

Kingdom of God vs. Kingdom of Heaven:
An Artificial Hermeneutic?

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Introduction

This research paper explores the issue of the Kingdom of God versus the Kingdom of Heaven. Many well-known and exegetically sound Bible teachers assert that there is a difference in these two terms as they are found in the New Testament, particularly the Gospel of Matthew. One such expositor writes:

In some instances, however, there seems to be a contrast between the kingdom of heaven as it is portrayed in Matthew's Gospel, and the kingdom of God as it is unfolded in the other Gospels and the rest of the New Testament. This distinction, in its simplest form, is a contrast between the kingdom of God, viewed as containing all saints and excluding those not regenerated, and the kingdom of heaven as a sphere of profession, which includes those who are outwardly related to Christ but not actually to be numbered with the saints.¹

The same author further states that the term "kingdom of heaven" is only used in the sense of a sphere of profession in the book of Matthew² and that the term "kingdom of God" is never used in the New Testament to refer to a sphere of profession.³ It is the assertion of the author of this paper that to differentiate between these two terms, which refer to the same thing, is to impose an artificial hermeneutic on the text of Matthew. In doing so, texts must then be interpreted in light of the definition of "kingdom of God" or "kingdom of heaven". This results in contradictory interpretations, especially when examining parallel accounts in the other Gospels.

In order to show the congruence of these two terms, we will adopt a three-pronged approach. We will first analyze the historical background of the kingdom concept and attempt to answer the question "What did the original hearers understand these terms to mean?" Secondly, we will look at several passages in Matthew that do not make sense if we adopt the view that these two terms mean different things. Thirdly, we will look at the problem of parallel accounts. Last but not least, we will draw all of the arguments together in order to show that these two terms are in fact equivalent in meaning.

¹ John F. Walvoord, *The Nations, Israel, and the Church in Prophecy*(Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), pp. 25-26.

² *Ibid.* pg. 26.

³ *Ibid.* pg. 26.

The Jewish Concept of the Kingdom

Before investigating the textual evidence to determine the difference, if any, between the two terms "kingdom of heaven" and "kingdom of God", it is important to ask ourselves "What would the average Jewish listener have understood when these terms were used?" Too often we attempt to give a word or phrase an exegetical meaning from the viewpoint of the whole of scripture and not from the viewpoint of the progress of God's revelation to the point in time in which the word or phrase is used. In asking this question, we are making the assumption, which is yet to be proven, that the two terms are synonymous.

In the two centuries prior to Christ, there was a growing idea that God would send the Messiah to restore the Davidic Kingdom, liberate Israel from foreign occupation, and restore a proper worship of God.⁴ This explains why the Gospels start out with an "assumed" definition to the terms "kingdom of God" and "kingdom of heaven". Unlike the term "church", which is defined by Paul, the terms "kingdom of God" and "kingdom of heaven" are not defined at all in the Gospels. It is as though the definition of the terms was so widely known that no explanation of their meaning was needed.

When we further ask where this idea came from, we must begin in the Old Testament scriptures. In 2 Samuel 7:1-29 we are given the account of God's covenant with David in which David was promised an enduring seed and a kingdom forever. This covenant was unconditional. In Isaiah 9:6-7, we read of the coming Messiah who will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom forever. Additional passages referring to the promise of a kingdom are Jeremiah 23:5-8, Jeremiah 30:8, Jeremiah 33:14-17, and Ezekiel 37:22-25. All of these passages contain the concept of an enduring kingdom although the phrase "kingdom of God" does not appear.⁵

Although the promises were there in the Old Testament for everyone to see, the period between 400 B.C. and Jesus' time was one hardly characterized by Jewish freedom, much less a Davidic kingdom. It is against this background that the Jewish people began to think in terms of a "deliverer" who would throw off the yoke of foreign oppressors. In other words, the crisis of the time caused the Jewish people to examine their own scriptures to determine how the promised kingdom would come about. This examination resulted in the understanding that God would personally intervene in history to deliver Israel and set up the promised kingdom.⁶

⁴ Rudolph Schnakenburg, *God's Rule and Kingdom* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1963), pp. 41-43.

⁵ Ernest F. Scott, *The Kingdom of God in the New Testament* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1932), pg. 17.

⁶ George E. Ladd, *Jesus and the Kingdom* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), pp. 54-55.

This hope of deliverance manifested itself in several apocalyptic and pseudigraphical works in the period immediately preceding Christ's birth. These works universally attest to the hope of the restoration of the Jewish nation and the Davidic throne.⁷ Thus when John the Baptizer and Christ came proclaiming "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand", there was little doubt in the mind of the listener as to what that meant. God was about to break into history, throw off the Roman yoke of oppression, and restore the nation of Israel to a position of world dominance with the Messiah on the throne. The kingdom offered by Christ was the kingdom promised by God in the Old Testament.⁸

This is an important point! Whenever Jesus used the term "kingdom of God" or "kingdom of heaven", everyone immediately thought of the kingdom promises in the Old Testament. If Jesus were actually referring to two different kingdoms, then the Jewish listeners would have been in error in this interpretation. When John came preaching in Matthew 3:2 "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand", he was not heralding a kingdom of profession, but a real kingdom ruled by God. John was the forerunner of Messiah, not the forerunner of the Church as Matthew 3:3 clearly points out. The account of Jesus' own proclamation of the kingdom of heaven in Matthew 4:13-17 contains a prophecy from Isaiah 9:1-7, a passage that clearly refers to the Messiah. Thus, we see that in these two passages, Matthew 3:2 and Matthew 4:17, the identification of the kingdom of heaven as being a sphere of profession does not make sense. It is quite clear that the Jews who heard John the Baptizer and Christ understood them to be referring to God's promised kingdom as literally described in their Old Testament scriptures

Problem Passages

We now turn to the issue of problem passages in Matthew. If the term "kingdom of heaven" refers only to a sphere of profession, we are faced with several passages in Matthew that become nonsense or must be interpreted outside of their context. Let us look at some of these.

Matthew 7:15-23

⁷ Schnakenburg, pp. 44-54.

⁸ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Dunham Publishing House, 1964), pp. 446-463.

The first passage we will look at is Matthew 7:15-23. This passage, specifically verses 21-23, is a clear reference to future judgment.⁹ Therefore, the identification of the kingdom of heaven as being a sphere of profession does not make sense. How can these false prophets be excluded from a sphere of profession, especially since the context is one of eternal exclusion from heaven? In fact, Matthew 7:23 closely parallels Matthew 25:41. We are clearly presented with a problem in this passage if we hold to this assumed definition of the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 8:11

A second passage is Matthew 8:11. This statement was given by Christ in response to the faith demonstrated by the centurion who had a sick servant. Christ's statement that many will come from the east and west and sit down with the patriarchs in the kingdom of heaven can hardly be interpreted as referring to a sphere of profession. Since when in the church age is anyone sitting down with Abraham, unless of course one interprets this as referring to heaven? Additionally, that this verse is a reference to a future kingdom is also supported by verse 12 in which there is reference to outer darkness. This is a common expression that Christ used to refer to hell.¹⁰ The identification of the kingdom of heaven as a sphere of influence does not make sense in this passage.

Matthew 13:24-30, 37-43

Another passage that proves problematic if we identify the kingdom of heaven as a sphere of profession only is the Parable of the Tares as found in Matthew 13:24-30 and 13:37-43. In verses 24-30 of Matthew 13, Christ gives this parable which is meant to show that both true and false believers will exist together in the kingdom of heaven until the end of the age at which time there will be a separation.¹¹ In verses 37-43 of Matthew 13, Christ himself gives the interpretation of this parable. What we want to note is that in the giving of the parable, Christ used the phrase "the kingdom of heaven is likened ..." (Matthew 13:24), and only the word "kingdom" in the explanation (Matthew 13:38-41). Thus, there is an identification of the phrase "kingdom of heaven" in the giving with the word "kingdom" in the explanation. When we examine the explanation, it is

⁹ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary Matthew 1-7* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), pp. 473-479.

¹⁰ William Hendricksen, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), pp. 397-398.

¹¹ J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), pp. 215-217.

clear that Christ uses the word "kingdom" in reference to heaven, and not in reference to a sphere of profession. In fact, the weeds are cast into fire to be burned, a clear reference to eternal punishment. Note that the identification of the phrase "kingdom of heaven" and "kingdom" depend on literally interpreting the passage. We are not reading our own preconceived notions and ideas into the text, rather we are letting the text speak for itself. When we do this, we find that Christ identified the kingdom of heaven as being the same as the eternal heaven, not a sphere of profession.

Matthew 20:1-16

A fourth, and somewhat difficult passage to interpret, is Matthew 20:1-16 in which we find the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard. This parable has been subject to many interpretations, but the best interpretation is arrived at by examining the context in which it was given. In the last part of Matthew 19, we have the account of the rich, young ruler who came to Jesus and asked "What must I do to inherit eternal life?". Jesus' answer struck at the core of this man's problem, namely his riches. After the man left, Jesus made the famous statement "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19:24). To this statement, Peter points out that they, that is the disciples, had given up everything to follow Christ; "What do they get?" Jesus answer is this parable in which he tells them that everyone will ultimately receive the same rewards of eternal life although some will have served longer than others.¹² Note that Christ begins the parable with the phrase "kingdom of heaven". He is not referring to a sphere of profession, but to eternal heaven where we will all receive the same reward of eternal life. The first will be last and the last first, meaning that we all cross the finish line in a dead heat. To force the phrase "kingdom of heaven" to refer to a sphere of profession makes no sense in this passage.

In summary, we have tried to prove that the identification of the phrase "kingdom of heaven" as referring to a sphere of profession causes some problems when interpreting passages in the Gospel of Matthew. What we have done is to select four such passages and examine them in some detail. Other passages could have been analyzed, such as some of the parables of the Kingdom in Matthew 13, with the same conclusions. The result of this brief look at these passages should convince us to be careful to define a phrase from a single passage and then force that interpretation on others. This practice may cause exegetical problems.

Parallel Passages

¹² John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary Matthew 16-23* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), pp. 207-217.

The final area we wish to look at is the problem of parallel passages. By this, we mean the examination of passages that occur with the same contextual setting in two or more of the synoptic gospels. In fact, this is one of the strongest arguments for the assertion that the phrases "kingdom of God" and "kingdom of heaven" mean the same thing.

Before we begin our analysis of some of these passages, we must make it clear that these arguments hold up only if we adhere to a strictly literal interpretation of the scriptures. We cannot read these accounts with any preconceived notion as to the meaning of the terms, nor can we read our fuller understanding of God's revelation into these passages. In other words, we read the Bible in a "forward" mode and not a "reverse" mode. We strive to understand passages in their historical and cultural setting and not from our historical and cultural perspective. If we do not do this, then the historical events and cultural settings become irrelevant when interpreting scripture. Let us, therefore, use the historico-grammatico hermeneutic as our guide and see what we discover.

Matthew 4:17, Mark 1:15

These passages give us an account of the beginning of Christ's itinerant ministry. Both occur immediately after the account of Christ's temptation in the wilderness and a brief note regarding the arrest of John the Baptizer (Matthew 4:12 and Mark 1:14). Hence, both of these passages are referring to the same historical event, namely, the start of Christ's public ministry.

Note that in the Matthew passage, the message Christ preached was "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17), and in the Mark passage it is "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand ..." (Mark 1:15). Now the logical question is this, did Christ preach two messages, or one? Was he preaching the advent of the kingdom of God, that is, the promised kingdom of the Old Testament, or was he preaching the advent of a kingdom of profession? I think it is clear from the context of this passage and the reference to the message and ministry of John the Baptizer that Christ was referring to the promised kingdom of the Old Testament. We have already examined the evidence that would suggest that the hearers of this message would have understood it in no other way. If Christ was not preaching the promised kingdom of the Old Testament, then he was misleading in his message. It is clear from these two passages that the phrases "kingdom of God" and "kingdom of heaven" were interchangeable in the mind of the Holy Spirit as he inspired Matthew and Mark.

Matthew 8:11, Luke 13:29

These two parallel passages are not from the same historical setting, but nevertheless serve to demonstrate the consistency with which the phrases "kingdom of God" and "kingdom of heaven" were considered identical in the mind of the Gospel writers. In Matthew, we have the historical setting of Christ's healing of the centurion's servant. In Luke, however, we only know that this was spoken by Christ while preaching and teaching in villages and towns (Luke 13:23). The point we want to make is that Christ used the illustration of those who come from the east and west, that is Gentiles, to refer both to the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 8:11) and the kingdom of God (Luke 13:39). We have to admit at this point that Christ could have used the same illustration on two separate occasions to teach two different truths. However, I feel that this is unlikely. To assume that Christ did this, one would have to assume that the phrases "kingdom of God" and "kingdom of heaven" mean different things at the start. This is to assume the conclusion before it is proven. It is much more sound exegetically to assume that Christ was consistent in his illustrations. However, the author admits that this particular issue can be argued both ways.

Matthew 11:7-19, Luke 7:24-35

This parallel passage gives us the account of Christ's opinion regarding John the Baptizer. The preceding verses in both passages refer to the historical occasion of John sending his disciples to Christ to ask him if he was really the promised Messiah. After they left, Christ addresses the crowds and tells them in no uncertain terms that John the Baptizer was indeed the forerunner of the Messiah as prophesied in Malachi. The two verses we want to look at are Matthew 11:11 and Luke 7:28.

In Matthew's account, Christ is quoted as saying that John the Baptist is the greatest man that was ever born of women, however, whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he (John). Luke paraphrases the exact same words of Christ except he uses the phrase "kingdom of God" (Luke 7:28). Again, we are faced with the question "What did Jesus really say?" If there is to be a difference in these two terms, then the Holy Spirit surely should have inspired the Gospel writers to be consistent in their usage of the phrases. Since the Spirit did not, we should assume that the phrases are identical in meaning.

Matthew 13:11, Mark 4:11, Luke 8:10

These three verses contain the parallel account of Christ's answer to the disciples question "Why are you speaking in parables to the people". From Matthew's gospel, we find that Christ's usage of the parabolic method of teaching was new at this point.¹³ Christ indicates in his answer that it is because of a judicial blinding on the part of God because of the hardheartedness of the Jews. However, Christ tells the disciples in these three parallel verses that it has been given to them to know the mysteries of the kingdom. The point we want to make here is that in Matthew 13:11 the phrase "kingdom of heaven" is used, and in Mark 4:11 and Luke 8:10 the phrase "kingdom of God" is used. We are again forced to ask ourselves "What did Christ really say?"

There can be little doubt that these three verses are referring to the same historical event, namely the giving of the Parables of the Kingdom. If these two terms are different, then Christ had to use one or another on this occasion. The fact that both phrases are used should be enough to prove that they are identical in meaning. Also, the statement by John Walvoord at the beginning of this paper that the term "kingdom of God" is never used to refer to a sphere of profession is shown to be untrue. Christ told the disciples that it was for them to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God (Mark 4:11 and Luke 8:10), and this after the giving of the Parable of the Sower. Hence it should be no great leap of logic to see that the Parable of the Sower is in reference to the kingdom of God, at least in the minds of Mark and Luke. Again, we see no attempt on the part of the Holy Spirit to differentiate the terms "kingdom of God" and "kingdom of heaven" on the occasion of the inspiration of these Gospel records.

Matthew 13:31-33, Luke 13:18-21

This parallel account gives us Matthew and Luke's version of the Parable of the Mustard Seed and the Parable of the Leaven. Although the historical settings are different, we can still make an important point regarding the use of the phrases "kingdom of God" and "kingdom of heaven". This point is that those who wish to differentiate the terms are forced to make an inconsistent interpretation of these accounts. In other words, if the phrase "kingdom of God" refers only to redeemed creation, then the interpretation given by Walvoord and others to these parables as found in Matthew must differ from the interpretation of these parables as found in Luke. In actuality, this is not the case. In the Bible Knowledge Commentary New Testament Edition,

¹³ John F. Walvoord, and Roy B. Zuck, The Bible Knowledge Commentary New Testament Edition (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983), p. 48.

Walvoord and Zuck make the same interpretation in both passages.¹⁴ This should not be the case if the two phrases "kingdom of God" and "kingdom of heaven" mean different things. It seems to me that the easiest conclusion to draw from these two passages is that the two phrases mean exactly the same thing. This avoids the sticky problem faced by Walvoord and Zuck.

One note that we should make here is the fact that when one assumes a definition of a term, then passages must be interpreted in light of that definition if one is to be consistent. For example, those who make the term "kingdom of heaven" refer to a sphere of profession interpret these two parables one way, whereas those who do not make that distinction interpret them another. This is not to say there are not diversities of interpretation in respect to these parables, but it is to say that one must maintain consistency with one's definitions of terms.

John MacArthur, who does not make a distinction between these terms,¹⁵ interprets the Parable of the Mustard Seed and Leaven as representing the explosive growth and influence of the kingdom from a small start to a world-wide organism.¹⁶ He can make this interpretation because he is not bound to an a-priori interpretation of the phrase "kingdom of heaven". To him, this phrase is identical with "kingdom of God", and as a result he does not have to interpret these two parables in a negative sense, i.e. the Mustard Seed as referring to abnormal growth and a haven for evil, and the Leaven as referring to the invading influence of evil within the Church.

On the other hand, John Walvoord makes a distinction between "kingdom of God" and "kingdom of heaven", and as a result interprets these two parables differently. To him, the Parable of the Mustard Seed and Leaven refer to explosive growth, but in the sphere of "profession" and not "possession".¹⁷ He makes this interpretation, in part, because of his definition of the phrase "kingdom of heaven".

Matthew 19:16-30, Mark 10:17-31, Luke 18:18-30

The last parallel passage we will look at is the account of the rich, young ruler found in Matthew 19:16-30, Mark 10:17-31, and Luke 18:18-30. All three of these accounts refer to the same historical event and offer further proof that the phrases "kingdom of God" and "kingdom of heaven" are identical. As we have seen in the other passages, Matthew uses the phrase "kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19:23), and Mark and Luke use the

¹⁴ John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, pp. 51, 240-241.

¹⁵ John F. MacArthur, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (Panorama City: Word of Grace Communications, 1984), pp. 10-11.

¹⁶ John F. MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary Matthew 8-15* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1987), pp. 368-375.

¹⁷ Walvoord and Zuck, p 51.

phrase "kingdom of God" (Mark 10:23-25, Luke 18:24-25). Again, we are faced with the question of what Christ really said. Unless the two phrases are identical in meaning, we are faced with an inconsistency in these passages.

One interesting note is seen in Matthew 19:24 where Matthew uses the phrase "kingdom of God". This is only one of the five occurrences of that phrase in Matthew, the others being Matthew 6:33, 12:28, 21:31, and 21:43. From an examination of the context of Matthew's account, it is clear that Christ is referring to the same kingdom in verse 24 as he did in verse 23. Hence, we are led to the conclusion that Christ considered the terms identical in meaning.

Summary

In this paper we have attempted to prove that the two phrases "kingdom of God" and "kingdom of heaven" mean the same thing. In doing so, we have examined the background of the kingdom concept to show that the New Testament writers assumed that the readers of their Gospels understood the term. There is no attempt on their part to define the "kingdom of God" or "kingdom of heaven", and as a result, we are led to the conclusion that these phrases referred to the kingdom promised in the Old Testament.

Secondly, we have looked at some passages in the Gospel of Matthew where adopting the view that the phrase "kingdom of heaven" refers to a sphere of profession presents some problems. These problems disappear if we see the phrase as referring to all of the redeemed, not just the professors.

Thirdly, we have looked at parallel passages. In doing so, we find that we were brought time and time again to the question of "What did Christ really say?" Only when we make the two phrases identical in meaning do we have consistency. Christ had to use one or the other term if different. Since he is recorded as using the terms interchangeably, we should interpret them as being the same.

The last question we need to ask is "Why did Matthew use the phrase 'kingdom of heaven' in his Gospel?" Probably the best answer to this question is found in realizing that Matthew was using the term "heaven" to refer to "God" in much the same way we use "White House" to refer to the President of the United States.¹⁸ Because Matthew is the "Jewish Gospel", and because the Jews had an aversion to using the name of God, Matthew was most likely condescending to the Jewish custom of substituting "heaven" for "God". One final note, it is the hope of the author of this paper that the reader has come to an understanding of the danger of defining a term from a subset of the available data, and then forcing the meaning of that term on the

¹⁸ John F. MacArthur, *Heaven* (Chicago, Moody Press, 1988), p. 17.

rest of scriptures. We must always be careful to weigh all of the biblical evidence before making such definitions. Only then will we become "exegetes" of the word and not "eisegetes".

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