “lying paralyzed at home, fearfully tormented”. After Jesus agrees to come to his home, the centurion admits that he is not worthy to have Jesus come under his roof, “but just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I am also a man under authority...” Shockingly, Matthew claims that Jesus responds, “Truly, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel” (Matt 8:5-10). If this is not a resounding condemnation of the chief priests, scribes, and Pharisees, then the meaning of the word is elusive!

Immediately afterwards, it is not by mere accident or chance that Jesus bows reverentially to Jewish law and makes direct references to the kingdom of heaven and implicit references to the Final Judgment: “I say to you that many will come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven; but the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt 8:11-12). Evidently, here the reference to the kingdom of heaven does not refer to an earthly kingdom since Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had long died.

All sarcasm aside, this is a crucial section of Matthew whose theological implications need to be fully digested. That Roman officer is a gentile, not Jewish, a gentile who shows overwhelming faith in the authority of Jesus over the world of nature as he knew it to be at that time. In recognizing that authority over the natural world, the Roman officer knows that the distance to his house does not constitute a limit to Jesus’s healing power. He recognizes that if Jesus is who He says that He is, then his servant could be healed across space and time with just a simple word or no word at all! Surely, now, THAT is faith beyond the faith that Jesus has seen among the chief priests, scribes, Pharisees, and elders in Israel!

But Jesus doesn’t stop there in his shocking commentary about the Roman officer’s faith. Remember, there is still a crowd of followers around Jesus at this time, and what Jesus says to the centurion surely shocks them to their Jewish roots! Many will come from east and west hoping to eat at the table (“recline at the table”) in the “kingdom of heaven” with Abraham and Company, so to speak, with all the great patriarchs of Israel. But they will be “cast out into the outer darkness”, Matthew has Jesus saying. Now that’s a severe shock to Jewish listeners because Jesus is making a direct reference to an everyday occurrence in Jewish family life where everyone typically sits around a low table to share a meal for the day; it was a common Jewish custom.

But Jesus is saying the shocking thing to his Jewish listening crowd that they will not be allowed to sit at the table to share a meal with the patriarchs of Israel in the spiritual kingdom of heaven. In other words, the concept of ‘kingdom of heaven’ is intimately related to a prophetic future time in eternity when all of Christ’s followers will be present eating together in a spiritual kingdom called ‘heaven’, not a heaven brought down to a physical earth. More importantly, Jesus is saying in no uncertain terms that this ‘kingdom of heaven’ will not only be inhabited by Jewish people but by all gentile believers as well. The Roman centurion was a gentile, not Jewish. This would not have been shocking news to believers in Christ, but it certainly would have been a bit shocking for Jewish disbelievers to hear.

However, what Jesus is saying is perfectly consistent with creation doctrine as set down in Genesis. Again, Genesis is the key starting point of the Old Testament as the integral part of the Hebrew Bible, so the link should have been made by Jewish people even at that time, especially by the chief priests and scribes. After all, it is there that God is quoted as saying to Abraham: “And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Gen 12:3).

Paul’s letter to the Galatians recognizes this link: “Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham. The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘All the nations will be blessed in you’. So, then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer” (Gal 3:7-9).

Therefore, it is also not by coincidence that Matthew uses the “Son of Abraham” nomenclature applied to Christ in his gospel. By doing so, Matthew is making the link between Jesus and Jewish law, but extending it to apply to gentiles as well as to Jewish people. Matthew is telling his Jewish listeners and readers that it is not their nationality alone that will get them a ticket into the “kingdom of heaven” spiritual concert, if you will; rather, “those who are of faith” are the ones who will be allowed to enter that concert, whether gentiles or Jews. Therefore, just by the fact of being born a Jew and having been born in Israel is not a guaranteed pass to the “kingdom of heaven”.

Kingdom of Heaven: Debates and Controversies

Before delving into Matthew’s extensive use of the concept ‘kingdom of heaven’ ourselves in a more detailed manner, it is probably wise to provide a brief review of different scholarly opinions about it especially as compared to the ‘kingdom of God’ concept employed much more sparingly by Matthew. In doing so, we can begin to understand why Matthew links his concept to another central theological theme running through his gospel,

namely, his constant implicit and explicit references to the 'end times'.

To begin with, the concept "Kingdom of Heaven" only appears in Matthew and not elsewhere in the New Testament (Turner, 2008). It is absent from the Old Testament where discussion is about God and God's kingship referring to the relationship between God and the human beings He created (France, 2007; Vanhoozer and Wright, 2005). As His creation, He holds all of them accountable for their behavior on Earth; he will judge them all at an appropriate time of His choosing. During the time of the Torah and the Old Testament writings, God's 'kingship' or 'kingdom' was decidedly more nationalistic in the sense that Jewish people were expecting a great 'Messiah' to come and liberate them by destroying their enemies and establishing God's 'kingdom' in a new state called Israel.

The teachings of Jesus are understood by Christian believers to follow from this Judaic Old Testament tradition (Nickle, 2001), even the great supernatural divine deeds that were expected to occur during the end times according to Jewish writings (Matt 8:17). Matthew appears to employ a spiritual conception of 'Kingdom of Heaven' to make a clear separation from its previous nationalistic interpretation as a long-awaited physical or geographical 'Kingdom of God' to be established in Israel by an equally long-awaited 'Messiah'.

Even in the few times Matthew uses the 'Kingdom of God' concept, it appears to suggest the same spiritual connotations. Although there were some restrictions imposed by the Jewish culture upon the use of the name of "God" and hence some reluctance to incorporate the word "God" in other concepts or phrases, it is equally clear that Matthew is trying to underscore a clear distinction between a physical or geographical ethnic kingdom and an eternal or transcendental or spiritual kingdom.

To further underscore the spiritual dimension of the Kingdom of Heaven concept, Matthew uses it to describe what occurred during the Sermon of the Mount. They are the very first words uttered by Jesus: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:3). And again, shortly thereafter: "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:10). Evidently, poor spirit and righteousness are not references to an ethnic national or geographical kingdom.

Even before the Sermon on the Mount, John the Baptist referred to by the prophet Isaiah uses the same concept while preaching in the wilderness of Judea: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt 3:2). Apparently, this 'kingdom' is a spiritual place where only the righteous are allowed to enter; that's why Jesus says to the gentiles to "seek first His kingdom and His righteousness" (Matt 6:33). A bit later, Jesus explains what He means through the parable of a tree and its fruit in reference to how we will know true believers in Christ: "You will know them by their fruits every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit...so then, you will know them by their fruits" (Matt 7:16-20). In other words, faith alone is not good enough for Christ; faith is completed by good works, good fruits; these are the treasures that are stored up in heaven which glorify God the Father (Matt 5:16/6:20).

This is why the parable of the tree and its fruit ends with Jesus making clear the relationship between faith and the works or fruits of faith: "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord', will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter" (Matt 7:21). Even when Jesus is commissioning the disciples to go out and preach the gospel of the "kingdom" to all nations, He instructs them accordingly in the kingdom of heaven language: "And as you go, preach, saying, the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt 10:7). So, then, the 'Kingdom of Heaven' language even cuts across the mission discourse in Matthew's Gospel, as it does in all other discourses.

Matthew even ties together his 'Kingdom of Heaven' language with Jesus's parabolic teaching technique. When Jesus is sitting in a boat by the sea addressing a very large crowd that had gathered on shore to listen to Him with His disciples there, too, he teaches and preaches to them in terms of parables. Later, His disciples ask Him why, and Jesus answers: "To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted Therefore, I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. In their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says, '...For the heart of this people has become dull...' (Matt 13:10-15). Perhaps the 'Kingdom of Heaven' is associated with the righteousness of the heart?

In many cases when 'Kingdom of Heaven' language is used in Matthew, it is employed in comparative terms, even when Jesus is using that language in parables. For example, "The kingdom of heaven is like..." or "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to..." are phrases that are employed repeatedly by Jesus. Here is just a small sample:

- "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field" (Matt 13:24)
- "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed..." (Matt 13:31)
- "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven..." (Matt 13:33)
- "The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field..." (Matt 13:44)
- "The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls..." (Matt 13:45)
- "The kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet cast into the sea..." (Matt 13:47)

After these parables, Jesus goes to Capernaum when the disciples approach Him asking, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (Matt 18:1). Implied in the question, of course, was that some kind of ranking system existed in the 'Kingdom of Heaven', and the disciples were interested to know how they were ranked, presumably.

At that point, Jesus calls a child to Himself and then says to His disciples: "Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 18:3-4). And just to make sure that the chief priests, Pharisees, or scribes in the crowd thoroughly understand what Jesus is saying, He adds: "...whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matt 18:6). That's about as graphic as it gets in terms of behavioral consequences.

However, the absolute worse punishments are reserved by Jesus for those whose behavior effectively prevents others from entering the 'Kingdom of heaven'. This point is made starkly evident in Matthew's description of the "eight woes" (Matt 23:13-29) especially addressed to the scribes and Pharisees who are resoundingly condemned for "outwardly appearing righteous to men, but inwardly...full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (Matt 23:28) and for being "...sons of those who murdered the prophets" (Matt 23:31). Here Jesus describes religious authorities in the worst possible terms variously referring to them a "brood of vipers", "hypocrites", "blind guides", "fools", "robbers", "murderers", and so forth.

These religious authorities are being pretentious and self-indulgent. That is why Matthew addresses this issue of final accountability for inappropriate behavior in some of the parables that are presented by Jesus. For example, the parable of the landowner details how a landowner planted a vineyard with all the associated paraphernalia to produce wine and then rented it out to vine-growers before going away on a long journey. At harvest time, he sent a few slaves to collect his produce but the vine-growers beat, stoned, and killed them. The landowner then sent a larger group of slaves, but the vine-growers did the same to them, too.

Then the landowner sent his son to collect, thinking that the vine-growers would respect him. But the vine-growers killed him, too, because they wanted to collect his inheritance. So, then, "when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vine-growers?" (Matt 21:33-40). Obviously, the vine-growers will be held accountable for their repulsive behavior towards the landowner. The parable of the talents and several other parables incorporate the same theme of ultimate accountability to God for inappropriate earthly behavior.

Matthew uses parable to communicate a much more important consequence which occurs if the Jewish people and their religious leaders refuse to accept the Gospel of Christ. In the parable of ten virgins, the five who went away to purchase oil for their lamps at precisely the time when the bridegroom came and then later came begging to enter the wedding feast, " 'Lord, lord, open up for us'. But he answered, 'Truly I say to you, I do not know you' " (Matt 25:10-13). Again, in the parable of the talents, the master of three slaves gives some money (talents) to each of three slaves before going away on his journey. Mathew points out that, "...after a long time, the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them" (Matt 25:19). In the 'Kingdom of heaven', then, it is all about the settling of accounts or being held accountable by God for your behavior on earth.

What's more, it is by no mere coincidence that Matthew culminates his gospel with a separate section entitled, "The Judgment". This is the time when Christ returns with the angels to "separate the sheep from the goats" in all nations, the "righteous" (sheep) from the "accursed ones" (goats), the wheat from the shaft, so to speak. The righteous will be consigned to eternal life in heaven, while the accursed ones will be consigned to eternal punishment in the eternal fires of hell (Matt 25:31-46).

Here the message to religious authorities and to the Jewish people is crystal clear, namely, live a righteous life in your works and deeds, not only in the outward appearance of your faith, otherwise pay the heavy toll in the afterlife when the end times

occur and final judgment takes place. And it could take place at any time, any moment: "Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour" Matt 25:13).

Therefore, the Final Judgment that takes place at the 'end times' when individual human beings are held accountable by God for their conduct (works, deeds) on Earth plays a central role in Matthew's conception of the 'Kingdom of heaven'. Getting into that 'kingdom' is not simply a matter of faith ('Lord, lord') but, more importantly, works or deeds for which human beings will be held accountable. In other words, God is the ultimate or penultimate transcendental or divine accountant holding the books on everybody's business (life), and at an appointed time will decide whether they are in the red or in the black. Since they are already dead in the flesh at that moment, then what is being "judged" is their soul, not their flesh.

Kingdom of Heaven in Matthew's Discourses

It is clear from the above discussion that the 'Kingdom of heaven' theme runs across all of the major discourses contained in Matthew's Gospel. As Nickle points out, Matthew has accumulated through various sources all of Jesus's teachings into blocks of readings which have been categorized by scholars as general discourses (Bacon, 2013; Kingsbury, 1989, 1988, 1969; Kostenberger, 2016; Blomberg, 2014; Nickle, 2001; Perkins, 2007). Each one of these 'discourses' consists of a fairly comprehensive review of a specific topic as follows:

- 1 – Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7)
- 2 – Discourse on Mission (Matt 10)
- 3 – Parables of the Kingdom of Heaven (Matt 13)
- 4 – Discourse on Church Discipline (Matt 18)
- 5 – Discourse on End-Time Judgment (Matt 23-25)

To some extent, these scholarly categories or 'discourses' have been artificially imposed upon the Gospel of Matthew (from Bacon in 1930 onwards) in order to provide a category structure as grounds for examination, analysis, and assessment for weaknesses and strengths as well as for comparison with other gospels and/or parts of the Bible. The imposition of artificial scholarly categories is made rather obvious right from the beginning of this essay in our discussion of "core themes" that cut across and permeate all five traditional 'discourses': antagonism with established religious authorities, Jesus' fulfillment of Judaic law, and kingdom of heaven – to name but a few of the many theological thematic threads running through Matthew.

It is also possible that the five-discourse model may have been an artificial scholarly theoretical model devised specifically to forge a link to the five books of the Pentateuch, to make a parallel to the Hebrew Bible. One effect of this artificial link would be to delegitimize the independent authenticity of the teachings of Jesus in the New Testament by making them appear as if they were simply attempts by Hebrew scribes to connect them to Judaic law.

However, it is doubtful that the author of Matthew himself intentionally devised this parallel, so this thesis tends to be rejected by most contemporary biblical scholars (Keener, 2011). Without further ado, then, the final part of this essay will be devoted to a brief review of these 'discourses' as traditionally discussed in the scholarly literature on Matthew's Gospel. Again,

the 'Kingdom of Heaven' concept looms largely throughout these discourses, making it clear that Matthew conceived of it as a spiritual kingdom, not a physical or earthly one.

a. Sermon on the Mount

The Sermon on the Mount is perhaps one of the most well-known parts of the New Testament especially since it includes the Lord's Prayer and the Beatitudes ("Blessed are the...."). For most Christian believers, the core principles of Christianity and discipleship are contained in what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount to initiate His public ministry. As mentioned earlier, Jesus makes clear in the Beatitudes who will be invited to the 'Kingdom of heaven', the very first one of which are the "poor in spirit".

This expression is often mistaken by socialist-minded scholars and the like to mean blessed are the economically marginalized or simply those mired in poverty. The spiritual meaning of this expression, however, simply refers to the need for human beings to recognize that they are spiritually bankrupt without God. They are like a small sailboat cast out into the ocean of life without an anchor, and God is the navigator that will lead them back home through salvation and eternal life. Besides the poor in spirit, the Sermon on the Mount also makes clear statements about several controversial issues such as divorce, adultery, fornication, lust, worldly versus heavenly treasures, persecution for the sake of righteousness, beware of false prophets, and instructions on how to pray.

b. Mission

In this part of Matthew's Gospel, the apostles of Jesus receive brief instructions on how to conduct themselves and spread the Gospel of the Kingdom. Matt 10:2-3 names these apostles: "The first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; and James the son of Zebedee, and John, his brother; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed Him". The first instruction Jesus gave them was to go to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel...saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand'..." (Matt 10:6-7). There are further instructions to heal the sick, raise the dead, and cast out demons; they are forbidden to carry money belts and to acquire gold or silver.

Jesus also instructs the apostles on how to travel. They are not to take any personal belongings since He will ensure that everything they need will be provided for them. Before they enter a city or village, Jesus instructs them to inquire "who is worthy in it" to stay at their house (Matt 10:8-13). Jesus warns them to beware of hostile reactions to their preaching ("I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves..."), but still they are not to have any fear at those times "...for it will be given to you in that hour what you are to say. For it is not you who speak, but it is the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you" (Matt 10:16-20).

c. Parables of the Kingdom of Heaven

There are numerous parables in Matthew 13 which refer explicitly to the "Kingdom of Heaven", as mentioned earlier in great detail regarding the kingdom of heaven as a core theme in the theology of Matthew cutting across all discourses. The first lengthy part of this discourse takes place near a body of water where Jesus sits in a boat and addresses His disciples and a large crowd that has followed Him there to listen to what He has to say. Many other

parables are mentioned here: the parables about the Sower in the field, the Leaven, the Mustard Seed, and the Tares (or weeds) among the wheat.

After the parables uttered by the water, Jesus then returns back into the house to teach His disciples partly through use of parables: the hidden treasure, a costly pearl, and a dragnet. All throughout these parables, Jesus is at pains to argue that the 'Kingdom of Heaven' is exclusively reserved for the righteous, and at the "end of the age" when God will return to separate the "wicked" from the "righteous" and to throw the former "into the furnace of fire; in that place, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt 13:44-51).

d. Church Discipline

This part refers to Matthew 18 and includes parables about the unforgiving servant and the lost sheep again from within the theological context of the 'Kingdom of heaven'. Here what is emphasized is the appearance in the future of a community of Christian believers or followers of the Gospel of the kingdom and the central role of the disciples in the creation and development of that community. Jesus states clearly in Matthew (18:18-20) what He anticipates for the future: "Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.... For where two or three have been gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst".

What Jesus means here is to extend and apply what he earlier said to Peter when he confessed (in Matt 16:16) that He is "... the Christ, the Son of the living God", and Jesus responds by saying, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven" (Matt 16:19). That is to say, in both the case of Peter and the extension of binding and loosing powers to the rest of the disciples, Jesus appears to be giving them spiritual powers.

He appears to be saying that heaven will ratify the decisions they make either to include or to remove individuals from membership in the community of believers earlier mentioned. Obviously, this is a unique spiritual power awarded by Jesus as a promise and privilege to the twelve disciples to fill a critical role in the history of God's church. And the highest virtues of this community of believers as reflected in Matthew's discourse are self-sacrifice and a childlike humility, emphatically NOT power, authority, status, wealth, property or position. This is the "rock" upon which Jesus wishes to build His church or community of followers, God's people.

e. End-Times

The final discourse in Matthew encapsulates chapters 23 to 25. Since much of this discourse is said to have taken place while Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, it is usually referred to as the Olivet Discourse and refers to the signs of Christ's return. At that time, the disciples came to him privately (no one else listening, apparently) asking, "... What will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?" (Matt 24:3). Presumably, this question refers to the end of the world or the end times and the beginning of the next world after that. Those who believe in Jesus Christ are expected to conduct themselves in particular ways, mostly to be

highly vigilant and attentive and alert to the coming of the final judgment.

Jesus gives a very long response about what they should not do, not just what they should do. They should beware that no one misleads them. There will be many false prophets and many “who come in My name, saying, ‘I am the Christ’ “. There will be “wars and rumors of wars...famines and earthquakes”. But Jesus is very clear that these are still just “the beginning of birth pangs”. Then the worse is yet to come, for “...they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations because of My name.” Still, Jesus insists, the end will not come until “the gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come” (Matt 24:3-14). Clearly, the “kingdom of heaven” is intimately bound up with the final judgment at the “end of the age”.

Footnotes

(1)

The notion of righteousness is intimately associated with the concept of the ‘Kingdom of Heaven’ in Matthean theology. In continually referring to the inappropriate behavior of Jewish religious authorities by highlighting their hypocrisy, deceitfulness, and overriding emphasis on the “external appearances” of faith, “doing deeds to be noticed by men”, not for the rightness of those deeds in and of themselves as examples of the Gospel of the kingdom according to Christ. Matthew appears to be emphasizing the moral or ethical meaning of the term ‘righteousness’ as delineating membership in the community of believers in Christ. So, then, it is the central focus of the identity of these believers, the proper conduct and ways of thinking that identifies members of this community and surely distinguishes them from non-members or outsiders of the believing community. As such, then, Matthew doesn’t appear to be emphasizing so much the soteriological dimension of righteousness although its relation to the possibility for salvation is implicitly acknowledged.

(2)

Here Matthew points out what happens to religious authorities when they begin to associate or consort with political rulers. They compromise their ‘righteousness’ and begin to adopt behaviors and attitudes consonant with the material interests of rulers in the promotion and preservation of their power and authority. Why are Jewish religious leaders there with King Herod in the first place? Well, apparently, the king was quite troubled when he had heard that the magi had followed a star to Jerusalem looking for a newborn “king of the Jews” which had been prophesied in the Old Testament writings, a “Messiah” who would destroy Israel’s enemies and rule over the nation. Herod was troubled because he didn’t want the new “Messiah” to challenge his own power. So, he decides to call all Jewish religious authorities together to try to stop this from happening. From the very start, then, Jewish religious authorities are complicit in the coming crucifixion and death of Jesus even before He begins His public ministry.

(3)

The relationship between Jesus and Moses is central to a proper understanding of Matthean theology. That’s why Matthew employs so many “Jesus-fulfillment” references to cement the connection between Judaic law and Jesus’s birth and ministry. Matthew is constantly at pains to show the core importance of Jesus to Judaic law and Old Testament Scriptures. In doing so, Matthew portrays Jesus as the second Moses, if you will, also appointed by God to liberate the Jewish people from their enemies and to deliver a new ‘law’ to the Jewish people based on new teachings about new codes of earthly conduct and attitudes. When talking about Jesus’s mission, therefore, it was common for New Testament authors to compare the words and deeds of Moses to those of Jesus (Postell et al, 2019).

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