The Kingdom of Heaven in the Gospel of Matthew

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One does not have to read very far in the Gospel of Matthew before noticing that the Evangelist has a distinctive way of speaking about the kingdom of God—by using the phrase "the kingdom of heaven" (ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν). This phrase is not only frequent in Matthew (thirty-two occurrences), but is also unique compared to the other Gospels, the rest of the New Testament, and all literature preceding Matthew. It is not until writings that post-date the NT that we begin to encounter this Matthean way of talking about God's kingdom. Indeed, in the second-century and beyond, this phrase becomes a dominant mode of expression in Christian writings, undoubtedly due to the great influence that the First Gospel had on subsequent Christianity.

This article will explore the meaning of Matthew's distinctive expression "the kingdom of heaven" and suggest that Matthew's careful choice of words has great theological import and practical application for the ongoing mission of the church.

The Centrality of the Kingdom

In recent years there has been a spiked increase in talk about the kingdom of God—in the academy, from the pulpit, and in the pews. The issue of the journal you are holding is evidence of the same. This trend to think about the Bible's message in terms of the kingdom is a helpful and important move because there is no doubt that the kingdom is the central message of Jesus' teaching. Moreover, a good argument can be made that the same is true for the rest of the Scriptures, Old and New.[1] Of course, there is nothing new under the sun, including in theological discussion, and we would be both ignorant and shortsighted to think that we are the first generation to discover the centrality of the kingdom in Scripture. Nevertheless, each age does have its blind spots, and it seems that our recent predecessors—especially our evangelical forerunners—have not frequently spoken of the kingdom nor seen it as the unifying theme of Scripture. Each generation has its own theological battles to fight, views to articulate, and contributions to make. We can be thankful to be living in time when the beauty and power of the message of God's kingdom is again becoming a central point of discussion and reflection.

I asserted above that the message of the kingdom is the central theme in Jesus' ministry. This understanding is widely accepted by students of the Gospels and can even be said to be a rare example of a truth that is held as a consensus among all Gospels scholars. Each of the Synoptics clearly portrays Jesus' ministry as one that focuses on the kingdom, but Matthew stands out among the Evangelists. At the basic level of vocabulary, we see that Matthew uses βασιλεία some fifty-five times in a wide variety of phrases, including "kingdom of heaven," "kingdom of God," "the Father's kingdom," and simply, "the kingdom." This is more often than

any of the other Gospels. It is also more frequent than the rest of the NT documents combined.[2] Additionally, we see that throughout Matthew the kingdom appears at crucial points in the story, such as at the introduction of John the Baptist (3:2) and the beginning of Jesus' ministry (4:17). In both cases, the message preached is that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. And when Jesus subsequently sends his own disciples out they are told to preach the same message: "As you go, preach, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is near.'" (10:7). Similarly, at several of the structural seams in Matthew, we encounter another of Matthew's unique and intriguing phrases, "the gospel of the kingdom" (4:23; 9:35; 24:14). Additionally, much of Jesus' teaching repeats the kingdom theme. The Beatitudes are framed with reference to the kingdom of heaven (5:3, 10). Entering the kingdom is what Jesus exhorts people to do (5:19-20; 7:21; 18:3; 21:31; 23:13). The great Christian prayer—the Lord's Prayer—has at its heart the request for God's kingdom to come to earth (6:10). And Jesus gives a whole series of parables in chapter 13 (and then again in chapters 20 and 22) which describe what the kingdom is like. The point is clear. Over and over again, in a variety of ways, Matthew (along with his fellow Evangelists) makes the reader aware of the central message of Jesus: the coming kingdom of God.

The Kingdom of Heaven—Not a Reverential Circumlocution

As stated above, Matthew's typical way of describing the kingdom—as "the kingdom of heaven"—is also unique to him. Not until sometime later do we find this expression used in other literature, and often those places are dependent on Matthew. This striking fact has led many scholars to ask why Matthew speaks in this unexpected way. The common understanding for at least a century has been that Matthew uses "kingdom of heaven" instead of "kingdom of God" out of a desire to avoid using the word "God"—what we might call a reverential circumlocution.[3] The argument is that when one compares Matthew's use of "kingdom" with the other Synoptic Gospels, it appears that he has simply replaced the original "kingdom of God" sayings with his favorite "kingdom of heaven." This understanding is combined with the fact that there certainly was a tendency in Judaism to avoid pronouncing and writing the divine name. This avoidance was accomplished through a variety of techniques such as using "divine passive" verb forms and substituting other names for God such as "The Name," "Adonai," and "The Most High."

I do not have space here to elaborate upon the many problems with this common view, but suffice it to say that this reverential circumlocution explanation for Matthew's "kingdom of heaven" proves indefensible. To put the argument succinctly, it is clear that Matthew is *not* studiously avoiding the use of "God" (θέος) by employing the phrase ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν because he does indeed use ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ four times (12:28; 19:24; 21:31, 43)[4] and in fact uses θέος freely all throughout the Gospels (fifty-one times). Additionally, while circumlocutionary techniques are undoubtedly in use in the first century, there is no evidence that "heaven" was being used for this purpose during that time.[5]

So, if Matthew's phrase "the kingdom of heaven" is not used simply to avoid the word "God," then what is its purpose?

The answer is found in recognizing that Matthew's "kingdom of heaven" language is but one part of an elaborate theme of "heaven and earth" woven all throughout the First Gospel. Recognizing this theme sheds light on Matthew's choice to speak of the kingdom in this unique way, and it also reveals a deep and powerful theological point—the apocalyptic and eschatological contrast between heaven and earth.

The Four-Fold "Heaven and Earth" Theme in Matthew

When one begins to recognize the language of heaven and "heaven and earth" in Matthew, it is striking to see how frequent and important this theme is. Not only does Matthew use "heaven" (οὐρανός) and "heavenly" (οὐράνιος) very frequently,[6] he employs this language in a variety of key formulas and at crucial points in the narrative and teaching discourses. Closer examination reveals that Matthew develops the theme of "heaven and earth" in four important ways. I will review these briefly.

(1) Singular Versus Plural Pattern of Heaven (Οὐρανός)

The first way in which Matthew develops the theme of heaven and earth is through an intentional use of the word "heaven" with different nuances in the singular and plural forms. In addition to his frequent use of the word, one of the unexpected things about Matthew's employment of οὐρανός is that he prefers to use plural forms of the word over the singular (fifty-five and twenty-seven, respectively). This may not at first seem odd until one understands that plural forms of οὐρανός are quite rare in ancient Greek, and even in the Greek version of the Old Testament they are quite uncommon (8 – 9 percent). Plural forms are becoming more frequent in the time of the NT, but they are still not the normal parlance for this word. In fact, Matthew's uses comprise 61 percent of the plural forms in the NT. Now all of this may still seem to be irrelevant data or simply coincidence until one begins to see that there is an intentional pattern at play here. That pattern functions in this way: Matthew generally uses οὐρανός in the singular to refer to the visible (earthly) world and in "heaven and earth" pairs, and he uses the plural to refer to the invisible (divine) realm. This plural notably includes Matthew's expressions "kingdom of heaven" and "Father in heaven." We can begin to see that there is much thought going on behind Matthew's use of the word "heaven" and that it hinges on a heavenly realm versus earthly realm distinction.

(2) Heaven and Earth Pairs

"Heaven and earth" is a very important biblical phrase, from its first appearance in Gen 1:1 throughout to its use at the end of John's Revelation. Of all the NT authors, no one uses this phrase more often than Matthew. And he *particularly* develops it into a theme in his Gospel. Heaven and earth are connected over twenty times in some form in Matthew. In comparison, Mark has only two instances of the heaven and earth pair and Luke five. Moreover, the language of "heaven and earth" as contrasting realities is found at the most important theological points throughout the Gospel such as in the Lord's Prayer (6:9-10), the ecclesiological passages (16:17-19; 18:18-19), and the Great Commission (28:18-20). Again, it is not difficult to see that Matthew is consciously developing a heaven and earth theme.

(3) Father in Heaven

Another common use of heaven language in Matthew is with reference to God as Father. The fatherhood of God is an important theme in Matthew, and he quite commonly modifies this by attaching heaven to it. Thirteen times we find the phrase ὁ πατὴρ ὁ ἐν [τοῖς] οὐρανοῖς ("Father in heaven"), and seven times the similar ὁ πατὴρ ὁ οὐράνιος ("heavenly Father"). This language is very familiar to us because we as Christians often refer to God as our heavenly Father. But notably, in the Gospels "Father in heaven" occurs elsewhere *only* in Mark 11:25.[7] This is apparently a particularly Matthean emphasis. All of this relates to the heaven and earth theme in two ways. First, when the noun "heaven" is connected with God as Father, Matthew always uses the uncommon plural form of οὐρανός. This is part of the singular versus plural pattern already mentioned. Second, references to God as Father very frequently occur in a way that presents a contrast between the Father in heaven and the things on earth (e.g., 23:9).

(4) Kingdom of Heaven

As we have already observed, the most common use of heaven in Matthew is in his unique and important phrase "the kingdom of heaven." In each of these thirty-two occurrences the form is always plural (τῶν οὐρανῶν) and, like the references to "the Father in heaven," is part of the singular versus plural pattern observed above. Additionally, closer examination reveals that many times Matthew uses "kingdom of heaven" as part of a contrast between the heavenly and earthly realms (e.g. 17:24-18:5; 4:1-11).

This last observation, combined with all that has been said so far, brings us to the main point. Analysis of this four-fold usage of heaven language in Matthew shows that there is a consistent and overarching theological point to all of it: Matthew is repeatedly setting up a *contrast* between two realms—the heavenly and the earthly—which stand for God on the one hand, and humanity on the other.

In other words, he is subtly but powerfully weaving into his Gospel narrative the theme of heaven and earth, particularly emphasizing the contrast between these two polar realms. Through this four-fold technique—singular versus plural forms of οὐρανός; heaven and earth pairs, usually in contrast; the Father in heaven; and the kingdom of heaven—Matthew is urging upon us the sense that there is a great disjunction between heaven and earth, between God's way of doing things and ours. There is a standing tension between the realms of heaven and earth and this represents the tension between God and humanity. In this way Matthew is very typically apocalyptic.

The Meaning of the Kingdom of Heaven

How does this relate to the meaning of "the kingdom of heaven" in Matthew? Matthew's choice to describe the kingdom as τῶν οὐρανῶν ("of heaven," "from heaven," or even "heavenly")[8] is not motivated by an avoidance of the divine name but is part of a thoughtful literary pattern with an important theological point. The in-breaking of the kingdom of God that has come in the Lord Jesus is radically different from the way you and I naturally think and act and different from the way we structure human society. It is unexpected, shocking, and topsy-turvy to human sensibilities. The unexpected and radical nature of the kingdom is why Jesus

spends so much time trying to explain what this kingdom from heaven is like (and why people so seldom understand). The Beatitudes give us an image of the blessed ones that is just the opposite of what we would naturally value—they are the poor in spirit, the persecuted, the mourning, the meek. The parables of the kingdom paint for us pictures where debtors are freely forgiven, where the smallest seed produces the largest tree, and where the last-come workers receive the same reward. Jesus' model of life shows open-armed compassion for the downtrodden, the touching of the leper, the exalting of the lowly child, the welcoming of the Gentile, and the listening ear for blind outcast beggars. As King of the universe he enters Jerusalem not on a warhorse or golden chariot but riding humbly on the foal of a donkey. As king of all he willing rides into the city where iron nails will soon be used to hang him naked on a cross in the scorching sun. As this king instructs us we learn that the one who wants to be first should not exercise an overbearing leadership style, but should be the slave of all. The one who is blessed by God with material wealth should set it aside to follow Christ. The one who desires to save his life must in fact die. Such is the radical nature of the vision of the kingdom that Jesus gives.

All of this is why it is so powerful and appropriate for Matthew to describe this as a kingdom τῶν οὐρανῶν; it is fundamentally different from the kingdoms of this world and all human expectations. God's Coming Kingdom—what Matthew likes to call the kingdom of heaven—is not built on human wisdom or human principles, but on God's character and nature! Matthew has intentionally taken the *cosmological* language of heaven and earth from the OT and has used it to communicate the urgently *eschatological* message of Jesus. A new day has dawned with the coming of the Kingdom. All is overturned because of the epochal reality of the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

Theological and Practical Application for the Church

As fascinating and interesting as this literary and theological theme is, we would be remiss if we did not ask further what the theological and practical ramifications are. This is certainly what Matthew would want for his readers. To truly understand the Word is to theologically integrate it and most importantly, to obey it.

What did Matthew intend for his hearers to take away from this emphasis on the contrast between the heavenly and earthly realms? One important observation is how this contrast theme provides a strong critique of all worldly kingdoms. In Matthew's day this would have meant both a critique of the Roman Empire and the contemporary Jewish expectations for the Messiah's kingdom. Regarding the application to the Roman imperial context of first-century Judaism (and Christianity), it seems that Matthew is intentionally drawing on his many connections with the book of Daniel. In the same way that Daniel talks about the kingdom of the God of heaven over against the kingdom of Nebuchadnezzar, Matthew provides an implicit critique of the ruling power of his own day, the Romans. Matthew and his audience were facing a situation strikingly similar to the Jewish people of the Exilic and post-Exilic times. They were a defeated people under the power of the greatest earthly empire at the time.

Daniel's language and stories about the God of heaven and this God's superiority over the greatest king of the earth at the time, Nebuchadnezzar, provide hope and solace and vision for the Jewish people. In the same way, Matthew's reference to the "kingdom of heaven" (as well as another significant Danielic phrase, the "Son of Man") evokes sentiments and encouragement regarding the ultimate superiority and eschatological hope of the God of Jesus. Thus, Matthew is beautifully and evocatively re-appropriating the vision and hope of Daniel for his own hearers' context, now understood in light of the Christ.

At the same time, Matthew critiques the common Jewish expectation for God's coming kingdom. It seems that many Jews of Jesus' day were expecting the Messiah to be a military leader who would drive out the heathen (Romans), deliver the Jews from bondage, and establish his Davidic kingdom in Jerusalem. Jesus' model and message about God's coming kingdom patently did not fulfill these expectations. Jesus not only repudiates the use of violence (e.g. 5:5, 9, 39; 26:52), but shockingly he heals and welcomes members of the Roman oppressors (e.g. 8:5-12). So, while the message about God's kingdom does provide solace for those suffering under oppression, its message is one of humility, meekness, cheek-turning, and waiting. This is not what most Jews expected or wanted.

Related, another clear function of Matthew's heaven and earth contrast theme is to provide a clear identity for the followers of Jesus. Matthew wants his hearers to understand that those who follow Christ are the true people of God and to encourage them with this reality. Jesus defines this new or true people not by ethnic pedigree, including having Abraham as one's father (3:9-10; 8:11-12; 23:9), nor by positions of honor (23:2-11), but as those who do the will of the Father who is in heaven (7:21; 12:50), as those whose lives bear the fruit of following God's commands from the heart (3:7-10; 7:15-23; 12:33-38). This theme creates a heaven-oriented *identity* for the disciples in the midst of a hostile earthly world. The world is depicted as bipartite—heaven and earth—and Jesus' disciples are the true people of God aligned with heaven, as opposed to the rulers (Roman and Jewish) on earth. In this way, Matthew's heaven and earth theme is an important part of his ecclesiology (see esp. 16:17-19; 18:14-20).

A third theological function of the heaven and earth theme is to undergird the radical nature of the ethics and teachings of Jesus. Jesus' teachings and parables have a clear ring about them of challenge, urgency, and world-overturning realities. This is true nowhere more than in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. The followers of Jesus are called to live now with a God-hoping ethical standard that is counter-intuitive and counter-cultural. Mourners, the poor, the persecuted, and the meek are said to blessed (5:3-5, 10-12). The standard of righteousness that Jesus requires must go beyond even the strictest interpretations of the scribes and Pharisees (5:20): it must cut to the level of the heart. Stated negatively, hating your brother is murder (5:21-26), and looking lustfully is adultery (5:27-30). Stated positively, instead of retaliation, the response should be gracious giving (5:38-42); instead of loving only one's neighbor, the disciples must love and pray for their enemies (5:43-47). The disciples' piety must be done from

the heart and not from hypocrisy—as in the cases of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting (6:1-21). In short, God's standard of righteousness as proclaimed by Jesus is perfection, for single-heartedness in the very same way that the Father himself is perfect (5:48). The radical nature of all such teachings is clearly seen and felt by any hearer. I suggest that the pervasive heaven and earth theme (which is itself concentrated in the Sermon) undergirds these radical teachings by positing the ways of God against the ways of humanity. That is, Jesus is presented as calling disciples to align themselves with the kingdom *of heaven*, as calling them to be sons of the Father *in heaven* (5:44-45; 7:21; 12:50), as calling them to lay up treasures *in heaven* and not *on earth* (6:19-21), as calling them to pray and hope for the kingdom *of heaven* to come *to earth* (6:9-10). This constant refrain of the tension or current disjuncture between the two realms of heaven and earth provides a tangible vision for the kind of hope that transforms daily living.[9] To use Bauckham and Hart's language, it provides resources for the Christian imagination which give Godward hope.[10] This heaven and earth disjunction is reminiscent of the same point in several of Paul's exhortations to godly living.[11] In Matthew, this way of speaking provides the framework of a symbolic universe that encourages the disciples to align themselves within the world with a different vision and set of values. Only this can sustain such a radical ethical call as Matthew presents. At the core of this vision is the heaven and earth theme.

Conclusion

In sum, there is great literary, theological, and pastoral weight to Matthew's choice to depict the proclamation of Christ as about the "kingdom of heaven." With great skill and finesse Matthew has woven a comprehensive narrative account of Jesus' life and teachings. This account is full of memorable images and language, including the widespread theme of heaven and earth. Understanding this theme enables one to perceive the meaning and function of Matthew's unique phrase "kingdom of heaven." While this expression *denotes* the same thing as the "kingdom of God," it *connotes* many other things. Particularly, we sense that God's (heavenly) ordering of life and society is radically different than the ways of sinful earth. Now that the new creation or new genesis (see Matt 19:28) has dawned through Christ, those who follow Jesus must align themselves with this coming radical heavenly kingdom. And as we do so, we stand to inherit the greatest reward, God's presence through Christ (cf. Matt 1:23; 28:20). In this time of waiting and hoping, the Christian's stance can be summed up in the great prayer that Jesus teaches his disciples to pray: "Let your name be sanctified, let your kingdom come, let your will be done *on earth even as it is in heaven*" (Matt 6:9-10).

ENDNOTES

[1]There are several valuable books that could be consulted on this matter. For many, a good place to start is Vaughan Roberts, *God's Big Picture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002). Slightly longer and more comprehensive is Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen's *The Drama of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004). Closely related to this latter work is the excellent and paradigm-shifting book by Al Wolters, entitled, *Creation Regained* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

[2]Of course, there are many other ways in which the kingdom theme is communicated beyond simply the use of βασιλεία. These include references to Jesus as king (βασιλεῦς), actions that depict God's coming reign, and texts that allude to OT images of God's kingship (e.g., Isa 40:1-12). Again, Matthew employs such language at least as frequently as the other Evangelists and often more.

[3]The only other popular view was that of the classical Dispensationalists. They argued that there is a temporal difference in meaning between "kingdom of God" and "kingdom of heaven." This view proves quite untenable biblically and has since been abandoned by most modern ("progressive") Dispensationalists.

[4]Some manuscripts also have "kingdom of God" at 6:33, but the original was almost certainly only "kingdom." Inexplicably the ESV includes the whole phrase even though the critical editions of the Greek New Testament do not recommend it (nor does the RSV have it).

[5]This is necessarily a very brief overview of the argument. A full exploration of the issue and documentation can be found in my *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 13-37. This whole article is a concise explanation of the main idea in this book, and I would refer the reader to that volume for more information on all the following arguments.

[6]Οὐρανός occurs eighty-two times in Matthew (30 percent of all the NT occurrences) and οὐράνιος seven times.

[7]Mk 11:25 is parallel to one of Matthew's occurrences of ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν ὁ οὐράνιος (6:14). Who is dependent on whom is unclear. There is also the less exact parallel ὁ πατὴρ [ὁ] ἐξ οὐρανοῦ in Luke 11:13, which in context is best understood as a reference to the Father giving the Holy Spirit *from* heaven.

[8]These three translations are all potentially good glosses for the genitive phrase here. Indeed, we are not forced to choose only one and dismiss the others. As many scholars have observed, there is much ambiguity with regard to the Greek genitive and often more than one category is appropriate. Cf. Nigel Turner, *Syntax* (vol. 3 of *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, ed. James Hope Moulton; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963), 210; Maximilian Zerwick, *Biblical Greek* (trans. Joseph Smith; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1963), §25; Herbert Weir Smyth, *Greek Grammar* (rev. Gordon M. Messing; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), §1295.

[9]This corresponds closely with the interpretation of heaven language in Matthew offered by Robert Foster. Foster states that the "heavenly language" of the Sermon "purposefully centres the lives of Matthew's community on the reality that counts: heaven's reality. Sociologically, the language of heaven encourages the disciples to continue in their counter-cultural lifestyle as they are assured that the FH [Father in heaven] cares about their earthly struggles and needs and will give them a heavenly reward. . . . Theologically, this language guides the community's decisions as they look toward heaven for their standard of righteousness, their strength for holy living, and their reward for their labours." Robert Foster, "Why on Earth Use 'Kingdom of Heaven'?: Matthew's Terminology Revisited," *New Testament Studies* 48 (2002): 487-99.

[10]Bauckham and Hart give an excellent account of how a grand Christian vision (via imagination) re-sources the Christian life in Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart, *Hope Against Hope: Christian Eschatology at the Turn of the Millennium* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999). I suggest that Matthew's vision of the world now and in the eschaton, described regularly with reference to heaven and earth, provides the kind of imaginative vision Bauckham and Hart are describing.

[11]For example, Col 3:1-4 makes the basis for godliness the fact that the believer has been raised up with Christ, therefore his or her mind should be set on "things above, not on the things that are on the earth." This is followed by the exhortation: "Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry" (3:5). Cf. Eph 1:19-20; 2:5-6.