

The Kingdom of Heaven

By Joseph Frankovic

Foreword By Fr. Richard Thomas

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, New American Standard Version.

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אין בידינו מיסורי הצדיקים

The Kingdom of Heaven

is fondly dedicated to the memory of

David Forbes

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Preface

On March 9, 1996 I taught a Bible study on the kingdom of heaven for the Narkis Street Congregation's adult Bible class. I vividly remember that morning. Among those in attendance was Professor Marvin Wilson. (He had been invited to preach the sermon for the 10:30 a.m. service.) The audience responded favorably to the material, and as a result I began entertaining the idea of transcribing and eventually publishing the study.

After I had returned to the United States in November of 1996, a kind lady who has been a dedicated supporter of this work volunteered to transcribe the Bible study. Typing many hours, she not only transcribed *The Kingdom of Heaven*, but entered into the computer numerous corrections and editorial changes. For her time, energy, and exactitude, I am truly grateful.

Once in manuscript form, I sent *Kingdom of Heaven* to Ken Mullican of HaKeshet, Inc. Volunteering his time, he completed the remaining work, which was necessary to make the manuscript ready for publication. To the manuscript, I added an appendix. The material included in the appendix originates from a presentation that I gave on March 1, 1997 at a national conference sponsored by the Center for the Study of Biblical Research.

Over the summer, Dr. Clifford Hill, who heads PWM Trust in Bedfordshire, England, asked me to contribute a piece for a memorial volume to honor the memory of Mr. David Forbes, who earlier that year had succumbed to cancer after a courageous bout with the disease. Agreeing to participate, I sent PWM Trust *The Kingdom of Heaven* to be included in the volume. The English and American versions of the essay resemble each other, but are not identical. I had the opportunity to revise

and supplement the American version beyond the revisions that I had made to the English one. Moreover, the British editorial team must face the formidable challenge of trying to polish the essay's Western Atlantic dialect, so that its prose may be worthy of the Queen.

As one can see, *The Kingdom of Heaven* has had a rather protracted gestation period. I have labored to make the text as readable as possible without recourse to rewriting the manuscript from scratch. Despite my efforts, I realize that *The Kingdom of Heaven* still retains traces of its origin as an oral presentation.

I would like to thank my teachers, Professors Burt Visotzky, David Flusser, Brad Young, and Roy Hayden. Since this essay deals with the Kingdom of Heaven, I am obliged to single out Dr. Robert Lindsey. His ideas on this subject have had a profound impact on my thinking.

Being a man who truly loved and enjoyed people, Lindsey did not naturally incline toward the solitary task of writing. I hope that this short essay will serve as a vehicle to introduce his ideas to a wider audience and will convince some readers of the significance of his approach to reading the gospels, which he pioneered with Professor Flusser in Jerusalem decades ago. Beset by chronic shortfalls in manpower and funding, this work, nevertheless, continues, carried on by a handful of disciples Lindsey made during the years he pastored the Narkis Street Congregation.

Lastly, I am very pleased that Father Richard Thomas wrote the Foreword to this study. Who is Father Thomas? The answer to that question stands as a remarkable story in itself. Allow me merely to say that he is a Spirit-filled priest who has dedicated himself to helping the poorest and most wretched of El Paso, Texas and Juarez, Mexico. One thing that strikes me as particularly significant about Father Thomas is that the lens through

which he reads the Bible—a life-style characterized by radical outreach to the destitute, infirm, and imprisoned—has caused him to zero in on the same accentuations in Jesus’ words that I have gradually come to see after more than a decade of studying in academia at both Jewish and Christian institutions. In short, the myth that commitment to a graduate-level education in critical, biblical research stands opposed to “the things of the Spirit” has been exposed once again for what it is—a myth. What remains truly important for all of Jesus’ disciples is obedience.

Joseph Frankovic
Wichita Falls, Texas
March 1998

Foreword

The Gospel of Matthew depicts Jesus as one day sitting near the edge of Lake Gennesaret. Many people had gathered about Jesus in order to hear him teach with parables. Later in the day when the crowd had departed, the disciples came to him and asked, “*Why do you speak to them in parables?*” “*To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven,*” Jesus responded, “*but to the rest it is in parables... because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand*” (Luke 8:10a, Matthew 13:13).

Jesus continues to teach the secrets of the kingdom of heaven today to his close followers. Like a small girl whispering in the ear of her friend, Jesus wants to unveil secrets to those willing to be alone with him and to give him time.

In the following pages, Joseph Frankovic shares some of the secrets unveiled to him. The kingdom of heaven (kingdom of God) was very prominent in the preaching of Jesus. Luke tells us, “*...He called the twelve together, and gave them power and authority over all the demons, and to heal diseases. And He sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God, and to perform healing*” (Luke 9:1-2). Curiously, in today’s popular preaching and writing, much more emphasis is placed on the person of Jesus than on the kingdom of heaven. There is more interest in the final coming, in the rapture, and so forth, than in the many times Jesus comes to those seeking the kingdom of God here and now.

This little book will supply a needed correction and emphasis as the author speaks about the kingdom of heaven and illuminates the mind of the reader. The admonition, “Seek first his righteousness” is paraphrased,

“Seek first God’s redemptive agenda.” God’s redemptive agenda is shown to be “mending the world,” i.e., bandaging the wounds of the hurting and pouring oil and wine into them like the Good Samaritan. God expresses his mercy in tangible ways: healing for the sick, food for the hungry, clothes for the naked, friendship for the rejected, rest for the weary, protection for the exploited, love for the abandoned, and so forth.

The lawyer (whose questions to Jesus evoked the story of the Good Samaritan) was finally told, “Go and do the same yourself.” In other words, we need to imitate the Good Samaritan. The lawyer had been asking good questions; now he was challenged to act, not just talk and speculate.

An old and prevalent temptation persists among religious folk to do various good things which are not specifically on God’s agenda at that moment. The New Testament illustrates our susceptibility to get “hung up,” not on something unworthy, but rather on a good activity at the wrong time, or in the wrong place, or by the wrong person.

The fourth Evangelist has offered an example of this (John 20:15-18). Mary Magdala, with all her love and devotion for the Lord, delayed his ascension! On Easter morning Jesus met her outside the vacant tomb. Mary made a mistake and addressed her beloved Lord as a meddling gardener, “*Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away.*” Finally, recognizing her Lord, she tackled him around the legs and tightly held him. Jesus gently chided her, “*Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father...*” You are holding up my ascension!

The kingdom of God, the ‘mending of the world,’ required something else of Mary and something else of Jesus. “*Go My brethren, and say to them, I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your*

God.”

Some forty days later, after Jesus had continued to appear to his friends to tell them about the kingdom of God, two angels found it necessary to admonish the twelve to get busy on God’s plan and not to stand idle. What they were doing was good, but not exactly what God’s kingdom required at the moment. God always wants us to be engaged in “his redemptive activity or plan.” Luke recorded the incident in the opening chapter of Acts: Jesus was slowly lifted up from the ground as the twelve looked on. A cloud came and covered Jesus, and they could not see him anymore. They strained their eyes to get another glimpse. *“And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was departing, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them; and they also said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky?...”* (Acts 1:9-11). In other words, “Do not be idle! The kingdom of heaven is moving on. Move with it!”

As you read the following pages, may the Holy Spirit guide you closer to the center of the kingdom of heaven.

Fr. Richard Thomas
The Lord’s Ranch
Vado, New Mexico
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The Danger

In a thoughtful essay entitled *Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism*, Krister Stendahl, wrote the following:

But it remains a fact worth pondering that Jesus had preached the kingdom, while the church preached Jesus. And thus we are faced with a danger: we may so preach Jesus that we lose the vision of the kingdom, the mended creation.¹

Stendahl has brought into sharp focus the fact that Jesus' preaching centered on the kingdom of heaven. Christian preaching, however, too often centers on the person of Jesus without adequate attention being given to his message. In the end, the laity, who week after week listen to such preaching, run the risk of neglecting the significance of the kingdom of heaven and blurring the challenges, responsibilities, demands, and privileges of being a disciple of Jesus.

His Righteousness

A key verse in the quest for attaining an accurate understanding of the kingdom is Matthew 6:33: "*But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you.*" This verse serves as an excellent example of what Bible scholars call a *parallelism*. The ancient Jewish mind enjoyed repeating the same idea in a parallel structure. For instance, Proverbs 20:1 says, "*Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler...*" Here "wine" is paired with "strong drink," and "mocker" with "brawler." Hebraic parallelisms also appear in the Greek of the New Testament. Matthew 6:33 is a synonymous parallelism which has been preserved in the Greek. Thus, if one can unlock what "his kingdom"

means, one can use that information to unlock what “his righteousness” means. Likewise, if one can unlock what “his righteousness” means, one can unlock what “his kingdom” means. The approach taken here will be to start by unlocking the meaning of “his righteousness.”

From the Greek of Matthew 6:33, *dikaiosunae* has been translated into English as “righteousness.” If one operates on the premise that Jesus was not teaching in Greek, but in Hebrew (or perhaps in Aramaic), then an effort to identify what he said in Hebrew may prove helpful.²

Underneath the Greek *dikaiosunae* is some form of the Semitic root *tsadak*.

From that same root, the noun *tsedakah* in Hebrew carries a range of meanings. During the first century A.D., when Jews spoke a type of Hebrew known as Mishnaic Hebrew, *tsedakah* had come to mean almsgiving.³ For example, in Matthew 6:1 the Greek *dikaiosunae* means charitable deed. This indicates that underneath *dikaiosunae* lurks the Hebrew word *tsedakah*, because *dikaiosunae* in Classical Greek does not mean almsgiving. *Dikaiosunae* takes on this meaning when Hebrew (or Aramaic) has influenced the Greek.

When modern Bible translators have encountered the Old Testament Hebrew word *tsedakah*, too often they woodenly translated it into English as “righteousness.” For example, examine the context of Micah 6:3-5. English translations of the passage read something like:

My people, what have I done to you? How have I made you weary? Answer me! I have brought you up from the land of Egypt. I have redeemed you from the house of slavery. I sent before you Moses, Aaron and Miriam. My people, remember what Balak, King of Moab, counseled, and what Balaam, son of Beor, answered him!

From Shittim to Gilgal, in order that you may know the tsidkot Adonai (author's translation).

Nearly all English translations have rendered *tsidkot Adonai* as “the righteous acts of the Lord.” What is the context of this passage? Speaking on behalf of God, the Prophet reminded the people that God had brought them up from the land of Egypt and had sent before them Moses, Aaron and Miriam. Micah was speaking about Israel's departure from Egypt. He was reminding the people how God had redeemed their ancestors. In fact, Micah 6:4 explicitly says, “*I have redeemed from the house of slavery.*” Note that “house of slavery” is paired with “the land of Egypt.” God had liberated the Israelites from the bondage of Egypt.

The Exodus event stands out as the most spectacular saving act of God on behalf of the Jewish people recorded in the Hebrew Bible. It was the superlative redemptive act of the Old Testament. God brought his people out of slavery; he went before them; he defeated their enemies; he provided water and food for them in the wilderness. God displayed his redemptive power in an awesome way on behalf of his people.

Reconsider Micah 6:5, “*In order that you may know the tsidkot Adonai.*” *Tsidkot* is the plural of *tsedakah*, and *Adonai* simply means Lord. In light of the context, how should this phrase be translated? The RSV translators rendered this phrase, “the saving acts of the Lord.” These translators recognized something very important, namely that *tsedakah* in biblical Hebrew may sometimes mean something more than righteousness. In Jesus' day, as mentioned above, it could mean almsgiving. Already in the biblical period, *tsedakah* could also mean a redemptive or saving act.

Surveying the nuances which are listed for the word *tsedakah* in *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon* (which is the standard Hebrew to English lexicon of the Old Testament)

one discovers that listed under the sixth and seventh nuances are the adjectives “redemptive” and “saving.”⁴ The RSV’s translation of Micah 6:5 reflects a greater degree of sensitivity to the context of the passage. The other English translations have failed to capture the essence of the phrase *tsidkot Adonai*. Israel is to remember how God had acted redemptively on their behalf.

His Kingdom

Enough data has been assembled from Micah 6:3-5 to unlock the second part of the parallelism in Matthew 6:33. The Hebrew noun *tsedakah* can refer to God’s redemptive activity as in the phrase *tsidkot Adonai*. Moreover, the ancient Jewish scholars who translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek rendered *tsidkot Adonai* as *dikaiousunae ton kuriou* (literally, “righteousness of the Lord”).⁵ Thus, applying this information to Matthew 6:33, one could say that a more dynamic rendering of “seek first his righteousness” would be “seek first his redemptive activity or plan.” Capitalizing on the parallel structure of Matthew 6:33, one now knows something about the kingdom of heaven, too. A link exists between God’s redemptive activity and the kingdom of heaven. A principal feature of the kingdom of heaven is God’s redemptive power at work in the affairs of humanity.

Is the expression “kingdom of heaven” found in the Old Testament? The phrase “kingdom of heaven” does *not* appear in the Old Testament. There are only two bodies of literature where the expression “kingdom of heaven” appears repeatedly as a sort of technical term.⁶ They are rabbinic literature and the New Testament, especially the synoptic gospels of the latter. Throughout their gospels, the first three Evangelists described Jesus as speaking frequently about the kingdom of heaven (or kingdom of God). Yet the term “kingdom of heaven” does not appear in

the Old Testament. A master of pedagogy, would Jesus have invented a technical term and expected his audiences to grasp it? One would do better to assume that Jesus borrowed a term, which was common in his day among the Jewish sages, and tailored it for his purposes. The way in which Jesus spoke of the kingdom of heaven resembled the way the sages (and those who came after them, the rabbis) used the expression. It was not identical, but similar. Much can be learned about how Jesus understood the kingdom of heaven by examining first how the ancient sages of Israel understood it. Once familiar with their ideas on the subject, one can then compare and contrast their teachings to what Jesus taught about it.

If a Christian were to ask a Hebrew-speaking rabbi where the kingdom of heaven first appeared in history, he would answer: *Adonai yimloch leolam vaed*. In dynamic English that means, “The Lord reigns forever” (Exodus 15:18). This declaration comes from the song of thanksgiving, which the Israelites sang after passing through the Red Sea. They sang this song because they had been redeemed. God had delivered them in a most dramatic way from their enemies. They had seen it with their own eyes. They had walked through the parted waters. Thus, the sages concluded that the kingdom of heaven had manifested first at the parting of the Red Sea.⁷

Now someone might argue that God remains in total control all the time. How then could the sages have claimed that this was the first time that God had exercised his sovereignty in creation? A distinction needs to be made. The sages of Israel clearly recognized the sovereign rule of God over the entire universe. They often spoke, however, about God’s sovereignty in a more qualified sense. Hebrew has a verb, which they were fond of using in reference to the kingdom of heaven. That verb is *lehamleech*, and it comes from the same three-letter root as the word *melek*, which means “king.” *Lehamleech* means to enthrone somebody

as king. The sages and rabbis were fond of talking about God in terms of his people enthroning him as king. They recognized theologically a need to make a distinction between God's absolute sovereignty over the universe and those who have chosen to recognize that sovereignty and obey his will. The rabbis enjoyed talking about people of faith, who had submitted their wills to God and were allowing him to reign in their lives. Although many people maintain a belief in an omniscient and omnipotent divine being, fewer people undertake the next step and respond in a radical way to God's absolute sovereignty. The kingdom of heaven makes contact with humanity through the yielded lives of people who have made obedience to the will of their heavenly Father a priority. They have made God king, and he reigns in their lives.

The Septuagintal translation of Exodus 15:18 is rather interesting. The translators of the Septuagint dynamically translated this verse in a way that probably reflects their understanding of the kingdom of heaven. Anybody who has worked seriously with biblical texts knows that a pure translation exists only in theory. As soon as one translates from one language to another, one has entered the realm of interpretation. The translators of the Septuagint did not render Exodus 15:18 as literally as they could have. The Hebrew literally says: "*The Lord will reign forever and ever.*" The verb is in the imperfect form, which approximates the future tense in English. The ancient translators, however, rendered this imperfect Hebrew form as a present participle in Greek: "*The Lord is reigning forever and ever.*" God's redemptive power was a reality in the lives of the Israelites. They had just passed through the parted waters. God was reigning in their midst.

From the Prophet Micah one learns that a fundamental characteristic of God's righteous activity is redemption. Thus, "Seek first his righteousness" could be more clearly paraphrased as "*Seek first his redemptive agenda,*" which is in parallel with "*his kingdom.*" From Exodus 15:18 one learns

that the kingdom of heaven, according to Jewish thought, first became manifest in history at the Red Sea.⁸ Moreover, the ancient Jewish scholars, who translated this verse from Hebrew to Greek sometime around 200 B.C., allowed their perception of God’s redemptive activity as a present reality to find expression in the translation. The Septuagintal translation of Exodus 15:18 indicates that the Lord reigns forever—in the past, present, and future.⁹

Heal First, Preach Later

A parable from an early Rabbinic commentary on Exodus sheds additional light on the kingdom of heaven. This parable is a midrashic comment on Exodus 20:2: “*God spoke of these words, saying, ‘I am the Lord your God, who brought you forth from the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery.’*” The parabolic comment on the verse follows:

I AM THE LORD, YOUR GOD: Why were the Ten Commandments not mentioned at the beginning of the Torah? ...This can be compared to a king who entered a province and said to the people, “I will reign over you.” But the people answered him, “You have done nothing beneficial for us that you should merit reigning over us.” What did the king do? He built for them a wall, he built for them a water system to bring water inside of that wall, and he went out and made war on their behalf [against their enemies]. Then he said to them, “I will reign over you.” They answered him, “Yes, please reign over us!” Thus, God brought forth Israel from Egypt, he divided the Sea for them, he caused the manna to fall for them, he raised up a well in the wilderness for them, he brought the quail for them, he made war against Amalek for them, and then he said to them, “I will reign over you.” And they answered him, “Yes, please reign over us!”¹⁰

Did God first give the Israelites the Torah or did he first redeem them? He first redeemed them, and then outlined what he expected from them in the Torah. Notice that the Ten Commandments begin, “*I am the Lord your God, who brought you forth from the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery.*” They open with an affirmation of the great redemptive act, which God had done on behalf of his people. A pattern seems to be emerging: first, an individual experiences the redemptive power of God, and then, he or she responds to that redemptive encounter. The normal response of an individual after he or she has been redeemed, saved, set free, healed, and/or forgiven by God is, “Yes, please reign over me.”¹¹ The kingdom of heaven is about redemption. It is a present reality. It is God’s redemptive power impacting humanity. A person who has experienced that power naturally responds with a desire to be obedient to God’s will.

Now Playing or Coming Soon?

In the synoptic gospels one meets difficulties in trying to understand precisely what Jesus meant when he spoke about the kingdom of heaven.¹² The difficulties seem to have been generated by two cases of an early conflation of ideas in Christian tradition. Apparently, in his teachings, Jesus did not link together these ideas. The linking together happened at a little later time. In other words, in each of the two cases, two separate motifs originally stood independently, and somehow elements from each of the motifs became mixed with the other.

In Jewish thought, eternal life and the kingdom of heaven stand out as two distinct concepts. In Hebrew, *olam habah* basically corresponds to what Christians talk about as eternal life. The kingdom of heaven is a separate term that has to do with God’s redemptive activity and obedience to his will. If one takes a concordance and examines the phrases “kingdom of heaven” and “kingdom of God,” (which are synonyms) one discovers that

in the synoptic tradition, the terms “kingdom of heaven” and “kingdom of God” appear about fifteen times in Mark and over thirty times both in Matthew and in Luke. If one examines the expression “eternal life,” one will see that it appears in each of the synoptic gospels about three times.

What happens when the same exercise is repeated with John’s gospel, which is not part of the synoptic tradition? The expression “eternal life” appears in John about ten times, whereas the phrase “kingdom of God” occurs twice in Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus. This feature of the gospels has unwittingly caused Christians to conflate these two concepts.¹³ If the main proclamation of Jesus is the kingdom of heaven in the synoptic tradition, one can easily assume wrongly that the main proclamation of Jesus in John is also the kingdom of heaven, and eternal life, therefore, must correspond with the kingdom of heaven. To treat the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as equivalent expressions represents an appealing, but facile, solution to this difficulty in the text.

If a reader of the gospels chooses this common, simple solution, then he or she will struggle with attaining an accurate understanding of the kingdom of heaven. Happily, through comparative study with ancient Jewish sources, one can see that in the synoptic tradition, the kingdom of heaven is a concept distinct from eternal life. Moreover, in the synoptic tradition the weight of Jesus’ teachings falls clearly on the kingdom of heaven. A theological shift in Christian thinking was already underway by the time that John began writing his gospel.¹⁴

A second conflation of ideas, which occurred early in Christian tradition, was that the expression kingdom of heaven became identified and interchangeable with the *parousia*.¹⁵ (This Greek word means “coming” or “arrival” and in theological literature refers to Jesus’ second coming.) When preaching sermons, Christian preachers sometimes identify the kingdom of heaven with the *parousia*. In other words, they describe it as

appearing at the time of the Lord's return. In the academic literature, too, this idea finds expression.

Realized Eschatology

A famous scholar named C. H. Dodd wrestled with trying to understand Jesus' teachings on the kingdom of heaven. He recognized in the synoptic tradition that, as a concept, the kingdom of heaven possesses a temporal dimension rooted in the present,¹⁶ but he was also aware of verses that seem to indicate that the kingdom of heaven will appear at some point in the future.¹⁷ He developed an idea that he called *realized eschatology*. Regarding *realized eschatology*, Dodd wrote:

Here then is the fixed point from which our interpretation of the teaching regarding the kingdom of God must start. It represents the ministry of Jesus as "realized eschatology," that is to say, as the impact upon this world of the "powers of the world to come" in a series of events, unprecedented and unrepeatable, now in actual process.¹⁸

His conclusion represents a serious attempt to wrestle with certain difficulties resident in the synoptic tradition. From the perspective of one who has spent considerable time reading rabbinic literature and the synoptic gospels, however, Dodd may have misinformed much Protestant evangelical theology. Was Dodd saying that the miracles, which had been demonstrated in Jesus' ministry, were unrepeatable and will not happen in our day? What would Kathryn Kuhlman have thought about such an idea?

Dodd's words reflect a certain nebulosity that ultimately stems from the synoptic gospels themselves.¹⁹ Was he suggesting that when believers

remain obedient to the will of their heavenly Father that God's redemptive power will not break forth to heal, restore, provide, and save from the evils at hand? One cannot easily ascertain exactly what Dodd intended to communicate, but he wrote "unrepeatable" in reference to the miraculous. Dodd's writings have pointed a lot of evangelical thinking on a path which has a tendency to emphasize the future aspect of the kingdom, while at the same time, giving lip service to its present aspect.²⁰ If one relies heavily on the majority of passages from the synoptic tradition that speak of the kingdom of heaven, and takes seriously comparative study with rabbinic literature, one cannot easily escape the conclusion that, from a temporal perspective, the kingdom of heaven as a concept, remains anchored in the present with attendant future implications.

Still Growing

Consider the parables of the mustard seed and of the leaven, which talk about the expansion of the kingdom of heaven. In these parables, does the kingdom of heaven appear suddenly at the end of this age? The kingdom of heaven is already here. It continues to expand steadily. These two parables do not fit into the model of the kingdom of heaven appearing suddenly with the return of the Lord. Nor is the metaphorical image of a seed growing steadily explained suitably as a series of "unrepeatable" events.

The parable of the mustard seed warrants special attention because it appears in Matthew, Mark and Luke, and all three of the synoptic Evangelists agreed that the parable describes the kingdom of heaven. Apparently some parables, which carry introductions as being about the kingdom of heaven in the first three gospels, were originally told by Jesus in regard to other subjects. Consider, for example, the parable of the net (Matthew 13:47). In Matthew 13:31-32, one finds the

parable of the mustard seed, which is followed by the parable of the leaven (Matthew 13:33). Eleven verses after the parable of the leaven, following an explanation of the parable of the tares (which is introduced as a kingdom parable), the parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl appear (Matthew 13:44-46). Although the parables of the tares, mustard seed, leaven, hidden treasure, pearl and net have been clumped together one after the other in Matthew and are introduced as kingdom parables, only the parables of the mustard seed, leaven, hidden treasure, and pearl seem to be authentically about the kingdom of heaven. Jesus originally told the parables of the tares and net not to teach about the kingdom of heaven, but about the final judgement. Matthew's decision to clump these two parables together with four kingdom parables influenced the manner in which he chose to introduce them.²¹ Being caught off-guard suddenly and separating the good from the bad represent motifs belonging to the terrible day of the Lord, the coming of the Son of Man (or *parousia*), and the final judgement.²²

Jesus' eschatological teachings regarding the end of the age, which culminates with the *parousia*, stress the need to be ready at all times. Unlike the kingdom of heaven, which has been slowly growing, the return of the Son of Man will be sudden! Consequently, Christians should be living in obedience to the divine will now, lest they be found delinquent when the terrifying eschatological judge suddenly comes. Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus made the same point this way: "Repent one day before death!" And, of course, his disciples asked, "How does one know the day one will die?" To that Rabbi Eliezer replied, "That is good reason to repent today."²³

Majoring on Majors

Modern scholarship has achieved a consensus of opinion that the kingdom of heaven stood at the forefront of Jesus' preaching.²⁴ Yet, if one enters a bookstore specializing in charismatic and/or evangelical materials, one will find an enticing display promoting books about end-time prophecy. Sadly, one generally finds a less prominent section dedicated to books on Jesus and his teachings about the kingdom of heaven. In regard to the kingdom of heaven, the Catholic Church may be educating its laity more accurately than clerics from some other denominations. The following quotation comes from the literature being disseminated among Catholic parishioners in the United States.

It [the kingdom of God] exists wherever God's will is at work. And God's will is at work wherever people are faithful to the command that we love one another... We can define the kingdom of God *as the redemptive presence of God*. This redemptive (or saving) presence of God can be found in everyday personal experiences... When we pray, "Thy kingdom come," we are hoping also for the inbreaking of God's power—right now—in our daily lives. Our God is a living God. God's power is a present power.²⁵

This description of the kingdom of heaven hits the mark because it accentuates the present reality of God's redemptive activity in our lives. Moreover, this short article begins by stating, "The kingdom of God is at the heart and center of Jesus' preaching."²⁶ Although the *parousia* played a significant role in Jesus' teaching, it was not the centerpiece of his proclamation. Ideally, contemporary Christian writing, preaching and teaching should resonate with the same emphases that were resident in Jesus' preaching and teaching. If they do not, then the laity runs the risk of losing sight of the vision of the kingdom of heaven.

The Challenge

The kingdom of heaven resembles a concept in rabbinic Judaism called *tikun ha-olam*, which literally means “mending the world.” When one enters (or joins) the kingdom of heaven, one becomes a partner with God in spreading redemption throughout a hurting world. That person goes out and feeds the hungry; clothes the naked; visits those who are in hospital and prison; prays for the sick and defends the rights of the orphan and widow. A person who has entered the kingdom of heaven gets involved in people’s lives. He or she pursues a lifestyle characterized by mending our world: where there is hatred, he or she sows love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy.

As Christians get involved in people’s lives, God backs their efforts with his redemptive power. Most Christians can remember times when they have seen God act redemptively in a subtle or remarkable way—both are miraculous. Jesus’ disciples have entered into a unique relationship with God. Empowered by his Holy Spirit, they selflessly dedicate themselves to the ongoing task of feeding, clothing, housing, educating, visiting, comforting, defending, redeeming, and healing hurting humanity.²⁷

Psychologically, that can be hard to accept, because, as Rabbi Tarfon once explained approximately 1,900 years ago, “The day is short, the task is great, the workers are sluggish, the reward is generous, and the Master of the house is urgent.” He went on to add, “It is not your responsibility to complete the task, but you are not at liberty to desist from it.”²⁸ For a Christian, the proposition that Jesus’ disciples have been assigned to a task of which they will likely see only limited results in their lifetime is not alluring. To accept the concept that the task at hand resembles bailing water out of a leaking boat challenges both psychologically and emotionally. As Christians continue to bail, the boat takes on more water.

Yet that is what God has instructed Jesus' disciples to do—bail! Being obedient does not require understanding God's reasoning.

On television and radio, from the pulpit and in Sunday School, much popular preaching and teaching echoes an immature theological approach to man's relationship to God and to his fellow. As a result, too many Christians never get around to disciplining themselves to sit down and start bailing. Instead, they happily devote themselves to some more enticing church-sanctioned activity or simply jump ship altogether by becoming consumed with eschatological speculation about end-time scenarios, hidden numerical codes embedded in the biblical text, and self-gratifying thoughts about the coming great and final judgement. Nevertheless Jesus wants his followers to be wholeheartedly bailing a listing vessel.

Hopefully, this essay has brought certain aspects of the kingdom of heaven into sharper focus. The kingdom of heaven is the present reality of God's redemptive power in the world today. Upon experiencing God's redemptive power, one's natural response is "Lord, what may I do for you?" which then translates into a life of good works.

The Bible indicates that God remains active among two groups of people: (1) among those who have made him king, and (2) among the poor, the captive, the infirm, and the downtrodden. A principal objective of the first group is to emulate God, and to emulate our heavenly Father means extending a hand of friendship, assistance, redemption, and love to the second group. This constitutes the major thrust of the work of the kingdom of heaven. To those who dedicate themselves to his redemptive agenda and commit to mending a hurting world, God gives his Holy Spirit for empowerment and the ongoing expansion of his kingdom (cf. Luke 4:18-19, Acts 2:38 and 5:32).

Appendix : Proposed Cause of the Ambiguity Concerning the Kingdom of Heaven in the Synoptic Tradition

Although not the main concern of this paper, the writer will outline briefly what he thinks has contributed to the ambiguity concerning the kingdom of heaven in the synoptic tradition. Jesus, like other sages of his day, connected ideas by means of web-like logic. He linked together imagery, motifs and verses of scripture into complexes or clusters of ideas. The analogy of a grape-like cluster serves as a helpful didactic aid.

As already mentioned, there were apparently two distinct idea-clusters that became conflated early in Christian tradition. One cluster may be called the kingdom of heaven (or kingdom of God) cluster. The following “grapes” belong to this cluster:

1. The present reality of God’s redemptive power exercised on behalf of his people (Exodus 15:18);
2. The finger of God (Exodus 8:19 and Luke 11:20);
3. The motif of slow but constant expansion (Matthew 13:31-33);
4. The phrase “entering the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20 and 21:31);
5. The motif of the VIP status of participating in the kingdom of heaven (a rabbinic comment on Exodus 15:2, Matthew 11:11 and 13:17);
6. The motif of the captives being set free, the blind seeing, the deaf hearing, and the lame walking (Isaiah 61:1-2, Matthew 11:11:5 and Luke 4:18).

The other cluster may be called the *parousia* or coming kingdom cluster. The following “grapes” belong to this cluster:

1. The Son of Man (Daniel 7:13 and Matthew 25:31);
2. The verb “coming” in conjunction with imagery of judgement (Malachi 3:1-3, Daniel 7:13 and Matthew 25:31-46);
3. The motif of separating (Malachi 3:1-3, Matthew 13:24-30,13:47-50 and 25:31-46);
4. The motif of judgement (Malachi 3:1-3, Matthew 25:31-46 and John 5:27),
5. The motif of suddenness, like a thief in the night (Zechariah 9:14 LXX, Malachi 3:1, Matthew 24:42-44, 25:1-13 and 2 Peter 3:10); and
6. The motif of the day being known only to God (Zechariah 14:7, Matthew 24:36, 24:42-44, and Acts 1:7).

The data that has been supplied above merely outlines these two complexes or clusters of ideas. Additional motifs and verses could be added to the list.

The concept of the kingdom of heaven deals more with the limited, but expanding reign of God among people. In a strict sense, the kingdom of heaven is limited to those people who have made Jesus Lord, but grows with each new person who says “yes” to Jesus. The coming of the kingdom deals more with a future event referred to in the Hebrew Bible as the terrible day of the Lord. In Jesus’ teachings, the terrible day of the Lord seems to be synonymous with the coming of the Son of Man or *parousia*. On that day, God’s absolute sovereignty will be manifested universally. Thus, in a certain sense, the kingdom of heaven climaxes in the *parousia*, but this remark in no way blurs viewing the kingdom of heaven as being fully operative today among those who have made Jesus Lord.

Early in the transmission process of the synoptic tradition, “grapes” from

the first cluster got mixed with “grapes” from the second cluster. This transposition of “grapes” can be readily seen in some of the introductions of the parables, which claim to speak of the kingdom of heaven.²⁹ Moreover, the kingdom of heaven (*malchut shamaim* in Hebrew) could easily have been conflated with the coming kingdom. Daniel 7:13-14 played a lead role in spawning the *parousia* or coming kingdom cluster. In this Aramaic passage, the words “sovereign power” (*malchu*) and “his kingdom” (*malchutay*) appear. It is not difficult to imagine how the kingdom of heaven and the coming kingdom could have been conflated on a literary level, particularly as apocalyptic ideas became more influential in nascent Christianity.

The limited success of modern commentators and clerics in addressing adequately the kingdom of heaven stems from four weaknesses that are prevalent in the New Testament scholarship of our seminaries: 1) a confidence in Markan priority, which the theory does not merit; 2) a lack of expertise in methods of ancient Jewish biblical interpretation; 3) failure to recognize that the Evangelists or redactors before them proliferated the use of the phrase kingdom of heaven (or kingdom of God) in their compositions; and 4) an uneasiness about the proposition that God’s redemptive activity in the world today continues in a manner that is consistent with the picture one sees in the first three gospels and Acts. In the end, even our most sincere attempts to preach and teach on the kingdom of heaven seem to generate as much confusion as enlightenment.

Despite the shortcomings of academia, a simple fundamentalist approach, which is embraced by many Christians, both clergy and laity, fails to do justice to the complexities generated by the text. Conclusions about the kingdom of heaven based on such an approach will also be askew. The kingdom of heaven does not appear suddenly; it grows steadily. It does not appear when Jesus returns; it is fully operative today among those

who have pledged allegiance to God's radical redemptive agenda and have been empowered by the Holy Spirit. The kingdom of heaven is not about separating the good from the bad nor is it about judgement. Rather, it is a special period in redemptive history that is characterized by hope, healing, restoration, grace and forgiveness.

From a kingdom of heaven perspective, things are getting better in the world today. The kingdom of heaven continues to do one thing—grow! Moreover, the days of the kingdom of heaven constitute a unique time in God's redemptive activity, which will end with the coming of the Son of Man. This will be the terrible Day of the Lord. As Rabbi Abahu once said, "Greater is the day of rain than the day of resurrection (judgement), for the day of resurrection (judgement) benefits only the just, whereas the day of rain benefits both the just and the unjust."³⁰

Endnotes

¹Krister Stendahl, *Meanings: The Bible as Document and as Guide* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 236. Note, too, this challenging remark that Stendahl made in his essay entitled *One Canon is Enough* on p. 64 of the same book: "... according to the synoptics, Jesus spoke not about himself but about the kingdom. But when we approach the questions from the point of the post-resurrection kerygma, then it seems that the kingdom of which Jesus spoke has been swallowed up into personalized christology. The kingdom language with its powerful theological potential has somehow been neutralized and emasculated. If it is true that Jesus really spoke about the kingdom, although the Church itself became absorbed by the question of christology, would it not be reasonable to see whether we should not find a new and fresh way to utilize this whole way of speaking about the kingdom, away from the personalized christological language?"

²Both being Semitic languages, Hebrew and Aramaic share many grammatical and lexical features. The closeness of these two languages may be compared to that of Dutch and German or Portuguese and Spanish in our day.

³See H. L. Strack and G. Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. Markus Bockmuehl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), p. 113.

⁴Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1979), p. 842, no. 6666. See also William L. Holladay, ed., *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand

Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 303. Definition 7.c) reads, “what God gives = salvation, deliverance.”

⁵In ancient Jewish texts, both translated from Hebrew or originally composed in Greek, *dikaiousunae* assumed the role of a technical term that mechanically translated or represented the Hebrew *tsedakah*.

⁶The eminent scholar R.H. Charles wrote, “...the expression hardly ever occurs in apocalyptic...” R.H. Charles, *Religious Development between the Old and the New Testament* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1914), p. 48. In reference to the Qumran Scrolls, Brad Young has written, “However the technical term ‘kingdom of heaven’ never appears.” Brad H. Young, *Jesus and His Jewish Parables* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1989), p. 225, note 22.

⁷See Joseph Hertz, *The Authorized Daily Prayer Book*, rev. ed. (New York: Bloch Publishing, 1985), p. 371. See also Joseph Frankovic, *Reading the Book: A Popular Essay on Christian Biblical Hermeneutics* (Tulsa, OK: HaKeshar, 1997), pp. 13-15.

⁸When Jesus spoke of the kingdom of heaven, he drew from the imagery of the narratives in Exodus. For example, by using the phrase “finger of God,” Jesus directed a provocative statement toward those criticizing him. The force of Jesus’ reply comes from the allusion to Exodus 8:19. In addition to Jesus’ teachings on the kingdom of heaven, two old stories involving messianic pretenders also reflect a similar linking of messianic expectations with imagery from the Exodus narratives. In *Jewish Antiquities* 20:97, Josephus wrote about Theudas: “...[he] persuaded the majority of the masses to take up their possessions and to follow him to the Jordan River. He stated that he was a prophet and that at his command the river would be parted and would provide them an easy passage” (Note the linking of the miracles at the Red Sea and the Jordan River in

Psalm 114:3.), *Jewish Antiquities*, in *The Loeb Classical Library*, trans. Louis Feldman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 441. Describing a similar tragic event which occurred in the middle of the fifth century A.D. on the isle of Crete, Socrates wrote, “A certain Jewish imposter pretended that he was Moses, and had been sent from heaven to lead out the Jews inhabiting that island, and conduct them through the sea.” “The Ecclesiastical History of Socrates Scholasticus” in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, v. 2, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, 2nd Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 174.

⁹The Greek Orthodox Church accepts the Septuagint as canonical. Greek Orthodox Christians read a different canonical text than Protestants. In my opinion, they have a nice benefit from reading the Greek of Exodus 15:18. The Septuagint’s translation brings the present reality of God’s reign into sharper focus. Regarding Protestants and the Septuagint, because of my high view of Scripture, I feel the more Canon, the better. I would recommend to the Protestant laity, therefore, to acquire an English translation of the Septuagint and read it alongside a standard Protestant English translation of the Bible, such as the KJV or NIV. One can benefit from reading the Septuagint version of the Bible in English translation. It offers valuable insights into the teachings of Jesus. As an ancient translation, the Septuagint reflects how ancient Jews understood certain verses of scripture, and in places, it preserves variant readings of the biblical text which Jesus knew.

¹⁰Author’s translation of *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* on Exodus 20:2. For a Hebrew text of this parable, see H. S. Horovitz and I. A. Rabin, eds. *Mechilta D’Rabbi Ismael* (Jerusalem: Wahrmann Books, 1970), p. 219.

¹¹Compare carefully Matthew 10:7-8 and Luke 10:9. The present writer views the Lukan wording to be closer to the original instructions of Jesus.

¹²Jesus employed the term “kingdom of heaven” with two principal nuances. The first, which is the subject of this paper, indicates that wherever God has taken charge of a situation, the kingdom of heaven is at hand (cf. Luke 11:20). The second refers to those people who have made Jesus Lord, i.e., the people who constitute the redemptive movement that Jesus is leading (cf. Matthew 11:11). Thus, a person can participate in this redemptive movement by entering the kingdom of heaven (cf. Luke 18:25). The common denominator between these two nuances is God’s taking charge. Whenever a supernatural manifestation of God’s power occurs, he has taken charge. Likewise, he has also taken charge of the lives of those who have decided to follow Jesus.

¹³Although not agreeing with the article in every detail, the current writer would call the reader’s attention to a passing remark found in “The Kingdom of God” regarding the conception of the kingdom of God in early Christianity, “...[it] was identified with the *olam ha-ba* (= “the world to come”), the spiritual life...” “The Kingdom of God” in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, v. 7 (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1916), p. 503.

¹⁴For further discussion on the synoptic tradition and the Gospel of John, see Frankovic, *Reading the Book*, pp. 29-32. See also, Stendahl’s remark in his essay, “The Sermon on the Mount and Third Nephi in the Book of Mormon” in *Meanings*, p. 109.

¹⁵For further discussion of this subject, see the appendix.

¹⁶See Matthew 11:12 (NIV) and Luke 11:20.

¹⁷See Mark 15:43 and Luke 19:11. Note also Matthew 16:28 and its parallels in Mark 9:1 and Luke 9:27.

¹⁸C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, rev. ed. (New York: Charles

Scribner's Sons, 1961), p. 35.

¹⁹One should not be surprised at Dodd's lack of clarity because it originates with the Evangelists and their sources. To portray the kingdom of heaven, Matthew, Mark, and Luke employed language which stands out in a few places as being inconsistent with regard to temporal considerations.

²⁰George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 59. In the past, scholars have criticized Dodd's views for minimizing the futuristic aspect of the kingdom of heaven. Ironically, here the present writer challenges Dodd's conclusions for not maximizing the present aspect. Dodd's influence on this subject throughout New Testament academic literature has been widespread. For example, one commentator wrote, "Jesus preached the coming of God's kingdom in the future and the inauguration of it in his own life and ministry." Daniel J. Harrington, S. J., *Interpreting the New Testament: A Practical Guide* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990), p. 89.

²¹Young, pp. 219-221 and 235, Note 97.

²²Ibid., p. 192.

²³*Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, chapter 15. For an English translation, see Judah Goldin, trans., *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan* (New Haven: Yale University, 1983), p. 82. For the Hebrew text of this story, see Salomon Schechter, ed. *Aboth De Rabbi Nathan* (Israel: n.p., n.d.), p. 62.

²⁴Ladd, p. 57.

²⁵Richard P. McBrien, "What is 'The Kingdom of God'? A Theologian Explains the Key Image of the Gospel," *Catholic Update* (1980), p. 2.

²⁶Ibid., p. 1.

²⁷Compare Matthew 9:35, where Jesus is described as being about the work of the kingdom, with Matthew 10:1, where the responsibility for the work of the kingdom is shifted to the disciples.

²⁸M. Avot 2:15-16. For a Hebrew text of Rabbi Tarfon's saying, see Hanoch Albeck, ed. *The Mishnah (Seder Nezikin)* (Jerusalem/Tel Aviv: Bialik Institute/Dvir Publishing, 1988), p. 362.

²⁹See Young, pp. 192, 223 and 224, note 15.

³⁰B. Taanit 7a. Cf. Matthew 5:45 with R. Abahu's statement.

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