

MATTHEW'S CHIASTIC STRUCTURE AND ITS DISPENSATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

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THE PRESENCE OF CHIASMS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT, formally proposed by Nils Lund in the mid-twentieth century, has been recognized by scholars for decades.¹ Chiasms have been noted as a literary and rhetorical device in the Old Testament also.² Yet in spite of this focus on chiasms Ronald Mann has rightly observed that “all too often chiastic structures are passed off in the scholarly literature as mere literary niceties, a structural tour de force which serves only aesthetic ends. Too little consideration has been given to the possible exegetical significance of such structures in the interpretation of biblical passages.”³ Although elaborate chiasms were not used in ancient Greek literature, the presence of smaller chiastic units has been recognized in Greek writings.⁴ Thus the presence of smaller chiasms in the Scriptures comes as no surprise. But the fact that more elaborate chiasms are noted in the New Testament should no longer be a surprise in light of the practice of ancient Israel and the assumed influence of Jewish culture on the New Testament writers.

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¹ Nils W. Lund, *Chiasmus in the New Testament: A Study in the Form and Function of Chiastic Structures* (1942; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1970).

² Ronald E. Mann, “The Value of Chiasm for New Testament Interpretation,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 141 (April–June 2002): 146. David A. Dorsey has provided an extended treatment of Old Testament chiasms, arguing for their presence throughout the Old Testament. Many of his developments are convincing, though some are less evident (*The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis–Malachi* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999]).

³ Mann, “The Value of Chiasm for New Testament Interpretation,” 147.

⁴ Lund, *Chiasmus in the New Testament*, 33, 35.

THE STRUCTURE AND NATURE OF CHIASMS

Both Old and New Testament authors used various structural devices for literary purposes.⁵ Traina identifies five kinds of structural units a biblical author may have used in “constructing” his message: biography (persons), history (events), chronological material (time elements), geography (places), or logical arrangements (ideas).⁶ Chiasms may employ any of these materials within their structure, but invariably chiasms reflect a logical arrangement of ideas that serve to focus the reader on the point being made by the author, whether explicitly stated or implied.

As a literary device a chiasm may be a small unit of as few as three lines or it may encompass a complete literary work such as the Pentateuch. Though one key trait of chiasms is the repetition of material in reverse order, its arrangement of material does more than that.⁷ Its structure serves to point the reader or ancient listener to its central section as the significant element.⁸ The other parallel pairs of units contribute to that message, but the central unit or units serve as its teaching point. Mann explains the significance of the parts of a chiasm. He notes that “two characteristics of chiasm help interpreters understand the meaning of biblical passages: (1) the presence of either a single central or of two complementary central elements in the structure, which generally highlight the major thrust of the passage encompassed by the chiasm; and (2) the presence of complementary pairs of elements, in which

⁵ Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament*, 36.

⁶ Robert A. Traina, *Methodical Bible Study* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury, 1952), 55–56.

⁷ Scot McKnight, “Literary Criticism of the Synoptic Gospels,” *Trinity Journal* 8 (spring 1987): 68.

⁸ Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament*, 44. Lund lists seven “laws” of chiastic structures: “(1) *The centre is always the turning point.* . . . (2) At the centre there is often a change in the trend of thought, and an antithetic idea is introduced. After this the original trend is resumed and continued until the system is concluded. . . . [This is] *the law of the shift at the centre.* (3) Identical ideas are often distributed in such a fashion that *they occur in the extremes and at the centre* of their respective system, and nowhere else in the system. (4) There are also many instances of ideas, occurring at the centre of one system and recurring in the extremes of a corresponding system, the second system evidently having been constructed to match the first. . . . [This is] *the law of the shift from centre to the extremes.* (5) There is a definite tendency of certain terms to gravitate toward certain positions within a given system. . . . (6) Larger units are frequently introduced and concluded by *frame-passages.* (7) There is frequently a mixture of chiastic and alternating lines within one and the same unit” (*Chiasmus in the New Testament*, 40–41 [italics his]).

each member of a pair can elucidate the other member and together form a composite meaning."⁹ He also observes that the author may relate the complementary pairs in either synonymous or antithetical parallelism. Their placement strengthens the comparison or the contrast.¹⁰ Mann adds, "The [central] point may be obvious even without recognizing the chiasm; but the chiasm serves to highlight and heighten the effect of this emphasis in the minds of the readers, even on an unconscious level."¹¹ More importantly, though, the author's choice of a chiastic structure is designed to help communicate his idea "through the emphases and movements inherent in the structure."¹² Thus the material does not lose its significance as it moves further from the center, but rather is shown to be related to that center in some significant way.

THE CHIASTIC STRUCTURE OF MATTHEW

The presence of chiasms in Matthew's Gospel is commonly accepted.¹³ But few have noted the possibility that the entire Gospel may be an extended chiasm, much like that of the Pentateuch.¹⁴ The Gospel of Matthew reflects a complex chiasm that stretches from its first chapter to the last, involving the narrative sections as well as the five discourses. Not every element in each section has an equivalent element in the parallel section. But Matthew incorporated enough literary clues and parallel elements to alert his

⁹ Mann, "The Value of Chiasm for New Testament Interpretation," 147–48.

¹⁰ Ibid., 148.

¹¹ Ibid., 150.

¹² Ibid., 153.

¹³ For example Lund notes such chiasms (*Chiasmus in the New Testament*, 233–35, 241–301). However, his chiasms seem more fanciful than clear.

¹⁴ Several commentators outline Matthew's Gospel around Jesus' five discourses in the book (e.g., B. W. Bacon, "The 'Five Books' of Matthew against the Jews," *Expositor* 15 [1918]: 56–66; and Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew* [Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1980], 24). Others divide the book at 4:17 and 16:21 based on the phrase, "From that time Jesus began to . . ." (e.g., J. D. Kingsbury, *Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975]; C. H. Lohr, "Oral Techniques in the Gospel of Matthew," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 23 [1961]: 403–35), P. F. Ellis, *Matthew: His Mind and His Message* [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1974], and H. J. B. Combrink ("The Structure of the Gospel of Matthew as Narrative," *Tyndale Bulletin* 34 [1983]: 61–90). Craig L. Blomberg rejects the chiastic structure, suggesting instead a blend of the three-part division of the Gospel and the role of the five discourses (*Matthew*, New American Commentary [Nashville: Broadman, 1992], 22).

audience to the relationships of those units as well as the development of his message.

Matthew recorded many events in Jesus' ministry logically rather than chronologically, though he did use chronological markers in some sections. Toussaint notes this logical arrangement and says the Gospel is built around five discourses that are marked off by the same concluding descriptive formula, "when Jesus had finished" (Matt. 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). He sees the addresses as connected and climactic to the narrative sections that precede them. Matthew, he says, used the narrative sections as preparatory and introductory to the five discourses.¹⁵ However, recognizing Matthew's chiastic structure helps account for the final chapters and relates them to the Gospel's four introductory chapters.

- A. Demonstration of Jesus' Qualifications as King (chaps. 1–4)
- B. Sermon on the Mount: Who Can Enter His Kingdom (chaps. 5–7)
- C. Miracles and Instruction (chaps. 8–9)
- D. Instruction to the Twelve: Authority and Message for Israel (chap. 10)
- E. Opposition: The Nation's Rejection of the King (chaps. 11–12)
- F. Parables of the Kingdom: The Kingdom Postponed (chap. 13)
- E.' Opposition: The Nation's Rejection of the King (chaps. 14–17)
- D.' Instruction to the Twelve: Authority and Message for the Church (chap. 18)
- C.' Miracles and Instruction (chaps. 19–23)
- B.' Olivet Discourse: When the Kingdom Will Come (chaps. 24–25)
- A.' Demonstration of Jesus' Qualifications as King (chaps. 26–28)

Matthew's eleven-part chiastic structure includes five parallel pairs of material. As noted earlier, not every element in each unit

¹⁵ Toussaint, *Behold the King*, 24. For example he says chapters 8–9 show Jesus' authority as Messiah, which authority He then granted to His disciples in chapter 10. Toussaint's point is good. But it does not account for the final section of Matthew, chapters 26–28, which would then have to be seen as an epilogue to the Gospel. However, when Matthew is viewed as a chiasm, the parallel between the first and final sections becomes significant. Both sections prove Jesus' qualification to be the Messiah. In the first section (chaps. 1–4) His legal qualification is demonstrated through His genealogy, His moral qualification is demonstrated through the temptations, and His spiritual qualification through His baptism. In the final section (chaps. 26–28) He is both proven to be and recognized as the Messiah by His resurrection appearances and His declaration of authority as He gave His followers instructions on what they are to do before He returns to set up His promised kingdom.

has a corresponding element in its parallel unit. But sufficient points of contact occur that enable readers to recognize the point being made by that pair.

Chapters 1–4 are parallel to chapters 26–28, for in both sections a non-Jewish ruler attempted to kill Jesus, and in both instances this occurred after the ruler was told that Jesus is King of the Jews. Herod failed while Pilate succeeded. In both sections the Jewish leaders assisted their ruler and did not believe in Jesus. In the first section Jesus escaped death by going to Egypt, but in the second section He conquered death by rising from the grave.

Chapters 5–7 are parallel to chapters 24–25, for in both sections Jesus addressed the nation of Israel as its King. In chapters 5–7 Jesus, the messianic King, described the character traits of citizens of His kingdom, and in doing so He declared who will be allowed to enter His kingdom.¹⁶ At this time the kingdom was still expected and was offered to Israel. In chapters 24–25 the kingdom was delayed because of the nation's rejection of the offer in chapters 11–12.¹⁷ In chapters 24–25 Jesus again addressed the nation of Israel in response to questions from His disciples. He spoke of the signs Israelites should watch for in order to be prepared for His return to set up the postponed kingdom. Thus Jesus' answer to His disciples may be seen as addressing Israel in the same sense as the Sermon on the Mount.

Chapters 8–9 are parallel to chapters 19–23. Both recount Jesus' instructions about discipleship and the coming kingdom as well as giving reports of Jesus' miracles. Chapters 8–9 record miracles that are divided by two pericopes on discipleship.¹⁸ Then in chapters 19–23, the section following the second set of instructions, Matthew recounted Jesus' instructions to His disciples and noted other miracles He performed. Where the first section emphasizes Jesus' miracles and touches on discipleship, the second section emphasizes Jesus' instructions to those who were His disciples and

¹⁶ Matthew's portrayal of Jesus as Israel's rightful King is clear in the first four chapters. Thus the Sermon on the Mount can legitimately be viewed as the address of the nation's rightful King to Israel. Also significant is the fact that Jesus said entrance into the kingdom depended on works, not faith, and so He was speaking of sanctification, not justification.

¹⁷ This is seen in the opposition Jesus experienced in these chapters as well as the climactic rejection of His family at the very end of the section and before the introduction of the parables of the kingdom in chapter 13.

¹⁸ In the first (8:18–22) two potential disciples are told the cost of discipleship. In the second (9:9–13) Matthew was called to be Jesus' disciple and left everything to follow Him.

only mentioned His miracles. They cover similar themes but with differing focuses.

Chapters 10 and 18 are parallel in that both include Jesus' instructions to the twelve apostles. In chapter 10 the kingdom was still being offered to the nation. And so the disciples were sent to Israel to announce the nearness of that kingdom. In chapter 18 the kingdom was no longer being offered, for it had been rejected by the nation. Instead of a message for Israel, Jesus gave His disciples instructions on the life of the church. Though the instructions to the disciples in these two sections differ, in both instances the Twelve were being instructed. This is similar to the pattern in the Pentateuch in which Exodus and Numbers both recount the nation's experiences in the wilderness. Their specific contents are different, but their "wilderness" connection and roles in the structure of the Pentateuch are unmistakable.

Matthew 11–12 is parallel to chapters 14–17. These sections seem to have the most points of contact. John the Baptist was imprisoned (chap. 11) and executed (chap. 14). The conflicts Jesus faced with the Jews in the grain field and synagogue (12:1–14) are parallel to the Jews' objections to Jesus' disciples transgressing Jewish traditions (15:1–20). In both sections Jesus healed many people (12:15–32 and 15:29–31), and in both sections the Pharisees/rulers asked for a sign, and each time Jesus mentioned only the sign of Jonah (12:38–42 and 16:1–4). Most significantly the first section ends with Jesus rejecting His family, representative of the nation (12:46–49), and the second section begins with Jesus' hometown rejecting Him (13:53–58).

At the center of the parallel sections are the parables of the kingdom (chap. 13), which may themselves be arranged as a chiasm.¹⁹

¹⁹ Mark L. Bailey, "Guidelines for Interpreting Jesus' Parables," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155 (April–June 1998): 173. He describes them as follows: "Each of the two sections in Matthew 13 (vv. 1–35 and vv. 36–52) includes a statement of setting (vv. 1–3a; 36a), an excursus (vv. 10–23; 36b–43), four parables (vv. 4–9; 24–33; 44–50), and a conclusion (vv. 34–36; 51–52). While many scholars say Matthew 13 has seven parables, the possibility of an eighth may be suggested by two observations. First, in verse 52 the phrase *ομοιός ἐστιν* is the masculine equivalent of the feminine form used earlier to introduce other parables (*ομοία ἐστιν*, vv. 31, 33, 44, 45, 47). Second, the concluding clause immediately following verse 52 is the Matthean formula that serves as a textual marker to indicate the ends of the five major narrative/discourse cycles (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1)." Blomberg identifies the chiasmic structure of the parables and uses it to argue for his view that Matthew's Gospel reflects a polarization theme (*Matthew*, 212).

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MATTHEW'S CHIASTIC CENTER

Matthew's placement of the parables at the center of his Gospel is purposeful and thus exegetically significant. Toussaint's discussion of Matthew's purpose is both insightful and helpful in understanding the message of the Gospel. He begins by detailing his understanding of how Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John developed their messages.

These books were not written merely to convey theological concepts or to relate a story. These are important, but the primary purpose of the gospel writers was to prove a point. In other words, they wrote their Gospels with the intention of setting forth an argument. In order to attain this objective the evangelists were very selective in their choice of materials. Those elements were placed in the fore which would assist them in accomplishing their purpose. Therefore one writer may at times emphasize doctrine; at other times he may underscore a series of events. Both doctrine and narration may be used, but their use is all for the sake of setting forth an argument.²⁰

Once one sees the parables of the kingdom as the center of Matthew's message, he must then ask what point was being made by the parables. Again Toussaint addressed this issue. "The answer can only be found by observing the main emphases of Matthew's Gospel and noting the logical development of those emphases. . . . Neither the significance of the life of Christ narrated by Matthew nor the doctrines contained in his Gospel are intelligible without an understanding of his argument."²¹ Then, observing the data of the text, he argues that the Gospel was written to Jewish believers based on "the author's style, by the vocabulary of the Gospel, by its subject matter, by the use it makes of Old Testament quotations, by the genealogy of chapter one, by its emphasis on Peter, by the unexplained customs related in the book, and by the testimony of tradition."²² From this he concludes, "Matthew has a twofold purpose in writing his Gospel. Primarily he penned this Gospel to prove Jesus is the Messiah, but he also wrote it to explain God's kingdom program to his readers."²³ Matthew presented God's

²⁰ Toussaint, *Behold the King*, 13–14.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

²² *Ibid.*, 18.

²³ *Ibid.* Toussaint adds, "A nonbelieving Jew would scoff at any assertion of the Lord Jesus being the Messiah, let alone King. 'If Jesus is the Messiah of Israel, where is His kingdom? Where is the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises to Israel?' he would ask. After all, the Hebrew Scriptures are replete with foreviews of a Utopian age headed by Israel and their Messiah. Therefore, the objector would

kingdom program “in three aspects. First, the earthly literal kingdom was offered to Israel in the person of Jesus, the Messiah, at His first coming. Second, the kingdom was postponed because Israel rejected its Messiah. This postponed kingdom will be established at Christ’s second coming. Third, Christ Jesus is now engaged in building His church, composed of those who in this age are the heirs of the kingdom.”²⁴

THE MEANING OF THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

In the parables of the kingdom Jesus referred repeatedly to the kingdom of heaven.²⁵ But to which kingdom was He referring? Couch correctly notes that “though Bible teachers of many persuasions recognize a universal kingdom of God’s reign and rule, the expressions *kingdom of God* and *kingdom of heaven* for the most part refer to the coming millennial reign of Christ on earth. . . . John, Mark, and Luke used the expression *kingdom of God* exclusively. They do not refer to the kingdom of heaven at all. But in reverse, Matthew uses the phrase *kingdom of heaven* some thirty

contend Jesus could not be the Messiah because He did not fulfill Old Testament prophecies promising a kingdom for Israel.

“Because of the validity of this objection, Matthew explains God’s kingdom program as it relates to Jesus, to Israel, and to the church. He shows first of all that the Jews rejected an earthly kingdom when they rejected their King (21:28–22:10; 11:16–24). He then goes on to show that because Israel rejected its King, its Kingdom is postponed. . . . In the meantime God has inaugurated an entirely new and previously unknown program. It involves the church of the present age which Christ predicted in Matthew 16:18. Because of the universal character of the church, Matthew also has an emphasis on Gentiles. Only Matthew mentions the word *church*. He refers to the Magi from the East, the Gentile centurion’s great faith, the Canaanitish woman, the promise of the universal proclamation of the kingdom (24:14), and the final great commission. Matthew has a definite universal emphasis to prove that the kingdom program of God also embraces Gentiles” (ibid., 19, [italics his]).

²⁴ Ibid., 20.

²⁵ Toussaint correctly notes that the term, “kingdom of heaven” occurs only in Matthew’s Gospel and “is distinctly Jewish” in nature (ibid., 16). Bailey observes, “The definition of the kingdom has been one of the most widely debated issues in Synoptic scholarship. However, the study of the kingdom in relationship to the parables has often been neglected. Studying the parables in this light helps interpret the kingdom within the progressive revelation of the life and teaching of Jesus Christ as He presented Himself and the message of the kingdom to Israel. Regardless of one’s interpretation of the kingdom, it is difficult to dispute that the kingdom is the primary referent of the majority of the parables. Too often the interpreter’s bias about the kingdom has been forced into parabolic exegesis rather than allowing the parables to inform the theology of the kingdom. More work is needed to allow the parables to unfold the biblical doctrine of the kingdom as the message of Jesus contributed to it” (“Guidelines for Interpreting Jesus’ Parables,” 37).

times and *kingdom of God* only three times!"²⁶ Beacham identifies the kingdom as "two overlapping yet distinguishable realms." The first is God's universal kingdom, His rule "at all times over every aspect and entity of the created order," and the second is His "rule that is localized on earth, framed within time, and centered on a select human constituency."²⁷ Beacham says this mediatorial kingdom was expressed as the kingdoms of Israel and Judah and will be expressed as the future messianic/millennial kingdom. He differs from Chafer, Pentecost, Ryrie, and Walvoord, who say that "kingdom" in Scripture carried "multiple senses" beyond the two, the universal and mediatorial kingdoms of God.²⁸

THE MEANING OF THE PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM

Jesus' parables should be interpreted within the context of their historical framework, looking to the immediate context for help in understanding both the reason for them as well as their meaning.²⁹ Since Matthew's material is arranged logically rather than chronologically, one needs to note how he used the parables as well as the details of their immediate contexts.³⁰

²⁶ Mal Couch, "Kingdom of God, of heaven," in *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*, ed. Mal Couch (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996), 230 (italics his).

²⁷ Roy E. Beacham, "Kingdom, Parables of the," in *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*, 235.

²⁸ Ibid. For example J. Dwight Pentecost identifies seven different senses of the word "kingdom": "(1) the Gentile kingdoms, (2) the kingdoms in Israel and Judah, (3) the kingdom of Satan, (4) God's universal kingdom, (5) a spiritual kingdom, (6) the millennial Davidic kingdom, and (7) the mystery form of the kingdom" (*Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958], 142). However, Pentecost also discusses the two distinct aspects of the kingdom. "We must recognize that the kingdom over which God rules is not self-contradictory; instead, it has two separate aspects that can be described a number of ways. One might say there is an *eternal* aspect as well as a *temporal* aspect; it has a *universal* nature as well as a *local* nature; or there is an *immediate* sense of the kingdom in which God rules directly, and a *mediated* sense of the kingdom in which God rules indirectly through appointed representatives" (*Thy Kingdom Come* [Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1990], 15 [italics his]).

²⁹ Bailey notes that "parables can be interpreted properly only by understanding the audience and the occasion that promoted them" ("Guidelines for Interpreting Jesus' Parables," 32). He says further, "To discover the need that prompted the parable is a significant step toward unlocking its meaning within its original context" (ibid., 34).

³⁰ Walter C. Kaiser and Moisés Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 113–14. Even though Matthew is logically arranged, and though these parables are located differently in other Gospels, probably Jesus spoke these parables together on a single occasion. In fact Matthew's re-

Jesus communicated the parables of the kingdom in Matthew 13 to His disciples in order to teach them the mysteries of God's kingdom program. And since the disciples were looking for a literal, physical, political, Jerusalem-based kingdom as described by the Old Testament prophets, Jesus' instruction must be seen in light of that expectation. Also the fact that Jesus "rejected" His family (12:48–50) just before He taught the parables and was rejected at Nazareth right after He taught the parables (13:53–57) shows that Jesus gave the parables with His and the nation's rejection in mind. As Beacham writes, "These parables were not spoken by Christ at the inception of His ministry in order to redefine the prophesied kingdom or to correct Jewish misconceptions about Messiah's rule. Rather, the kingdom parables were spoken by Christ later in His ministry, at a point of crisis in the offer of the restored kingdom to Israel. . . . The kingdom parables, then, were not intended to define the kingdom in its offer but to explain the effects of its rejection. The contextual setting that envelopes the kingdom parables (Matt. 10:1–16:21) must not be ignored in their interpretation."³¹ Thus, as Bailey writes, "The parables in Matthew 13 focus on the phase of God's kingdom program that extends from the time of Israel's rejection of Jesus in His earthly ministry to the time of judgment at His second coming."³²

Interpretation of the parables must take into account the eternal, unconditional covenants between God and Israel's patriarchs and kings. Pentecost correctly observes that "the Davidic kingdom program would not be cancelled. It could, however, be postponed."³³ He notes that in the parable of the ten minas (Luke 19:11–27) Jesus taught that "the kingdom offer was being withdrawn from that generation and the Davidic form of the theocracy postponed."³⁴

Since the kingdom was being delayed by Jesus, the parables need not refer to the millennial kingdom as some dispensationalists take them.³⁵ Rather, they describe the interadvent period of

counting of details such as their movement to the house and His change from an audience of many to the Twelve indicates that Jesus did in fact teach these parables in a single setting soon after rejecting His family and the nation.

³¹ Beacham, "Kingdom, Parables of the," 232.

³² Mark L. Bailey, "The Doctrine of the Kingdom in Matthew 13," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156 (October–December 1999): 446.

³³ Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come*, 233.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ For example Mike Stallard says that "any interpretation of Matthew's kingdom parables must understand at the outset the concrete essence of the kingdom as

God's rule that will continue until Israel is ready to welcome her King as promised in Scripture.³⁶

The parables also need not describe the church as such, though the church age is included within the scope of their time frame. "The aorist passive form of the verb (*ῥοιῶθη*) indicates that Jesus viewed the kingdom of heaven as having present reality. This parable describes a stage in God's kingdom program that has already begun—the present form of God's rule, which is explained as 'the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven' (v. 11)."³⁷ The "parables do not primarily concern the nature, function, and influence of the church. Rather, they show the previously unrevealed form in which God's theocratic rule would be exerted in a previously unrevealed age, made necessary by Israel's rejection of Christ."³⁸ It is through this new program that God expresses His sovereign rule in the present period of human history.³⁹

JESUS' STATEMENTS THAT INDICATE A DELAYED KINGDOM

Matthew included statements by Jesus that hint at the kingdom's delay and other statements that clearly point to the delay.

The first hint of the kingdom's delay is in His response to the question by John the Baptist's disciples about fasting (Matt. 9:14–15). Jesus alluded to His coming absence by referring to a groom being absent from his wedding feast, symbolic of Messiah's kingdom. His disciples will fast, but only after He, the groom, is gone. In weddings in those days the groom would be gone until just

taught by the Old Testament. The Jews did not usually think in abstract terms about such things. Therefore, the literal, earthly, political, and ethnic nature of the kingdom as understood in such passages as Amos 9, Daniel 7, Isaiah 11, and Ezekiel 36–48 form a backdrop to one's reading of Matthew, the most Jewish of Gospels" ("Hermeneutics and Matthew 13: Part II," *Conservative Theological Journal* 5 [December 2001]: 324–25). Stallard's view is just one of several approaches to the issue. Beacham describes the diversity of views within dispensationalism. "A variety of contrasting views attend these parables even among premillennialists and dispensationalists. Some believe, for example, that the kingdom parables relate to Jewish interests only or describe the future millennial age exclusively. Others believe that these stories redefine the kingdom and correct mistaken Jewish views about God's rule. Some contend that the parables describe the growth of the professing church and introduce an entirely new form of kingdom that precedes the millennial rule" ("Kingdom, Parables of the," 232).

³⁶ Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 139–42.

³⁷ Mark L. Bailey, "The Parable of the Tares," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155 (April–June 1998): 267.

³⁸ Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come*, 220.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 235.

before the wedding feast begins, when he would go to get his bride from her home and lead her to his home.⁴⁰ Thus Jesus implied His absence before the coming of the kingdom.⁴¹

A second hint comes as part of Jesus' instructions to the Twelve in chapter 10. He said they were to expect persecution till the kingdom comes. For this to happen there must be a time when He would not be accepted as Messiah. Yet He would indeed come as the Son of Man (Dan. 7:13–14) before they had finished the task (Matt. 10:23).

When the leaders asked Jesus for a sign, He responded by telling the parable of the returning unclean spirit (12:43–45). His words, "that is the way it will also be with this evil generation" (v. 45), indicate that their generation faced judgment, not the coming of the kingdom.

In the face of the nation's final rejection of Him, Jesus described His departure and delayed kingdom in more vivid terms. In the parable of the wicked vinedressers (21:33–41), He promised that the kingdom would be given to someone other than their generation (v. 43);⁴² thus a delay is involved. When attacked by the nation's leaders in the temple, Jesus responded by telling the parable of the wedding feast (22:1–14), and He said again that that generation would be left out of the kingdom. Just before predicting the destruction of the temple, Jesus wept over Jerusalem and predicted that His prophets would be persecuted by that generation (23:34–36) and that that generation would miss the kingdom because of their rejection of its King (vv. 37–39).

In the Olivet Discourse Jesus spoke specifically about the delay of the kingdom. He was answering the question of His disciples about the sign of His coming and the end of the age, thus the beginning of Messiah's kingdom. Following the parable of the fig tree (24:32–35), Jesus repeatedly alluded to His departure and delay in returning to set up the kingdom. The master of the faithful and evil

⁴⁰ Louis A. Barbieri Jr., "Matthew," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1983; reprint, Colorado Springs: Cook Communications Ministries, 1996), 80.

⁴¹ Ralph Gower and Fred Wright, *The New Manners and Customs of Bible Times* (Chicago: Moody, 1997), 66.

⁴² The anarthrous *ἐθνεί* in verse 43 is often translated "nation," but it can mean "people," "race," or "multitude." It does not refer to the church or to Gentiles, since it is clear in the Scriptures that the church is composed of citizens of many Gentile nations. Rather, this is a reference to Israel, but not the Israel of Jesus' generation, whose rejection and judgment is certain (Acts 2:40). It is the restored nation described in Ezekiel 36–37 and Romans 11:25–29.

servants went away and delayed his return (vv. 45–51). The groom, symbolic of the Messiah, was delayed, while the wise and foolish virgins, symbolic of Israel, waited (25:1–13). The master in the parable of the talents traveled to a far country (vv. 14–30) and returned “after a long time” (v. 19). Jesus followed these warnings to the nation with a clear description of His return (vv. 31–46), in which He said, “When the Son of Man comes in His glory . . . then He will sit on His glorious throne” (v. 31). Every warning in the Olivet Discourse includes an element that indicates that His return to set up the kingdom would be delayed.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DISPENSATIONAL ESCHATOLOGY

The Gospel of Matthew clearly communicates the fact that the Messiah has delayed the coming of His kingdom. And Matthew wrote to Jewish believers to explain why Jesus, as the Messiah, had not yet brought in the kingdom as promised. What then are the implications of these facts for dispensational eschatology?

First, one significant implication is that Matthew 13 includes the first revelation of the *mystery* Paul described in his epistles, namely, the inclusion of the Gentiles in God's program and the temporary setting aside of Israel.⁴³ This period of time is a parenthesis between the sixty-ninth and seventieth weeks of Daniel (Dan. 9:24–27). Paul defined this mystery as a plan of God “which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit” (Eph. 3:5). Thus this interadvent age involving the delay of the seventieth week of Daniel is not described or predicted anywhere in the Old Testament, but was revealed by Jesus to the apostles.⁴⁴ When Jesus spoke the parables of the kingdom in Matthew 13, He gave His listeners new revelation and made known to them “previously unknown data related to the kingdom. The kingdom to which Christ referred in Matthew 13 must certainly be the same kingdom of which He spoke earlier that day, the kingdom that had come upon that generation in the person of the King (Matt. 12:28).”⁴⁵ Jesus' teaching in Matthew 13 was new revelation

⁴³ Romans 11:25; 16:25–26; Ephesians 1:9–10; 3:1–12; Colossians 1:24–28; and 1 Timothy 3:16.

⁴⁴ Bailey, “Guidelines for Interpreting Jesus' Parables,” 176. John F. Walvoord asserts that there are “more than a dozen such truths” in the New Testament (*Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come* [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1974], 97).

⁴⁵ Beacham, “Kingdom, Parables of the,” 232.

unrelated to Israel as a nation but describing a new dispensation of God's universal kingdom program.⁴⁶

And what was revealed in the parables? An "entire age would intervene between the offer of the kingdom by the Messiah and Israel's reception of the King and enjoyment of full kingdom blessings."⁴⁷ Pentecost discusses the mysteries of the New Testament.

The existence of this present age, which was to interrupt God's established program with Israel, was a mystery (Matt. 13:11). That Israel was to be blinded so that Gentiles might be brought into relation to God was a mystery (Rom. 11:25). The formulation of the church, made up of Jews and Gentiles to form a body, was a mystery (Eph. 3:3–9; Col. 1:26–27; Eph. 1:9; Rom. 16:25). This whole program of God that results in salvation was called a mystery (1 Cor. 2:7). The relation of Christ to men in redemption was called a mystery (Col. 2:2; 4:3). The incarnation itself is called a mystery (1 Tim. 3:16), not as to fact but as to its accomplishment. . . . That there should be a new method by which God received men into His presence apart from death was a mystery (1 Cor. 15:51). These, then, constitute a major portion of God's program for the present age, which was not revealed in other ages, but is now known by revelation from God.⁴⁸

Pentecost also explains that the present mystery form of the kingdom is not the millennial kingdom because the latter was clearly predicted in the Old Testament and was not a mystery. Nor can the kingdom's mystery form refer to the church because the mystery form includes more than church-age believers.⁴⁹

Second, Matthew's chiasmic structure with its focus on chapter 13 implies that the church is distinct from the Messiah's kingdom promised to Israel. "The present dispensation of the church is not the kingdom of God. . . . the kingdom was postponed and the dispensation of the church is now temporarily in place. But the church saints have an anticipation of the coming kingdom of God."⁵⁰ This explains how what Jesus said to Israel can be applicable to the church as well (Matt. 28:18–20), without the church replacing Israel in God's program. "All I commanded you" makes what Jesus said to His disciples applicable to the *church* without changing its significance to *Israel*. Jesus was then speaking to Israelites who

⁴⁶ In view of Paul's teaching that God is not through with Israel (Rom. 9–11), but will one day save all Israel (in fulfillment of Zech. 14), this means a time gap exists between Daniel's sixty-ninth and seventieth weeks.

⁴⁷ Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come*, 219 (italics his).

⁴⁸ Ibid., 134–35.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 143–44.

⁵⁰ Couch, "Kingdom of God, of heaven," 231.

would soon become participants in God's new program, the church. And the point Jesus was making to Israel as represented by His disciples is that though the kingdom was delayed, God is still at work. Recognizing this fact helps strengthen the view that the earthly kingdom, though delayed, is yet to come.

CONCLUSION

Since Mathew focused his message on the parables of the kingdom, their role is central to his message. Thus, as noted, one of Matthew's purposes was to explain why, since Jesus is the Messiah, the kingdom had not yet come. This is demonstrated by the chiastic structure of the Gospel of Matthew with its focus on the interadvent age and God's work during this time, a work that includes the church but extends before and after it. Though Matthew did not state his purpose, he made his message (subject) evident through his arrangement of material. Thus Jesus' parables of the kingdom do not describe Messiah's kingdom or the church. Instead they address God's continued kingdom program (His universal rule) expressed through the church while Israel's program is "put on hold" until Daniel's seventieth week is resumed. The gifts and calling of God, especially as they relate to Israel, are irrevocable, as Paul affirmed (Rom. 11:29). But, as Paul also wrote, Gentile inclusion in God's universal (nonmessianic) kingdom program is a mystery, a truth not previously revealed.

After Jesus' resurrection the disciples were still anticipating the coming of the kingdom in the immediate future. When they asked, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6), Jesus answered by telling them that they were not privileged to know when the kingdom would be established (v. 7). Instead they were to be busy carrying out His commands in the Great Commission. By obeying Jesus' command in Acts 1:8 they would see the kingdom parables played out in the present age.

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