

NB: A much fuller and refined version of this argument can be found in the forthcoming published version of my thesis, *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew*.

“The Kingdom of Heaven Against All Earthly Kingdoms”

Jonathan T. Pennington
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Introduction

Regardless of whether one is approaching the Gospels from a narrative approach or one is engaging in some form of historical Jesus study, there is a scholarly consensus that the kingdom or reign of God was the central message of Jesus’ ministry.

The centrality of the reign of God can be substantiated from any of the Synoptic accounts, but Matthew above all highlights this theme. For example, at the basic level of vocabulary frequency, Matthew uses both βασιλεία and βασιλεύς significantly more often than the other Evangelists. Even more telling, we find that the kingdom is emphasized at crucial points in Matthew’s narrative: John the Baptist’s message is introduced as one about the kingdom (3:2), as is Jesus’ shortly after (4:17), and then in 10:7 Jesus commissions his own followers to go out with the same words: “The kingdom of heaven is near.” Likewise, at the structural seams of Matthew in 4:23, 9:35, and 24:14, we find the thrice-repeated phrase “the gospel of the kingdom.” And it goes on and on. Through constant repetition, Matthew *particularly* makes his hearers aware of the centrality of the message of the coming kingdom of God.

Well there is nothing new here. It is also nothing new to recognize that the most distinctive thing about Matthew’s emphasis of the kingdom of God is that he regularly describes the kingdom with the unique phrase, ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν, “the kingdom/reign of heaven/the heavens.” This is not the *only* way that Matthew speaks about God’s kingdom – we also find four occurrences of the traditional “kingdom of God” as well as reference to the Father’s kingdom, the kingdom of the Son of Man, Jesus’ kingdom and simply “the kingdom.” But ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν is by far Matthew’s preferred phrase, weighing in at 32 occurrences. This phrase is also striking because it is found *nowhere else* in the OT or preceding Second Temple literature, nor in the NT. Only in later texts such as the Mishnah and portions of the Targumim do we find occasional occurrences of this phrase. As you likely know, the nearly universal explanation for Matthew’s expression here is that he is using heaven to avoid the name of God, what we can call a reverential circumlocution.

Now, the thesis of my paper today is that rather than merely writing off ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν as a reverential circumlocution as is typically done, we should see that this phrase is a crucial part of Matthew’s broader heaven and earth theme, and that for Matthew, to describe God’s kingdom as the “kingdom of heaven” serves a number of important rhetorical points: to highlight God’s universal sovereignty and to present God’s kingdom in counterpoint to all other earthly kingdoms – whether they be Jewish or Roman.

To argue this thesis today I will proceed in two steps. First, I will seek to show just how “kingdom of heaven” functions as part of the heaven and earth theme in

Matthew's narrative and theology. And secondly, having done this, I will make a few suggestions about how this interacts specifically with the Roman Empire context of early Christianity.

I. The Function of ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν in Matthew

As I just stated, the nearly-universal reason given for why Matthew uses the phrase ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν is that he is using “heaven” in the place of “God” out of Jewish sensibilities to avoid pronouncing the name of God. You can find this explanation anywhere you look. Let me say very plainly that I have come to believe that this assumption, as widespread as it is in scholarship, is simply wrong. I don't have time today to present the full arguments as to why this is the case. I have done so in a previous paper; it comprises a whole chapter of my PhD thesis; and I have an article on this in the works. All I can say at this point is that this widespread assumption stems completely from a singular 19th-century source – Gustaf Dalman – and has many methodological and historical problems. Nevertheless, as is often the case, through the magic of publication, time, and repetition, it has become a standard assumption.

More recently, there *have* been a few Matthean scholars who have sounded a minor note of disagreement, notably Robert Gundry, David Garland, Gerhard Schneider, a recent article by Robert Foster, and Robert Mowery. But none of these gentlemen has developed their critique very much and the widespread assumption still stands.

Today because I don't have time to offer the deconstructing arguments against the reverential circumlocution assumption, I want instead to offer a positive alternative for Matthew's ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν that I believe has great explanatory power.

That alternative explanation is what I stated as my thesis: that ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν is not just a throw-away phrase but is part of a larger heaven and earth theme all throughout Matthew.

In my PhD work I have identified four elements which I am arguing constitute Matthew's unique emphasis on the heaven and earth theme. These elements are: (1) An intentional difference between singular and plural forms of οὐρανός; (2) An emphasis on the word-pair “heaven and earth”; (3) Regular reference to the Father in heaven; and (4) The phrase “the kingdom of heaven.”

Of course, today, there is not time to do more than briefly mention these categories and encourage you to buy my thesis if and when it is published! But I will tell you what my conclusion is from an in-depth analysis of all of this: *That in each case, these four elements serve the same purpose for Matthew, to contrast the heavenly realm with the earthly.* Very quickly, let me run over these four elements.

(1) Singular and Plural Difference of Οὐρανός

In the first case, I have found that Matthew generally uses οὐρανός in the singular to refer to the visible (earthly) world – the sky – *and* in “heaven and earth” pairs, while he uses the plural to refer to the invisible (divine) realm. Inherent in this distinction is a contrast, you see, between the two realms of the earth and heaven, all the while playing on the ambiguity inherent in the semantic domain of οὐρανός.

(2) “Heaven and Earth” Word Pairs

Regarding Matthew’s heaven and earth pairs, a close analysis of these reveals that this word-pair is very important to Matthew and that again, he regularly uses “heaven and earth” in a contrastive way. That is, over and over again, heaven and earth are conjoined as counterpoints rather than the more typical biblical merismatic usage (where “heaven and earth” stands simply for the entire created order). So, for example, right in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount we find an extended discourse on the disciples’ righteousness which hinges on a heaven and earth contrast. In 6:1-21 Jesus instructs his followers to live in such a way to please their Father in heaven and not merely humans on earth. This is applied to three categories: almsgiving, prayer and fasting. It is summed up then with the well-known words of 6:19-20 – “Don’t lay up treasures on earth . . . but in heaven.” My point is that 6:1-21 is one of the many examples where Matthew uses the concepts of heaven and earth in a contrastive way.

(3) Father in Heaven

Likewise, I contend that Matthew’s propensity to refer to God as the Father in heaven or heavenly Father – a moniker which is almost unique to Matthew among the Evangelists – also serves as part of his heaven and earth contrast theme. Thus, for example, in 23:9 we find the strong words of Jesus that we should call no one *on earth* father, for we have one *heavenly* Father. Again, just one example of many of the heaven and earth contrast in Matthew’s language.

(4) Kingdom of Heaven

And finally, building on these previous observations, we can now see that kingdom of heaven likewise functions as a part of Matthew’s broader discourse of contrast between heaven and earth.

Now as a general theme, the contrast of kingdoms or empires is woven all throughout Matthew. Let me point out just three textual examples.

(a) The Birth Narratives (Matt 1-2)

It is patently clear that one of the intended points of the stories of Matthew 1-2 is the ironic contrast that is set up between the mad Herod, who has (disputedly) taken upon himself the title “King of the Jews,” and the helpless infant Jesus *who is in fact* the true King of the Jews (and the world). This subtle but important theme appears throughout the birth narrative and the irony is deepened by the fact that the Jewish people and Jerusalem, including Herod and his court, do not understand what is happening, but the foreigners from the East do – in fact, they are the ones who ascribe to Jesus the title of king.

So the contrast of kingdoms is clear in this narrative and it is no coincidence that this theme is found right here at the beginning of Matthew.

However, I should note that Matthew 1-2, which in several other ways stands apart from the rest of the narrative, does not explicitly describe this as a heaven and earth contrast, though it is certainly not inconsistent with such a description. In fact, interestingly, the word heaven does not occur in Matthew at all in the first two chapters of Matthew (a notable thing in light of the great recurrence of οὐρανός in Matthew), but is found first in the phrase ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν in 3:2, after the thirty year gap between chapters 1-2 and the rest of the Gospel. Nevertheless, the contrast of kingdoms that is set

up in chapters 1-2 will become explicitly a heaven and earth contrast within the rest of the Gospel.

So my point, again, is that chapters 1-2 lay the groundwork for Matthew's theme of the contrast of God's kingdom with humanity's. Although heaven and earth language is not used yet, it will become clear that this is the contrast in view.

(b) The Temptation Narrative (Matt 4:1-11)

Now fast forward just a bit to the temptation of Jesus (4:1-11). In the devil's third and last-ditch attempt to nip Jesus' ministry in the bud before he goes public, he offers to Jesus *πάσας τὰς βασιλείας τοῦ κόσμου καὶ τὴν δόξαν αὐτῶν*, "all the kingdoms of the world and their glory." Warren Carter has recently observed that we need to understand that Satan's claim here establishes Rome, "the leading empire of the world, as the devil's agent who shapes a world that enacts the devil's purposes, not God's."¹ This makes sense, and clearly, a contrast of God's kingdom with the kingdoms of the world is in view here.

But for my purposes, notice specifically that this phrase "the kingdoms of the world" is intentionally framed by Matthew with the weighty, contrasting references to the "kingdom of heaven" in 3:2 and 4:17. In fact, this entire section about the beginning of Jesus' ministry is book-ended with reference to the kingdom of heaven (3:2; 4:17), and a point of contrast to this is Satan's offer of "the kingdoms of the world."

The contrast of Satan's kingdom with God's kingdom comes up again in 12:22-28. Additionally, we can see that Satan's unsuccessful offer of worldly authority for Jesus is, post-resurrection, granted to Jesus by God in the climax of 28:18-20, another text that uses heaven and earth language. My point again is that the "of heaven" part of "kingdom of heaven" here is not accidental or reverentially circumlocutionary, but serves a very powerful literary and rhetorical purpose: to contrast the world's kingdoms with God's.

(c) The Two-Drachma Tax and the Kingdom (17:24-18:5)

Let's look at one final example of this type of heavenly and earthly kingdoms contrast. In 17:24-27 we have the story of the question about the payment of the two-drachma tax. In several ways this text seems to me to parallel the pericope in 22:16-22, where the question of taxes to Caesar is raised. In fact, there has been debate about whether this tax is indeed the Temple Tax or instead a Roman civil or toll tax.² Regardless, Jesus takes the question about the tax and converts it into a teaching which contrasts the "kings of the earth" with the sons of God. Notice this language specifically in 17:25-26.

But then also notice that immediately following this text, in 18:1-5, we segue way into the question about status in the kingdom of heaven, with *ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν* repeated three times in very short space. We typically think of 18:1-5 as entirely separate but the two pericopae are linked with the connecting sentence, "at the same time" (18:1). This is a case where the 16th-century versification of our Bibles can be more misleading than helpful. I believe there is a subtle but real contrast here between the "kings of the

¹ Warren Carter, "Matthew and the Gentiles: Individual Conversion and/or Systemic Transformation," *JSNT* 26.3 (2004), 267.

² Cf. the review of the arguments and ultimate siding with the Temple Tax interpretation in Davies and Allison, *Matthew* 2:739-741.

earth” and the “kingdom of heaven” in Matthew’s presentation. I think this also lends some credence to the interpretation of the tax as a Roman tax rather than a Temple tax, though I’m not sure on this.

The point remains, however, there is some contrastive connection between the “kings of the earth” and the “kingdom of heaven.” Granted, this connection is a bit looser than the same connection in 4:8, but I believe the close proximity is more than accidental.

These are but three examples of the kingdom of heaven and earth contrast. And this contrast is but one of the four different ways that I’ve identified that Matthew uses to contrast heaven and earth.

So, to reiterate: I believe a careful reading of Matthew’s Gospel reveals that he has subtly and artistically woven into his entire narrative a sense of the contrast between God’s ways and humanity’s and that he uses the powerful biblical language of “heaven and earth” as a rubric to describe this contrast. The phrase “kingdom of heaven” is one of the most important aspects of this heaven and earth contrast and serves to frame Jesus’ teaching and ethics as God’s kingdom against all other earthly kingdoms or ways of being in the world.

II. Interaction with the Roman Context of Early Christianity

From this we may now turn to part two of my presentation. As is well known to each of us here – and in fact the very reason for this consultation – only relatively recently has scholarship begun to explore the Roman Imperial context of the NT documents.³ In addition to Paul, Matthew has received special attention in this regard, most notably through the leadership of Warren Carter. I will not attempt to review these studies, which are readily available. Instead, I want to briefly offer a few insights regarding how the kingdom of heaven theme just described interacts with the Roman Imperial context of early Christianity.

I will examine this question at two different levels: (1) First, how the expression “kingdom of heaven” interacts with the Roman Empire for Matthew himself and his original hearers; and (2) Secondly, how the Gospel of Matthew’s “kingdom of heaven” terminology was later appropriated by second-century Christians, people still living very conspicuously under Roman rule.

(1) The “Kingdom of Heaven” for Matthew and His Original Audience

Once we get beyond the mistaken assumption of writing off “kingdom of heaven” as a reverential circumlocution, we can begin to ask more clearly where Matthew may have gotten the idea for such a phrase. What terminology and concepts resident in his Jewish tradition provided the building blocks for this odd expression?

I contend that Matthew is taking up the language and ideas and social context of the Book of Daniel and re-appropriating them for his own *Sitz im Leben*. Specifically I am referring to the series of stories found in the Aramaic section of Daniel 2-7. Many scholars have observed that the stories of Daniel 2-7 hang together in a chiasmic structure or as a series of concentric circles: chapters 2 and 7 are related by the four-kingdom schema; chapters 3 and 6 are both tales of deliverance; and 4 and 5 present stories of two

³ Some examples include R. A. Horsley, *Paul and Empire* (Trinity Press, 1997); S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (CUP, 1984).

kings' different responses to God.⁴ Certainly, the most developed and weighty of the stories is that of King Nebuchadnezzar's bestial lesson about God's royal sovereignty in chapter 4.

I wish we had time to look at these great stories more closely, but I will simply sum up the issue at hand with this observation: Throughout these chapters in Daniel and especially in chapter 4, we can find two juxtaposed themes – the contrast of the God of heaven with people on earth, and the contrast of God's kingdom with humanity's kingdoms (here specifically, Nebuchadnezzar as a foil, as the “great king over all the earth”). Peppered all throughout these stories is the very important Second Temple description of Yahweh as the “God of heaven.” This phrase first begins to appear in the Exilic and post-Exilic literature and it is commonly recognized that this moniker for God was used by the Jews to safeguard and exalt the belief that their God was the universal God – He is the God residing way up above all, in the heavens – even in light of the destruction of Jerusalem and Judea. (It is very interesting that this phrase then almost completely disappears by the time of 1st-century CE.)

In light of the many other connections between Daniel and Matthew, and in view of the amazing similarity in themes between Daniel 2-7 and what I have identified in Matthew, I suggest that Matthew has taken up the language and idea of the “God of heaven” and his kingdom (contrasted with the kings of the earth) from Daniel and has coined this wonderful phrase, “the kingdom of heaven” with this same meaning. In other words, Matthew's favorite expression is a shorthand, joining together of the two ideas of the universal “God of heaven” with *this* God's coming eschatological kingdom, all the while in counterpoint to the rulers of the earth. Thus, we end up with the weighty phrase, the “kingdom of heaven.”

Now how does this relate to the 1st-century CE context? Quite simply, 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 the other Danielic phrase, the “Son of Man”) evokes sentiments and encouragement regarding the ultimate superiority and eschatological hope of the God of Jesus. So Matthew is beautifully and evocatively re-appropriating the vision and hope of Daniel for his own hearers context.

(2) The Gospel of Matthew's “Kingdom of Heaven” in Early Christianity

The widespread influence of Matthew's Gospel and its central place in the Church from the earliest times is easily demonstrable. I believe one overlooked example of this influence is the emphasis in many second-century texts that the kingdom of Christ is a heavenly one not an earthly one. I suggest that in the same way that Matthew re-appropriated Daniel's language, we can see that many late first-century and early second-century Christians likewise took up and used Matthew's “kingdom of heaven” terminology and used it for their own purposes as they sought to live peaceably under the often-hostile Roman Empire.

⁴ This was first observed by A. Lenglet, “La structure littéraire de Daniel 2-7,” *Bib* 53 (1972), 169-190, and followed by many scholars since.

A great example of this comes from Hegesippus' account of the grandsons of Jude (as recorded in Eusebius *EH* 3:19:1-3:20:7). According to Hegesippus, during the Emperor Domitian's rule, some people brought charge against Zoker and James, who were the grandsons of Jude, the brother of Jesus. The charge was that because these men were descendants of David, they were a potential threat to the Empire. Therefore, the story goes, Domitian called them to trial and examined them to see if they were a potential source of Jewish political uprising. When asked about Christ and his kingdom the grandsons of Jude responded that the kingdom "was not of the world nor earthly, but heavenly and angelic; and that it would appear at the end of the world" (20:5). After this, Zoker and James were dismissed and miraculously, Domitian's persecution of the church ceased from that time. Apparently, their answer, which emphasized the *heavenly* nature of Christ's kingdom, succeeding in showing, as Richard Bauckham has suggested, "that allegiance to Christ's kingdom does not make Christians political revolutionaries intent on overthrowing the Roman state."⁵

In fact, an examination of many references to the kingdom in the second-century writings shows this same emphasis. For example, Justin stresses that Christians have been misunderstood if it is thought they are looking for a human kingdom (*I Apol. 11*), and in the Martyrdom of Paul, Paul explains to two Roman officials that "we do not march, as you suppose, with a king who comes from the earth, but one from heaven, the living God" (4).⁶ There are many such examples, and they likely reflect a perception among many Romans that Christians were potentially armed and dangerous. This perception likely came about because of a confused association of Christianity with the many revolutionary Jewish messianic movements in the first and second-centuries. As Bauckham explains, these texts reveal "an apologetic concern to make clear the real nature of the kingdom of Christ as heavenly rather than earthly."⁷ And in so doing, these second-century Christians were able to protect themselves.

Everett Ferguson, in his interesting essay on the kingdom of God in Patristic literature provides several insights along these same lines. He observes that "neither Jews nor Christians in the second century were permitted a "political" expression of their kingdom claims"⁸ and that "the Apologists were particularly aware that the biblical word for "kingdom" was the ordinary word for the empire or any kingship."⁹ Therefore, "in political contexts Christians emphasized that Christ's kingdom is otherworldly and heavenly."¹⁰

At this point in my understanding, I do not think that this is what *Matthew* meant by the phrase "kingdom of heaven" but this was a very understandable appropriation of Matthew's language for these early Christians living precariously in the Roman Empire.

⁵ Richard J. Bauckham, *Jude and the Relatives of Jesus in the Early Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 101.

⁶ Quoted in Bauckham, *Jude and the Relatives of Jesus*, 103.

⁷ Bauckham, *Jude and the Relatives of Jesus*, 103.

⁸ Everett Ferguson, "The Kingdom of God in Early Patristic Literature," in Wendell Willis, editor, *The Kingdom of God in 20th-Century Interpretation* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987), 193.

⁹ Ferguson, "The Kingdom of God," 194.

¹⁰ Ferguson, "The Kingdom of God," 200.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me simply restate my thesis: Matthew's frequent and striking use of "kingdom of heaven" is not out of a supposed avoidance of the name of God (in fact, ΚΟΓ and θεός occur in Matthew as well), but is part of an elaborate theme of the contrast of heaven and earth that Matthew has skillfully woven into his work. This theme, combined with the radical ethics and teachings of the First Gospel, serves to emphasize for Matthew's audience that God's way of "doing kingdom" is very different than humanity's way (whether it be Jewish or Roman),¹¹ and that the kingdom that Jesus preached is the true and universal kingdom, worthy of hoping in. In the subsequent century, Matthew's readers continued to live with this hope and re-tooled the meaning of the phrase "kingdom of heaven" to help protect their lives against Roman persecution.

I'm confident the insights presented here about Matthew's "kingdom of heaven" will bear much more fruit in our seeking to understand Matthew's message. I'm also confident that those with much greater knowledge of the Roman Empire than mine will be able to see more applications of my thesis than I can myself. And to such scholars, many of whom are in this room, I respectfully offer my own work and defer. Thank you.

¹¹ Cf. the observations of Trevor Hart and Richard Bauckham in *Hope Against Hope*: "Much of Jesus' teaching seems designed precisely to show how God's rule differs from earthly rule." (164) And "more radically than his Jewish predecessors, Jesus wishes to portray God's rule as an alternative to earthly rule which is quite unlike all earthly rule." (165)