

On “kingdom of heaven”¹

ἡγγικεν γὰρ ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν. Compare 3:2 and 10:7. For the historical Jesus the kingdom of God, which was at the heart of his proclamation and thus fairly belongs to a summary statement, primarily signified not the territory God rules or will rule—it was not just a place, like Shangra La—but God’s eschatological activity as ruler. In its fullness, this rule, whose creator is indicated by the genitive, was still unrealized, and its arrival (conceived of partially as a judgement) would mark the end or transformation of the world, the restoration of an idyllic, paradisaical state in which God’s will would be perfectly realized. Note especially Mt 6:10a = Lk 11:2a; Mt 8:11 = Lk 13:28–9; and Mk 14:25. For discussion and literature see Allison, pp. 101–41; idem, ‘A Millennial Kingdom in the Teaching of Jesus?’, *IBS* 7 (1985), pp. 46–52; Beasley-Murray; B. Chilton, ed., *The Kingdom of God*, Issues in Religion and Theology, London, 1984; and Sanders, *Jesus*, esp. pp. 123–56. See also on 5:5 and 8:11.

Yet God’s rule was also spoken of by Jesus as already present, and this claim, although not unique, was at least distinctive. Especially important is Mt 12:28 = Lk 11:20, a statement whose meaning is explicated in the synoptic tradition by sundry images. Satan has already been cast out of heaven (Lk 10:18) and bound (Mk 3:27). There is new wine (Mk 2:22). In the midst of Israel is something greater than Solomon or Jonah (Mt 12:41–2 = Lk 11:31–2). Even today the sons of Abraham can open their eyes and see what the prophets and righteous only longed to see (Mt 13:16–17 = Lk 10:23–4).

Now the conjunction of statements about the presence of the kingdom with statements about its future coming appear to entail a dilemma, one horn of which has been grasped by some (‘consistent eschatology’), the other horn by others (‘realized eschatology’). But it seems best to strive for harmony. Only overly sceptical dissection or misinterpretation can remove from Jesus’ preaching of the kingdom either its future or its present elements. Assuming, then, that neither ‘realized eschatology’ nor ‘consistent eschatology’ is in itself quite adequate, perhaps the best solution involves the idea of an extended time. Not unlike the program in Deutero-Isaiah—a section of Scripture which presumably influenced Jesus—the advent of God’s kingdom did not, for Jesus, belong to a moment but constituted a series of events that would cover a period of time (cf. Gaston, p. 414). A similar conception is present in Jubilees 23, in which the age of blessedness enters the stage of history a step at a time (cf. Allison, pp. 17–19). And in the so-called Apocalypse of Weeks, 1 En. 93 + 91:12–17, the eschatological transition is a protracted process. So the seeming contradiction between the presence of the kingdom and its futurity is dissolved when one realizes that Jewish thinking could envision the final events—the judgement of evil and the arrival of the kingdom of God—as extending over time, and as a process or series of events that could involve the present. When Jesus announces that the kingdom of God has come and is coming, this means that the last act has begun but not yet reached its climax: the last things have come and will come.

If we have rightly understood Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom, it follows that Matthew’s views are in line with those of his Lord (and of much of the early church in general), for, as we shall see throughout this commentary, Matthew thinks in terms of a complex of prophesied

¹ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (International Critical Commentary; London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 389–392.

events, some of which have taken place (e.g., the Messiah has appeared and there have been resurrections), some of which are taking place (see, e.g., 10:16–23), and some of which will take place in the near future (see, e.g., the parables of chapter 25). But here we must pause and ask how all this is reflected in Matthew's diction. Our evangelist usually writes about the 'kingdom of heaven' while 'kingdom of God', the expression so often found in Mark and Luke, occurs only in 12:28; 19:24; 21:34, 43; and textually doubtful is 6:33. Matthew does not explain 'kingdom of heaven'; it is used as though the readers are expected to know what it means. Most scholars assume that 'kingdom of heaven' is the equivalent of 'kingdom of God', 'heaven' being a periphrasis for God, perhaps under rabbinic influence. More than one scholar, however, has argued otherwise: 'kingdom of heaven' does not equal 'kingdom of God'. On this view, especially as propounded at length by M. Pamment, 'kingdom of heaven' refers to a wholly future and imminent reality while 'kingdom of God' denotes God's sovereignty which can be experienced in the present. Should this distinction be upheld? The futurity of 'kingdom of heaven' certainly seems well-founded; but a present reference cannot be altogether omitted from 11:11 and especially 11:12 (see the commentary). Moreover, only by special pleading can a future reference be eliminated from all the 'kingdom of God' sayings, 6:10 and 21:31 being decisive. Also particularly troublesome for the proposal under review is 19:23–4. Here 'kingdom of heaven' and 'kingdom of God' stand in what most commentators take to be parallel sentences. 'How difficult is it for the rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven' (v. 23). 'It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man (to enter) into the kingdom of God' (v. 24). What could be the distinction between 'kingdom of God' and 'kingdom of heaven' in these two verses? Finally, it should be noted that Matthew uses not only 'kingdom of heaven' and 'kingdom of God' but also 'kingdom of my Father', 'kingdom of the Son of man', and the absolute, 'the kingdom'. We are not told by proponents of the view under scrutiny how all of these expressions are to be related to one another; and the absolute use of 'the kingdom' in particular seems perplexing and misleading if Matthew were making the distinction proposed.

If we are not persuaded that a difference exists between 'kingdom of God' and 'kingdom of heaven', neither are we satisfied with Gundry's account of Matthew's fondness for the latter. For Gundry the term stresses the majesty of God's universal dominion (cf. Dan 4:1–37); it also prevents Matthew's readers from wrongly thinking that God the Father rules to the exclusion of the Son: 'heaven' encompasses them both. In our judgement this account leaves unexplained the several occurrences of 'kingdom of God' and particularly the two occurrences of 'kingdom of my Father'. Perhaps what needs to be injected into the discussion is this: the variation between 'kingdom of heaven' and 'kingdom of God' in Matthew is simply one instance of a phenomenon wider than the First Gospel. The Gospel of Thomas uses 'kingdom of heaven' alongside 'kingdom of the Father' and 'the kingdom', and no distinction in meaning is apparent (see e.g. 3, 20, 22, 54, 57, 76, 114). Similarly, while Mark almost always has 'kingdom of God', also attested are the synonyms 'my kingdom' and 'the kingdom of our father David'. And Luke, who uses 'kingdom of God' thirty-two times, sometimes writes of 'his kingdom' (once of Jesus, once of the Father), 'the kingdom', 'your kingdom' (once of Jesus, once of the Father), and 'my kingdom' (twice of Jesus). Note also the variation between 'kingdom of God' and 'kingdom of heaven' in the Testament of Jacob (2:25; 7:11, 19, 20, 23, 27; 8:3) and the Testament of Isaac (1:7; 2:8; 8:5–6). Further, in all three synoptic gospels we find 'heaven' sometimes but not always used as a periphrasis for God (e.g. Mt 3:17; Mk 11:31; Lk 11:16); and it seems safe to claim that Jesus himself did not shrink from speaking of God yet also frequently used periphrasis (cf. Jeremias, *Theology*, pp. 9–14, 97). All this leads us to think of 'kingdom of heaven' as

nothing more than a stylistic variation of 'kingdom of God'. For the most part, Matthew used periphrasis; but no more than with Jesus was this usage inflexible. So 'kingdom of heaven' equals 'kingdom of God'. Both denote God's rule, present and coming.

ἐγγίζω is used of the kingdom of heaven in 3:2; 4:17; and 10:7. The meaning is probably, 'on the point of arrival', 'at the door'. The kingdom is imminent but not yet present. Thus 12:28, where the kingdom has already come, means something different.