

The Kingdom Program in Matthew's Gospel

By Michael J. Vlach, Ph.D.

mvlach@tms.edu

www.TheologicalStudies.org

The kingdom of God is one of the great themes of Scripture. It is also one of the most debated topics in theology. The kingdom is a subject of disagreement among premillennialists, amillennialists, and postmillennialists. Even among dispensational premillennialists there are differences of thought concerning the nature and timing of the kingdom. For instance, at the 2009 ETS Dispensational Study Group, David L. Turner argued for a progressive dispensational perspective on the kingdom¹ against a traditional dispensational view as espoused by men like Alva J. McClain, Stanley Toussaint, and Charles Ryrie. At the heart of the issue was whether the kingdom had been inaugurated with the first coming of Christ. Thus, while dispensationalists agree on a future earthly millennial kingdom which involves a special role for national Israel, there is debate as to whether the kingdom is entirely future from our current standpoint or is an already/not yet entity with certain aspects of the kingdom being in operation today.

The purpose of this paper is to survey the kingdom as presented in Matthew's Gospel. Since there is near universal acceptance among Christian theologians that Matthew is a gospel about the King and His kingdom, Matthew's Gospel is a good place to start to try to establish a sound kingdom theology. So then, we will examine the nature and timing of the kingdom in Matthew. In regard to "nature" this work will look at whether the kingdom is primarily earthly or spiritual or a combination of these two elements. In regard to "timing" we will survey whether Matthew's Gospel presents the kingdom as present or future or something in between.

The reader should note the survey-nature of this paper. Our main purpose is to offer a broad picture presentation of the kingdom program in Matthew that takes into account the historical flow of events in Matthew's Gospel. Detailed discussion of specific passages is beyond the purpose of this work. Also, although this paper interacts with contrary views, critiquing contrary views is not our primary goal here. Instead, we will look at strategic statements in Matthew that affect the nature and timing of the kingdom. At the end of this paper, we will summarize what we believe is the kingdom program in Matthew's Gospel.

Before examining the kingdom program in Matthew it is helpful to point out certain assumptions that have influenced my understanding of the kingdom and God's purposes in history.² First, I will operate from a new creation model of eschatology.³ This means that I view God's purposes for His creation, including his eschatological purposes, to be holistic—they include matters both spiritual and physical. I am not averse to the idea of a physical kingdom on earth and do not see this as something that has to give way to a primarily spiritual kingdom. The

¹ David L. Turner, "Matthew Among the Dispensationalists: A Progressive Dispensational Perspective on the Kingdom of God in Matthew," unpublished paper for ETS Dispensational Study Group (Nov 2009).

² These are assumptions that I believe are biblical.

³ A new creation model is in contrast to a spiritual vision model which holds that God's primary purposes are mostly spiritual as opposed to physical. For more on the contrast between the new creation model and the spiritual vision model see Craig A. Blaising, "Premillennialism," in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 160–74.

kingdom is a 'both/and' situation not an 'either/or.' The kingdom can have spiritual requirements and characteristics and yet still be physical in nature including social, political, economic, and agricultural elements. The idea of a primarily 'spiritual' kingdom smacks of Platonism and should be rejected.⁴

Second, in line with a new creation model of eschatology, I believe that God is concerned with both individuals and nations as national entities. I do not believe that with Christ's first advent that all of a sudden God's plans for Israel or even other nations has been entirely transcended by individual spiritual salvation.⁵ Passages like Isaiah 2; 19; and Zechariah 14 indicate that God has plans for both Israel and other nations. God's plans for the nation Israel are affirmed in the New Testament (see Matt 19:28; Acts 1:6; Rom 11:26). Nations and kings are even mentioned as part of God's plan for the eternal state (see Rev 21:24, 26). Again, this is a 'both/and' not an 'either/or' scenario.

Third, I believe that human responses can influence the *timing* of fulfillment of some biblical prophecies. Thus, while the certainty of God's purposes is sure because of God's sovereignty, from the human side of the divine/human curtain the timing of fulfillment of some prophecies can be influenced by human obedience or disobedience. Contingency appears to be explicitly taught in Jeremiah 18:7–10 when God says:

“At one moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to uproot, to pull down, or to destroy it; if that nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it. Or at another moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to build up or to plant it; if it does evil in My sight by not obeying My voice, then I will think better of the good with which I had promised to bless it.”

As Toussaint observes in regard to this passage, “Here the response of a nation to God's prophecy may affect its future.”⁶ Contingency is seen with 1 Kings 11:38 when Ahijah the prophet promised Jeroboam that his house would be as enduring as David's if he obeyed God. Ahijah's disobedience, though, disqualified him from experiencing this promise. Jonah prophesied that Nineveh would be destroyed in forty days, but national repentance delayed God's judgment (Jonah 3). In addition, Isaiah told Hezekiah that he would die (2 Kings 20:1) but Hezekiah prayed and was granted fifteen more years of life. Thus, contingency in regard to prophecy must be considered. As will be argued, contingency is a factor when it comes to the timing of the kingdom's establishment.

⁴ We, therefore, strongly reject Bruce K. Waltke's assertion that “in the NT, in contrast to the expectation of Judaism, the kingdom's character is 'heavenly' and 'spiritual,' not 'earthly' and 'political.’” Bruce K. Waltke, “Kingdom Promises as Spiritual,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*, ed. John S. Feinberg (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1988), 270.

⁵ We disagree with George Ladd when he states that the “nationalistic elements in the Jewish concept of the kingdom” are done away with “to lay stress on the spiritual elements” (George E. Ladd, *The Presence of the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 110–11).

⁶ Stanley Toussaint, “The Contingency of the Coming of the Kingdom,” in *Integrity of Heart, Skillfulness of Hands: Biblical and Leadership Studies in Honor of Donald K. Campbell*, eds. Charles H. Dyer and Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 225.

Fourth, while I am not against all ‘already/not yet’ constructs in regard to eschatology,⁷ I find most ‘already/not’ yet assertions in regard to the kingdom to be unsatisfactory. For example, Turner’s claim that Matt 5:3 and 5:10 refer to a present kingdom experience while the verses in between—Matt 5:4–9—are for the future kingdom appears to be somewhat arbitrary to me.⁸ I simply do not find it persuasive to say, “This verse presents an ‘already’ inaugurated kingdom while another verse in the same chapter or book speaks of a future ‘not yet’ kingdom.”⁹ Yes, such a scenario is possible, but is it not also possible that a consistent understanding of the kingdom in Matthew 5 is more likely? I believe that most of the alleged ‘already’ kingdom passages can better be understood consistently in regard to the future coming earthly kingdom. Thus, if a consistent understanding of the kingdom makes sense I am not as apt to look for ‘already not/yet’ scenarios. I agree with Christopher Rowland’s skepticism in this regard:

Despite the fact that the consensus of New Testament scholarship accepts that Jesus believed that the kingdom of God had already in some sense arrived in Jesus’ words and deeds, the fact has to be faced that the evidence in support of such an assumption is not very substantial.¹⁰

Matthew 1–2 (The Promised King)

Matthew 1 introduces the kingdom plan by showing that Jesus is the “Messiah” and has the bloodlines to be the promised Davidic king.¹¹ The “genealogy of Jesus” (1:1) links Jesus with the line of Abraham and David (1:1–17). The connection with David is significant because of the Davidic Covenant (see 2 Samuel 7) and its promise that a descendant in the line of David would have an everlasting rule over Israel. Not only does Jesus have the pedigree to be the Davidic king His birth was promised in the Old Testament by the prophet Isaiah (see 1:22–23). There cannot be a kingdom without a king, thus, Matthew 1 proves that Jesus qualifies to be the King of Israel both by genealogy and Old Testament prophecy. On this issue of Jesus’ right to be King there is agreement among Christian interpreters.

Matthew 2 discusses the reaction of other leaders in response to the newborn King. The “magi from the east” arrived in Jerusalem (2:1) declaring, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him” (2:2). When Herod heard of this he was disturbed (2:3). He inquired more information from the chief priests and scribes:

⁷ I believe there are already/not yet aspects to the Abrahamic and New covenants. There are aspects of these covenants being fulfilled today while the full consummation of these covenants awaits the second coming of Christ.

⁸ Turner, “Matthew Among the Dispensationalists,” 4–5.

⁹ As Robert Saucy states, “In our opinion the statement of the presence of the kingdom deserves more careful consideration than simply saying it is here and it is coming, or some other ‘already/not yet’ terminology.” Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism, The Interface Between Dispensational & Nondispensational Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 99.

¹⁰ Christopher Rowland, *Christian Origins* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1985), 135–36. In Acts 1:6–7, on the day of Jesus’ ascension, it is clear that both the disciples and Jesus viewed the kingdom as a future event when the disciples asked “Lord, is it at this time you are restoring the kingdom to Israel? (1:6). Jesus response that they were not to know the timing of this event indicates that its arrival was still future (1:7).

¹¹ See Douglas R. Hare, *Matthew*, in *Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox, 1993), 8.

They said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet:

‘AND YOU, BETHLEHEM, LAND OF JUDAH,
ARE BY NO MEANS LEAST AMONG THE LEADERS OF JUDAH;
FOR OUT OF YOU SHALL COME FORTH A RULER
WHO WILL SHEPHERD MY PEOPLE ISRAEL’” (2:5–6).

The religious leaders of Israel viewed the coming King as a “ruler” over “Israel.” Herod certainly had this understanding, viewing Jesus’ coming as a threat to his political position.

At this point in Matthew’s Gospel, the understanding is that the kingdom of Messiah would be a political rule over Israel. Matthew does not indicate that the Jewish religious leaders were wrong in their understanding, yet it is also true that the Jewish religious establishment often had incorrect beliefs. Our view, though, is that the perception that the coming Messiah would be a political ruler over Israel is correct. Of course other Scripture will indicate that Jesus would be *more* than a political ruler. He would also be a spiritual savior. But these two concepts are not mutually exclusive. A spiritual Savior can also be a political ruler.

Matthew 3–4 (The Nearness of the Kingdom in the Ministries of John and Jesus)

Matthew 3 offers the biggest interpretive issues thus far in Matthew’s Gospel concerning the nature and timing of the kingdom. The forerunner of the King, John the Baptist, came preaching in the wilderness of Judea. His message was, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (3:2). Matthew refers to this kingdom as the “kingdom of heaven” not “kingdom of God.” “Kingdom of heaven,” as Turner states, “is a distinctively Matthean expression for the kingdom of God. There is little doubt that Matthew uses it in order to avoid mentioning the name of God, which was held in awe by pious Jews.”¹² We agree.

Interpreters, though, have parted ways on the meaning of this brief declaration by John. There are two inter-related issues to consider. First, what specifically is this kingdom (*basileia*) of heaven? And second, in what sense was this kingdom “at hand” (*engiken*)?

Concerning the first issue of the nature of the kingdom, there are three main interpretations. The first view is that John was proclaiming an earthly, physical kingdom. This perspective sees much continuity between the Old Testament kingdom expectation and what John the Baptist was expecting and proclaiming. The second interpretation understands John’s reference to the “kingdom of heaven” as being spiritual. Thus, John was not proclaiming an earthly kingdom but, instead, was announcing a spiritual kingdom of salvation. This view is common among amillennialists and postmillennialists. A third view is that the kingdom has ‘already’ and ‘not-yet’ elements to it. Thus, there is an aspect in which the kingdom had arrived but there is also a sense in which the full manifestation of the kingdom is still future. In discussing the nearness of the kingdom in Matt 3:2 and 4:17, David Turner states, “A common and helpful way to describe the dynamic nature of God’s reign is to say that it has been inaugurated at Jesus’ first coming and will be consummated when he returns.”¹³

¹² David L. Turner, *Matthew*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 107.

¹³ Turner, “Matthew among the Dispensationalists,” 5.

We believe the first view is correct. John was correctly anticipating and proclaiming an earthly kingdom consistent with what was predicted in the Old Testament. Even George E. Ladd, who held that Jesus redirected the Old Testament expectation of an earthly kingdom, declared, “John the Baptist had announced the coming of the Kingdom of God (Matt. 3:2) by which he understood the coming of the Kingdom foretold in the Old Testament.”¹⁴

That John proclaimed an earthly kingdom and not a spiritual kingdom or ‘already/not yet’ kingdom seems evident from the context. John offered no explanation of this kingdom he announced, thus, he fully expected his audience to understand its nature. Ridderbos points out that this “kingdom of heaven” “was not unknown to those to whom this message was addressed, but was rather calculated to find an immediate response with them.”¹⁵ If the Old Testament anticipated an earthly kingdom and John was now proclaiming a spiritual or ‘already’ kingdom, why is there no definition or re-definition of the kingdom offered? The lack of qualifying language appears to indicate that the common expectation of an earthly kingdom was correct. When the Jewish hearers of John’s message heard the term, “kingdom,” an earthly kingdom would come to mind, not a spiritual kingdom over the hearts of men. It seems unlikely that John would have in mind a spiritual kingdom knowing all the while that his hearers would be thinking earthly kingdom. We agree with Alva McClain that, “The absence of any formal definition of the Kingdom in its initial announcement indicates that the Jewish hearers were expected to know exactly what Kingdom was meant.”¹⁶

The second major issue in 3:2 concerns the meaning of “at hand” (*engiken*). In what sense was the kingdom of heaven “at hand”? Two options exist. When John uses “at hand” does he mean “here,” “present,” or “arrived,” or does he mean “drawn near but not yet arrived”? If John means “present” then there must be a sense in which the kingdom of God had actually arrived and was in effect when he made his proclamation. If John means “drawn near” then there is a sense in which the kingdom is imminent or on the brink but had not actually arrived yet.

Scholars like E. Earle Ellis and Darrell Bock have understood *engiken* in this context to mean “arrived.”¹⁷ Thus, the proclamation of the nearness of the kingdom was a statement that the kingdom had arrived in some sense. But we do not see Matt 3:2 as indicating a present arrival of the kingdom in any form. First, in what sense can the forerunner of the King be linked with the arrival of the kingdom? John did not have the authority to bring in the kingdom himself. Second, how could the kingdom have arrived when Jesus’ death, resurrection, ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit had not occurred yet? To believe that the kingdom had arrived in Matt 3:2 is to affirm that the kingdom of heaven could be established before those important events. Also, the Scripture seems to indicate that the Day of the Lord and the events of the coming Tribulation

¹⁴ George E. Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 53–54.

¹⁵ Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1962), 3.

¹⁶ Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom: An Inductive Study of the Kingdom of God* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1959), 276–77.

¹⁷ See E. Earle Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke*, Century Bible (Camden, NJ: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1966), 13, 202–203. Darrell L. Bock, “The Reign of the Lord Christ,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, eds. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 40. Bock is referring to Luke 10:9.

Period must occur before the kingdom arrives (see Matt 25:31).¹⁸ If the kingdom had arrived with John's message in 3:2, how then does one explain the presence of the kingdom before the earthly ministry of Christ, the death of Christ, the resurrection of Christ, the ascension of Christ, and the events of the Day of the Lord?

Second, there is no evidence that the disciples of Jesus viewed themselves as being in the kingdom. In fact, Luke 19:11 indicates that Jesus had to give the parable of the nobleman to convince the disciples that the kingdom would not "appear immediately." Luke 19 proves that late in Jesus' earthly ministry the disciples thought Jesus would soon establish the kingdom, but clearly they did not view themselves as being in the kingdom. It was something they were expecting and not something of which they viewed themselves as being in.

Robert Gundry points out that *engiken* "indicates nearness, right up to, but not including the point of arrival."¹⁹ This rule of God "verges on arrival."²⁰ We agree. Thus, our view is that *engiken* ("at hand") is best understood as "drawn near," not "arrived." This understanding is found in James 5:8; "You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near (*engiken*)." With this verse, the coming of the Lord is on the brink, but not something that had actually occurred. Significantly, Jesus used this term again in Luke 21:31 when discussing the coming of the kingdom after the signs of the end-times events: "So you also, when you see these things happening [end-times events], recognize that the kingdom of God is near (*engus*)." Here, Jesus is saying that signs of the end will indicate the soon coming of the kingdom. If this is the case, then it is difficult to hold that the kingdom was established before the end-times events or during the early ministry of John the Baptist. Thus, Kümmel is correct when he states that *engus* refers to "an event which is near, but has not yet taken place."²¹

It is best to conclude that the nearness of the kingdom in Matt 3:2 meant that the earthly kingdom promised in the Old Testament was on the brink but had not yet arrived. The people of Israel needed to repent and become spiritually qualified for this coming kingdom, but the kingdom had not yet arrived. Interpreting Matt 3:2 as some spiritual form of the kingdom that had arrived seems more an imposition of later spiritualized and already/not yet eschatology schemes than the true meaning of Matthew's Gospel. Perhaps other sections of Matthew will introduce a spiritual kingdom, but at this point it is not in view.

Matthew 4 introduces the proclamation of the kingdom by Jesus: "From that time Jesus began to preach and say, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'" (4:17). The wording of Jesus echoes that of John in 3:2. John most certainly relied upon the Old Testament understanding of an earthly kingdom with his message. But what does Jesus mean when He says the "the kingdom of heaven is at hand"? The simplest answer is that the nature of the kingdom is the same. Jesus offers no redefinition of the kingdom of heaven, nor does he make a distinction

¹⁸ Blaising is correct when he states, "Throughout biblical theology, the eschatological kingdom is seen as coming in its fullness through a Day of the Lord." Blaising, "A Premillennial Response," in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, 74.

¹⁹ Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 43.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

²¹ W. G. Kümmel, *Promise and Fulfillment*, Studies in Biblical Theology 23 (Naperville, Ill.: Allenson, 1957), 19.

between His view of the kingdom and John's view. As Robert Saucy states, "Since He [Jesus] gave no explanation of the meaning of the kingdom in His early proclamation, it seems reasonable to conclude that Jesus assumed His audience knew the meaning of this term."²² Saucy also points out, "It is inconceivable that Jesus, knowing the understanding of his hearers, would not have immediately sought to correct their thinking if he in fact had another concept of the kingdom in mind."²³ Thus, like John, Jesus leads his listeners to assume continuity between the kingdom He is presenting and that discussed in the Old Testament prophets.

Chapters 5–7 (The Sermon of the King)

Matthew 5–7 details Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. This section has important implications for the kingdom program including its nature and timing. Turner argues that the Beatitudes include already and not yet aspects of the kingdom. Supposedly Matt 5:3 and 5:10 indicate already aspects of the kingdom while Matt 5:4–9 emphasizes the future kingdom.²⁴

That Jesus is speaking of already and not yet aspects of the kingdom in Matthew 5:3–10 is not impossible but it seems forced in our opinion. In 5:3, Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." With 5:10, Jesus states, "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Some like Turner rely much on the present tense of "is." Supposedly this shows the kingdom as a present reality for believers even though 5:4–9 is clearly futuristic. But 5:3 and 5:10 can easily be understood in a futuristic sense as well. As Gundry notes, "The present tense of 'is' (see also v 10) needs to be taken futuristically, since we read the future tense in the second halves of the following beatitudes and since in v 12 the phrase 'in heaven' almost demands a futuristic understanding."²⁵ In our view, it is so certain that the poor in spirit and the persecuted will be a part of the kingdom that it can be presented as a present certainty. If you are poor in spirit or persecuted for Christ it is certain that the kingdom of heaven belongs to you. Matthew 5:5 indicates the future and earthly nature of the kingdom when Jesus declared, "Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth."

The futurity of the kingdom is also seen in other passages in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus taught His disciples to pray, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (6:10). God's will is not always completed on earth as it is in heaven, but we are to pray for the day when the kingdom will be established on earth. In that day God's will on earth and heaven will both be accomplished. The fact that Jesus told His disciples to pray for the coming of the kingdom indicates that the kingdom had not arrived at the time of the sermon.

In 7:21, Jesus declared, "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." Jesus then says that it is "on that day" that those who cried "Lord, Lord," but practiced lawlessness will be told to depart from Him (7:22–23). "That day" refers to judgment day when entrance to

²² Robert Saucy, "The Presence of the Kingdom in the Life of the Church," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Jan-Mar (1988), 33.

²³ Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, 87.

²⁴ Turner, "Matthew among the Dispensationalists," 5.

²⁵ Gundry, *Matthew*, 68.

the kingdom of heaven is determined. The coming judgment day precedes the coming of the kingdom of heaven.

In sum, the Sermon on the Mount of Matthew 5–7 reaffirms what has been revealed previously in Matthew. The kingdom of heaven is future and earthly (5:5). It is something we pray to come (6:10) and it will be established in connection with the coming judgment (7:21–22).

Chapter 8 (Gentile Inclusion in the Kingdom Program)

Matthew 8 has implications for the nature and participants of the kingdom. Jesus takes note of the faith of a gentile centurion. The centurion expressed great faith when he showed confidence that Jesus could heal his son without even having to come to him personally. Jesus contrasts this noble faith of a gentile with that of those in Israel: “Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel” (8:10).

Jesus then makes a statement that would have been startling to many Jews who thought their ethnicity alone qualified them for entrance into the kingdom: “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” (8:10–12). The nature of the kingdom presented here is similar to the Old Testament expectation of a literal earthly kingdom with fellowship and feasting. As Toussaint states, “That the Jewish kingdom is in view is well established by the naming of the three patriarchs.”²⁶ He also notes, the verb “to recline” (*anaklino*) “suggests a banquet, a term often used by the Jews to characterize the promised blessings of the prophesied kingdom.”²⁷

What is remarkable here is that some physical descendants of the Jewish patriarchs would be cast out of the kingdom while some Gentiles would actually be a part of this blessed and joyful event. Thus, the kingdom not only will include believing Gentiles it will also exclude unbelieving Jews. It should also be noted that there is a group of people called “sons of the kingdom,” which, according to Gundry, is “a Semitic expression for those who belong, or by privilege should belong, to the kingdom.”²⁸ These “sons of the kingdom” in this context are Jews who should believe but do not. They are “cast out into outer darkness” and are not allowed to enter the kingdom. What is important for our purposes here is that qualifying to be a ‘son of the kingdom’ does not automatically mean that one is presently in the kingdom. If this were the case, unbelieving Jews, who are “sons of the kingdom” would have to be in the kingdom, but clearly they are not. One must be born again to enter the kingdom (see John 3:3).

Chapter 9 (Miracles as Previews of the Kingdom)

Matthew 9:35 states: “Jesus was going through all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness.”

²⁶ Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1980), 124.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Gundry, *Matthew*, 145.

The message of the “gospel of the kingdom” is surrounded by miracles of healing. These miracles draw attention to the legitimacy of Jesus the King, and His kingdom message. They also give glimpses of conditions in the coming kingdom. In the Old Testament, the predicted messianic times included a reversal of conditions since the fall (see Isaiah 65). Healings and exorcisms restore people to health and give exciting previews of what life on earth will be like once the kingdom of the Messiah is established. Yet, previews of the kingdom are not the same as the kingdom fully arriving. Saucy is correct that “miracles of Jesus were exertions of kingdom power, but not yet the kingdom.”²⁹

Chapter 10 (The Nearness of the Kingdom Presented to the Cities of Israel)

This kingdom authority to cast out demons and heal diseases was delegated by Christ to His disciples in 10:1: “Jesus summoned His twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every kind of disease and every kind of sickness.” The ability to do these miracles was to be in the context of the kingdom message to the cities of Israel:

These twelve Jesus sent out after instructing them: “Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as you go, preach, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. Freely you received, freely give” (10:5–8).

From Matthew 10 certain truths about the kingdom program must be noted. First, the message of the kingdom of heaven at this point was not for “Gentiles” or “Samaritans.” Rather it was for “the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” This shows that there is a strong connection between the kingdom and the nation Israel and not just a general call for salvation. As Saucy observes, “If Jesus proclaimed a kingdom consisting only of the spiritual salvation now present for all in the church, why was this message limited to the nation Israel?”³⁰

Many have interpreted Matt 10:5–8 as simply meaning that the Gospel must first go to the Jews and then later to Samaritans and Gentiles. This is true, but the meaning here is more than that. It is more accurate to say that there was a presentation of the kingdom that if accepted by the cities of Israel would bring kingdom blessings. In Luke 19:41–44, Jesus indicated that judgment would come upon Israel since they did not respond appropriately to the message of the King:

When He approached Jerusalem, He saw the city and wept over it, saying, “If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes. For the days will come upon you when your enemies will throw up a barricade against you, and surround you and hem you in on every side, and they will level you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation.”

²⁹ Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, 100.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 88.

This passage from Luke indicates that the people of Israel missed “the things which make for peace.” As a result judgment would come. It is our view that the spiritual salvation of the Jews was at stake with the message of the disciples of Matthew 10. But it is also true that the benefits of the earthly kingdom of Christ were also in view as well.

Second, as part of the proclamation of the kingdom of heaven it was necessary that the disciples be able to cast out demons and heal the sick. Doing such activities would give kingdom previews to the audiences that witnessed these events and would give glimpses of the coming regeneration (Matt 19:28) and restoration of all things (Acts 3:21) that is associated with the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth.

Matthew 11 (Rejection of the Kingdom by the People of Israel)

With Matt 11:11 Jesus makes a statement about the kingdom in relation to John the Baptist: “Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist! Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” Here Jesus pays tribute to John the Baptist and yet also draws attention to the greatness of the coming kingdom. This verse seems to indicate that John the Baptist was not yet in the kingdom of heaven, thus placing the kingdom as still future at this standpoint. As Toussaint notes, “Though John is as great as the greatest of the Old Testament saints, the least in the kingdom which is at hand is greater than John now. This statement further affirms that the kingdom was not then present, otherwise John would certainly have been in it. The kingdom was near and being offered to Israel.”³¹

A strategic statement about the kingdom is also found in Matt 11:12–13 in which Jesus said: “From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force. For all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John.” This section offers significant and even difficult interpretive issues. Something important is taking place in this period—“from the days of John the Baptist until now.” In particular, the kingdom of heaven is suffering violence and violent men are somehow taking the kingdom by force. But in what sense is the kingdom “suffering violence”? The verb *biadzo* is either middle or passive. Some say it should be understood as middle and thus refers to the intense striving needed for disciples to enter the kingdom. Toussaint, though, argues that the verb is passive and that something negative was being done to the kingdom by evil men. First, he points out that the verb has no object. Second the use of *harpadzo* for “take it by force” indicates a violent snatching. Third, the feminine pronoun “it” “shows that the kingdom is that which is being seized.”³² Mounce, too, states, “it is better to take *biazetai* as passive and translate ‘has been enduring violent assault.’”³³ Blomberg translates this verse, “the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent people attack it.”³⁴ Turner appears accurate when he writes, “It is best to understand this difficult passage . . . as teaching the difficult truth that John in prison is learning: the kingdom

³¹ Toussaint, *Behold the King*, 150.

³² *Ibid.*, 151.

³³ Robert H. Mounce, *Matthew*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 104.

³⁴ Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 188.

will not immediately judge God's enemies but will itself be oppressed by them for a time until God vindicates himself and his people."³⁵

What, then, should we conclude from Matt 11:12–13? It appears that Jesus is declaring that the religious leaders of Israel are doing harm to the kingdom. It was certainly true that since the ministry of John began until Jesus' words in Matthew 11, that the religious leaders and Herod intensely opposed John, Jesus, and the message of the kingdom of heaven. Plus, Matt 23:13 indicates that the religious leaders of Israel were not allowing people to enter the kingdom: "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in."

In sum, Matt 11:11–13 teaches that the prophets predicted the coming of the king's forerunner and the kingdom. The response of the leaders of Israel, though, was doing violence to the kingdom. This indicates that there was a real presentation of the kingdom to Israel at this point in Matthew's Gospel, but wicked men were doing violence to it. As Toussaint says, "The King has declared the present condition of the kingdom—it is suffering violence at the hands of the violent men who were the leaders of Israel."³⁶

The rest of Matthew 11 further discusses the rejection of the kingdom message by the leaders and people of Israel. With 11:14 Jesus states, "And if you are willing to accept it, John himself is Elijah who was to come." The conditional particle "if" (*ei*) indicates that if Israel would receive John and his message then he would be the fulfillment of the Malachi 4 prophecy concerning the coming of Elijah. Toussaint notes, "There is scarcely a passage in Scripture which shows more clearly that the kingdom was being offered to Israel at this time."³⁷

Matthew 11:16–19 indicates that there would be no acceptance of John or Jesus, though. This "generation" that John preached to concluded that "He has a demon" (18). They also stated that Jesus was "a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" (19). Matthew 11:20–24 confirms the national rejection of Jesus and the kingdom. Jesus "denounces" the cities of Israel "because they did not repent" (20). To show the wickedness of their rejection of Him, Jesus states that Sodom would fare better on the day of judgment than the cities of Israel. What is clear at this point is that the cities of Israel have not repented and have not embraced the kingdom that was near to them.

Matthew 12 (Rejection of the Kingdom by the Leaders of Israel)

Matthew 12 has significant implications for the kingdom program. This chapter draws attention to the intense hostility of the Jewish religious leaders toward Jesus. The Pharisees challenged Jesus when the disciples were eating heads of grain on the Sabbath (12:1–7). They also challenged Him for healing a man on the Sabbath (12:8–21). Jesus then healed a man who had been possessed by a demon (12:22). This was a strategic point in the ministry of Jesus

³⁵ David L. Turner, *Matthew*, Baker Exegetical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 295. Turner lists Herod the Great, Herod the Tetrarch, and the religious leaders as enemies who do violence to the kingdom (see 294). Luz says, "it is most natural to think of the opponents of John and Jesus who take away the kingdom by force. The general formation includes both political opponents (Herod Antipas) and the religious establishment." Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8–20* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2001), 141.

³⁶ Toussaint, *Behold the King*, 153.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 153.

because of the response of the crowds and the Pharisees. Matthew 12:23 states: “All the crowds were amazed, and were saying, ‘This man cannot be the Son of David, can he?’” The title, “Son of David” is an obvious reference to the Messiah. Seeing a dramatic miracle caused the crowds to ask whether this Jesus of Nazareth was truly the long awaited King of Israel. As the spotlight turns to the religious leaders they offer a negative answer to the question of the crowds. Their answer is—No! Not only is this not the Messiah, this Jesus is under the influence of the powers of darkness—Jesus “casts out demons only by Beelzebul the ruler of the demons” (12:24).

Jesus then says in 12:28: “But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.” Two points should be noticed. First, there is a sense in which the casting out of demons is linked with the presentation of the kingdom. This was the case in 9:35 with Jesus and 10:7–8 with the disciples. Direct suppression of the demon realm characterizes the kingdom. In fact, the binding of Satan is directly connected with the establishing of the millennial kingdom (see Rev 20:1–6). The kingdom had come at this time in the person and work of the King who was standing their midst. Jesus’ point is clear in this exchange. His casting out of demons and doing miracles is not evidence that He is of Satan. It is evidence that the kingdom has come upon Israel and would be established if they would believe and repent. This hardened unbelief that distorts the true meaning of what the Messiah is doing is linked with the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (12:31). This is an unforgivable sin (32).

After these encounters with the Jewish religious leaders the die is cast. Even with full revelation, including the Messiah standing in their presence performing miracles of the kingdom, the leaders of Israel will not believe. From this point onward in the earthly ministry of Christ, *the kingdom will never again be presented as something “at hand” or “near.”* In fact, shortly before His final entrance into Jerusalem Jesus would give a parable to show that the kingdom of God was not “going to appear immediately” (Luke 19:11). The kingdom would only become “near” once again in the distant future with the events of the coming Tribulation period (see Luke 21:31). The promised kingdom of the Old Testament prophets would not be established soon because of the negative reception of it by Israel. New truth concerning the kingdom program would now be given with Matthew 13.

Matthew 13 (Mysteries Concerning the Kingdom)

Matthew 13 is an important chapter regarding the kingdom program since for the first time Jesus begins to speak in parables as He reveals “mysteries” or new information about the kingdom of heaven. Scholars are in general agreement that Jesus is revealing truths about the kingdom in the inter-advent age between His two comings, but the content of these “mysteries” is much disputed. Is Jesus presenting a new form of the kingdom, a mystery form which is the church? Is Jesus indicating that a spiritual kingdom will grow in the inter-advent age? Or is He is describing the spread of the message of the kingdom without claiming that the kingdom itself is established in this inter-advent period?

Matthew 13 must be understood in light of the events preceding this chapter, especially chapters 11 and 12. The kingdom promised by the Old Testament prophets was “at hand”—its coming was on the brink. In fact, it was present in the person, words, and works of Jesus. All that needed to happen was a national recognition of the Messiah and repentance from both the people and leaders of Israel. Instead, the King and His kingdom were met with hostility and rejection

and violence had been done to the kingdom program. Matthew 13 marks a dramatic shift in the kingdom program as Jesus withdraws from widescale proclamation of the kingdom to the cities of Israel and begins to share new truths or “mysteries” concerning the kingdom with His disciples. Matthew 13:11–13 states:

Jesus answered them, “To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted. For whoever has, to him more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him. 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.”

The key phrase here is “mysteries of the kingdom of heaven.” “Mysteries” are new truths and these new truths are about the “kingdom of heaven.” Jesus indicates that the purpose of the mysteries is to reveal new truths to those who believe and to hide truth from those who have hardened their hearts. This indicates a strong discontinuity from what had been taking place before. Up until this point the gospel of the kingdom was proclaimed openly and clearly to the cities and leaders of Israel. Now Jesus is withdrawing from the crowds and offering new truths to his circle of disciples.

As mentioned, the parables of Matthew 13 describe conditions between the two advents of Christ. While the Old Testament predicted both a Suffering Servant and a Reigning Messiah, it did not explicitly state that there would be two comings of Jesus, separated by a considerable period of time. Matthew, thus, discusses kingdom conditions between His comings.

The parable of the Sower (13:3–9; 18–23) indicates that there will be various responses to the Gospel. Verse 19 states: “When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is the one on whom seed was sown beside the road.” Thus the message preached in this inter-advent age is related to the “kingdom.” Some will receive the Word and be saved while others will not.

Starting in 13:24 the kingdom of heaven is likened to “a man who sowed good seed in his field.” Thus, the parable of the wheat and the tares (13:24–30, 34–43) indicates that sons of the kingdom and nonbelievers will co-exist until Jesus comes again and sets up His kingdom. Then he will separate the tares (unbelievers) from the wheat (believers). An interpretive issue must be decided in 13:41 when it is said that the “Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness.” Does this mean that Jesus is coming to an already established kingdom? Probably not. As Saucy explains:

This [Matt 13:40–43] does not suggest that the righteous are presently in some inaugurated kingdom on earth but not “shining.” The wheat and the weeds are growing in the same field—that is, the world, which is never identified as the kingdom. Furthermore, as we have seen, the weeds are cast out of the kingdom, but this is only with its coming at the end of the age with the return of Christ. They could not be said to be “in the kingdom” today. It is preferable, therefore, to interpret this future “shining” in the kingdom as relating to the future establishment of the kingdom. We concur with Kümmel

that this parable does not speak of “the present growth and existence of the Kingdom of God.”³⁸

Jesus likened the kingdom of heaven to a mustard seed and leaven in 13:31–33:

He presented another parable to them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field; and this is smaller than all other seeds, but when it is full grown, it is larger than the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that THE BIRDS OF THE AIR come and NEST IN ITS BRANCHES.” He spoke another parable to them, “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three pecks of flour until it was all leavened.”

Both parables, of which an explanation is not given, link the kingdom with small beginnings that eventually explode into something large and grand. Does this indicate that the kingdom of God is established in this inter-advent age and that it is growing?

While we do not agree with the view that the kingdom itself has been established in the present age, there are two important aspects associated with the kingdom that are in operation. First, the message of salvation—the gospel—that if believed qualifies one for entrance into the kingdom is growing in this inter-advent age. Second, Jesus refers to “sons of the kingdom”—those who have believed in the kingdom message and are qualified to enter the kingdom. Thus, the number of sons of the coming kingdom is growing. Thus, while the kingdom itself awaits establishment at the second coming, the kingdom message and sons of that coming kingdom continue to grow. These twin truths will culminate in the establishment of the kingdom when the King, Jesus, comes in glory and sits on His glorious throne (see Matt 25:31).

Jesus also likened the kingdom of heaven to a hidden treasure and a costly pearl in 13:44–46:

The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid again; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, and upon finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

These parables speak of the value of the kingdom and the intense desire that must accompany those who seek to enter it. One should value the kingdom above all else. Matthew 13:47–50 records the parable of the dragnet. At “the end of the age” (13:49) the angels will “take out the wicked from among the righteous.”

In light of the rejection of the King in Matthew 11 and 12, chapter 13 reveals important new truths about the kingdom plan. The kingdom will not be established with Christ’s first earthly ministry, but there must be an inter-advent age. Yet this period between the two comings of Christ is still related to the kingdom program. A spiritual nucleus called “sons of the kingdom,” those who have believed the “word of the kingdom,” is being formed and growing in this inter-advent age. These sons of the kingdom are also to evidence kingdom righteousness in their lives (see Rom 14:17). But the kingdom itself will not be established until the second

³⁸ Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, 100–01.

coming of Jesus. Matthew 19:28 and 25:31 link Jesus' kingdom reign with the second coming, the transformation of the earth, and the coming judgment. So even after Matthew 13 the kingdom is still presented as future.

Thus, two extremes must be avoided. First, it is erroneous to deny any connection between the kingdom and the present age. Second, it is incorrect to hold that the kingdom has been established in this age. Other Scriptures point to this balance. Colossians 1:13 indicates that Christians have been transferred to Christ's kingdom, but this kingdom is linked with our "inheritance" (Col 1:12) which is clearly future. In Revelation 5:10 we are told that the saints have been made a "kingdom" yet the reign of this kingdom is future ("and they will reign upon the earth"). Matthew 13 does not indicate a change in the nature of the kingdom but it does present new truth about the timing of its establishment and how it relates to the inter-advent age.

Matthew 14 and 15 (Death of the Kingdom's Forerunner)

With Matthew 14 we learn that the first herald of the kingdom, John the Baptist, was beheaded (14:10). Earlier Jesus had declared "If you are willing to accept it, John himself is Elijah who was to come." But both people and leaders had not accepted him. In Matthew 15 a Canaanite woman came to Jesus for mercy for her daughter who was possessed by a demon (15:22). Jesus did help the woman, but not before declaring, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Thus, indicating that Jesus' early ministry was for the nation Israel and not the Gentile world, which it would later become (see Matt. 28:19).

Matthew 16–17 (A Kingdom Preview)

These chapters also have strategic information concerning the nature and timing of the kingdom of heaven. Upon Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, Jesus announces for the first time His future plans for the building of His church (16:18). There is another first to soon follow. Jesus' words in Matthew 16:21–24 are also his first prediction concerning His soon suffering. The disciples, who earlier were told that the kingdom was "at hand" must now adjust to the difficult idea that their King was going to suffer on the cross. Peter rebuked Jesus for this idea and was himself rebuked by Jesus (16:22–23). Jesus' words at the end of chapter 16 help show the relationship of the kingdom to the suffering of the King:

"For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and WILL THEN REPAY EVERY MAN ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS. Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom" (16:27–28).

After the predictions of His death, Jesus makes declarations concerning his coming, judgment, and kingdom. Why does Jesus make these statements and how does this impact the nature and the timing of the kingdom? First, the context of this heavily eschatological passage is important for a proper understanding. In the verses immediately before this passage, Jesus announced His death for the first time (16:21). This was a shock to the disciples who were expecting Jesus to reign over Israel—not be executed. One natural question that would arise in the midst of such discussion is—what about the kingdom? It may be that Jesus' words in 16:27–28 were an affirmation that in spite of coming suffering, God's kingdom program was still in effect. A preview of Jesus' coming and kingdom was given in 17:1–13 with the account of the

Transfiguration. This event served as a powerful reminder of Jesus' "power and glory" (see 2 Pet 1:16) for the apostles even after Jesus ascended. In sum, the words of Jesus in Matthew 16:27–28 and the events of Matthew 17 were powerful proofs that even though the Messiah would be killed, the kingdom would someday be established.

Matthew 18–19 (The Kingdom, the Regeneration, and the Restoration of Israel)

The subject in Matt 18:1–6 is greatness in the kingdom. "At that time the disciples came to Jesus and said, 'Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?'" (18:1). Jesus' answer is that greatness is linked to being humble like a child. When the kingdom is established those who are great in it will be those who evidenced humility. Matthew 19:27–28 links the coming of the kingdom with the restoration of Israel:

Then Peter said to Him, "Behold, we have left everything and followed You; what then will there be for us?" And Jesus said to them, "Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."

This section clearly places the kingdom in the future. It discusses the time when "the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne." This refers to the Davidic throne that the Messiah would sit upon as He ruled the nations from Jerusalem. This kingdom rule is linked with "the regeneration" which is a reference to the coming renewed and renovated earth as predicted in the Old Testament prophets (see Isa 65). This kingdom reign is also tied to the restoration of the twelve tribes of Israel which is also the topic of much Old Testament prophecy. This reign of Jesus from His glorious Davidic throne is not currently taking place, but it will when the events of the second coming bring in the regenerated earth and restoration of national Israel. This verse is clear testimony that the kingdom had not arrived but is still future.

Matthew 20

With Matthew 20:1–16, Jesus likens the kingdom to a landowner's relationship to his laborers. This shows God's sovereignty in regard to rewarding His servants. In 20:20–28, the issue of being great in the kingdom of heaven is at the fore as the mother of James and John, with her two sons, ask that James and John sit on the right and left of Jesus in the kingdom (20:21). Two points should be noticed here. First, James and John, with their mother, perceive the kingdom in connection with the Old Testament prophetic picture of an earthly kingdom with ruling positions. It is when the kingdom is established that they hope they can have ruling positions on Jesus' right and left hand. There is no indication here that the disciples viewed themselves as existing in an already present spiritual kingdom. Second, as Toussaint has noted, "the Lord does not dispute the disciples' concept of the kingdom,"³⁹ and in refusing to do so affirms that their expectation was correct. At this late date in Jesus' ministry, Jesus and the disciples view the kingdom as being in the future. Jesus does not rebuke them for having wrong conceptions of the kingdom but does indicate that a decision concerning positions of authority lies with the Father and that greatness comes through humility and serving others. We can say that "The disciples were prepared for the coming of the kingdom, but not positions in it."⁴⁰

³⁹ Toussaint, *Behold the King*, 233.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 233.

Matthew 21–22 (Coming Judgment for Unbelief)

Matthew 21 presents the entry of Jesus the King into Jerusalem. Jesus came into Jerusalem on a donkey to directly fulfill the prophecy of Zech 9:9. The crowds recognized the messianic significance of this event by shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David; BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD; Hosanna in the highest!” (21:9). While the crowds praised Jesus with their voices their hearts were not morally prepared for the King. Days later they would shout “Crucify Him!” Luke 19:41–42 indicates that on this day Jesus wept over the city since the people of Israel missed “the things which make for peace.” Jesus also predicted judgment for the people since “You did not recognize the time of your visitation” (see Luke 19:44). The peace of the kingdom could have come but instead there would be judgment upon Jerusalem and its inhabitants.

The parable of the landowner (21:33–46) and the parable of the marriage feast (22:1–14) reiterate the truth of Matthew 8 that the Jewish leaders would not be part of the kingdom while others would. Matthew 21:43 has important implications concerning who will experience the kingdom: “Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people, producing the fruit of it.” This statement of Jesus has more to do with participants of the kingdom and not so much with its nature and timing. The context indicates that the leaders of Israel, who had the message of the kingdom proclaimed to them, are going to have the kingdom taken from them and given to another. Most commentators believe this nation is the soon-coming “church” and link it with 1 Pet 2:9–10. Others link it with a future believing nation of Israel, the nation that will cry out in belief and accept her Messiah (see Matt 23:39).

Matthew 23 (Woes to Those Who Shut Off the Kingdom)

Matthew 23 describes Jesus’ woes to the Pharisees. Verse 13 has special implications in regard to the kingdom:

But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.

This verse parallels the truth found in 11:12–13. Since the religious leaders resisted the king and the presentation of the kingdom they were hindering the kingdom’s coming and thus the ability of people to enter it. McClain points out that the rejection of Jesus by the leaders of Israel “effectually shut the door to the Kingdom offered by God through His Son upon earth.”⁴¹ He also says, “It must be observed here that, if the teaching of verse 13 were limited to the matter of personal salvation through Christ, it could hardly be true. For in this sense the Pharisees could shut no one out of the Kingdom of God. But they could and did, by their obstinate rejection of the Messianic King, shut both themselves and all the Israel of that generation out of His promised Kingdom, in the sense that its establishment is now, by the course of events, set at a second advent of the King.”⁴²

Matthew 23:37–39 presents a picture of both judgment and hope for Jerusalem. Because the people of Israel had killed the prophets of God, the city would be left “desolate” (23:38). But

⁴¹ McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, 357.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 358.

this judgment would only be for a finite time period: “For I say to you, from now on you will not see Me until you say, ‘BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD!’” Craig S. Keener rightly notes the hope in this passage:

This passage reminds us that God does not forget his promises to his people. . . . Matthew places it among the woes of coming judgment, but in so doing transforms this into a promise of future hope. . . . Israel’s restoration was a major theme of the biblical prophets and reappeared at least occasionally in early Christianity (Rom 11:26), though the emphasis of early Christian apologetic came to focus on the Gentile mission.⁴³

Matthew 24–25 (The Kingdom after Tribulation)

Matthew 24 and 25 give us Jesus’ Olivet Discourse. These chapters are eschatological in that Jesus discusses the signs of His coming and the end of the age (24:3). Jesus predicts “the tribulation of those days” (24:29) and the many events that make up this period. Matthew 25:31 indicates that the coming of the kingdom is linked with the second coming of Jesus to earth: “But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne.” Sitting upon the “glorious throne” is connected with the establishment of the kingdom. This verse indicates that the coming of the kingdom is established when Jesus comes in glory with “all the angels.” It is at this time that “all the nations will be gathered before Him” (25:32). After His coming and in connection with the judgment of this time, Matthew 25:34 states, “Then the King will say to those on His right, ‘Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.’” Those on the “right,” the sheep, are clearly believers. It is at this time that these believers “inherit the kingdom” that has been prepared for them. There is no indication that these believers were already in the kingdom in a spiritual sense, since the entering of the kingdom takes place after the judgment. In sum, the Olivet Discourse of Matthew 24–25 places the establishment of the kingdom after the end times events of the Tribulation.

Matthew 26–28 (Death and Resurrection of the King)

Matthew 26 describes the events immediately prior to the crucifixion. Jesus links His death with the new covenant (26:28). In verse 29 Jesus then says, “But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father’s kingdom.” Again, the kingdom is presented as futuristic and tangible. As Toussaint states, “By these words, the Lord looks forward to the time when the kingdom will be on earth. Finally, by these words the Lord indicates that the disciples are to live and labor in anticipation of seeing the Messiah with them in God’s millennial kingdom.”⁴⁴

When before Caiaphas at one of Jesus’ trials, Jesus told the high priest, “I tell you hereafter you will see THE SON OF MAN SITTING AT THE RIGHT HAND OF POWER AND COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF HEAVEN” (26:64). Here Jesus predicts His second coming and kingdom, relying on the prophecy of Dan. 7:13. Matthew 27 describes the crucifixion. The sign above Jesus’ head read, “THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS.”

⁴³ Craig S. Keener, *Matthew*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 341.

⁴⁴ Toussaint, *Behold the King*, 303.

With the final chapter, Matthew 28, Jesus is resurrected and appears to His disciples and friends. In 28:18 Jesus declares, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.” This authority is the basis for the disciples mandate to “make disciples of all the nations” (19). This universal authority does not mean that the full manifestation of the kingdom has taken place. In Acts 1:6–7 Jesus told the disciples that it was not for them to know the timing of the kingdom, which meant that it was still future. With His resurrection and ascension Jesus has full authority over the universe and has the ability to usher in the kingdom according to God’s sovereign timetable.

Summary of the kingdom in Matthew’s Gospel

The following is a summary of the kingdom program in Matthew:

1. The kingdom in Matthew’s gospel as proclaimed by John the Baptist and Jesus is an earthly kingdom that has continuity with the kingdom predicted in the Old Testament prophets.
2. The kingdom was “at hand” in that it was near and imminent, conditioned on Israel repentance and belief in Jesus. The kingdom itself was not established.
3. Part of this nearness of the kingdom was the personal presence of the King, the words of the King, and the miracles of the King.
4. The leaders and people of Israel hindered the coming of the kingdom by not repenting and believing in the King.
5. When it became clear that the leaders and people of Israel would not believe in the King the kingdom was no longer presented as being “at hand.”
6. Jesus then began to reveal new truths or “mysteries” concerning the kingdom of heaven. These mysteries describe the relationship of the kingdom between the two comings of Jesus.
7. In between the two comings of Jesus the message of the kingdom would spread as would the number of those who believe in the King. Those who believe are called “sons of the kingdom.”
8. After Jesus announced His death, He gave His disciples a preview and glimpse of His coming and kingdom with the Transfiguration experience. This would show that the cross did not mean there would not also be a kingdom someday.
9. Jesus still presents His kingdom reign as future in connection with the regeneration of the planet and national Israel’s restoration.
10. Jesus will assume His throne at the time of the second coming. It is at this time that judgment will take place to see who will enter the kingdom.