

Israel and the Church

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Jesus' words to the chief priests and elders of the people in Matthew 21:43, "Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God¹ will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it,"² and similar NT texts³ have led millions of Christians over the past two millennia to despise and even hate Jews.⁴ While anti-Semitism⁵ and racism in any form have no place in Christianity, the fear of anti-Semitism must not guide the interpreter in his exegesis of the NT. The text must be allowed to speak on its own terms without predetermined restrictions.

The purpose of this paper is to find answers to the following questions: What did Jesus mean by the kingdom of God? What will be taken from whom and given to whom? What nation will bear the fruits of the kingdom?

¹ The "kingdom of God" and "the kingdom of heaven" are synonyms, as can be seen from the parallels in the Synoptics, e.g., Matt 4:17/Mark 1:15; Matt 13:11/Mark 4:11; Matt 13:31/Mark 4:30, 31; etc. Writing for a Jewish audience, Matthew may have been reluctant to constantly use the divine name and so employed the substitute "heaven" for "God."

² The Greek text reads: διὰ τοῦτο λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι ἀρθήσεται ἀφ' ὑμῶν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ δοθήσεται ἔθνοι ποιούντι τοὺς καρποὺς αὐτῆς.

³ For example, Matthew 27:25, "His blood be on us, and on our children." This text, however, was fulfilled in AD 70 when, according to the Jewish historian Josephus (*The Wars of the Jews*, 9. 9. 3), 1.1 million Jews perished during the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. It should not be applied to Jews today.

⁴ During much of church history, Jews were called "Christ killers." Popes, bishops, and Protestant ministers taught that "the Jews, because they had killed Christ and rejected his gospel, were reprobate people, incapable of a spiritual life and thus not fully human. It ought not to surprise us that the ultimate result of this kind of thinking was the 'final solution' of the Nazi gas chambers" (Douglas R. Hare, *Matthew, Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1993), 250.

⁵ This is a misnomer, since Arabs and others are also Semites. The term anti-Semitism was first coined in 1879 by Wilhelm Marr, the founder of the Antisemitic League, who, ironically, was said to be the baptized son of a Jewish actor. (Nathan Ausubel, *The Book of Jewish Knowledge* [New York: Crown, 1964], 6).

The Parable of the Wicked Vinedressers

The setting for Jesus' words in Matthew 21:33–44 is the parable of the wicked vinedressers (Matt 21:33–44). Like the preceding parable of the two sons (Matt 21:28–32) and the parable of the wedding feast (Matt 22:1–14) that follows, this parable is a parable of judgement. It stands at the center of Jesus' response to the religious leaders who questioned his authority (Matt 21:23–27).

The parable of the wicked vinedressers, echoing the parable of God's vineyard in Isaiah 5,⁶ is generally understood to depict God as the landowner, Israel as the vineyard, and the vinedressers as Israel's religious leaders who failed in their duty to God. The fruit stands for that which is owed to God; the servants who are sent and rejected are the prophets; the son is Jesus Christ, and the new tenants symbolize the new people of God who do produce fruit.⁷ The parable has been called "an allegory,"⁸ "a parable of judgment,"⁹ as well as "an outline of salvation-history,"¹⁰ and its interpretation has produced a variety of opinions ranging from a polemic against Zealots¹¹ to the offer of the gospel to the poor.¹²

The story Jesus tells would have been a familiar one to his hearers. Absentee landlords who let out their estate and who were interested only in collecting the rent at the right time were a familiar institution in Palestine at that time. Much of Galilee belonged to foreign landlords who had Galilean peasants working the land for them.¹³ The actions of the vinedressers, therefore, were not unheard of. Barclay writes, "The country was seething with economic unrest;

⁶ It is important to remember that in Isaiah 5 the vineyard of God is destroyed (5:5, 6) because it has not been producing fruit. The picture is one of total destruction; the once fruitful hill becomes a worthless plot of ground, a place where nothing could grow. There is no indication as to the fulfillment of this parable. Was it the fall of the northern kingdom in 722 BC, or the end of the southern kingdom in 586 BC? Since there was a restoration after the 70 years of exile, Isaiah 5:5, 6 could also apply to AD 70, when the Jewish state was completely eradicated.

⁷ See, for example, W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *Matthew*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1997), 176; David Hill, *Matthew*, NCBC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 298. Douglas Hare disputes the identification of the vineyard with Israel and points out that in verse 41 the vineyard is interpreted as the kingdom of God and not as Israel. He says, "It is not suggested that God will remove Israel's present leadership and provide it with more faithful leaders. Rather, 'the kingdom of God' will be taken 'from you' and given to a nation that will produce the fruits of the kingdom." He sees the "you" as a corporate identity which includes the Jewish leaders as well as the Jewish people, and "the nation" or church "is neither Jewish nor Gentile but a 'third race' that transcends the old distinction" (Hare, 248, 249).

⁸ Hill, 298

⁹ Hare, 248.

¹⁰ Davies and Allison, 178. See also Jack Dean Kingsbury, "The Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen and the Secret of Jesus' Divine Sonship in Matthew: Some Literary-Critical Observations," *JBL* 105/4 (1986): 645.

¹¹ J. E. Newell and R. R. Newell, "The Parable of the Wicked Tenants," *Nov T* 14 (1972): 226–237.

¹² Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), 76.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 74, 75.

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the working people were discontented and rebellious; and the action of the cultivators in seeking to eliminate the son was not by any means impossible.”¹⁴

As the story unfolds, the tenants rebel against the absentee landowner.¹⁵ They beat some of the servants he sends to collect what is his due, and others they kill.¹⁶ When he finally sends his own son, they throw him out of the vineyard¹⁷ and kill him too,¹⁸ hoping thereby to somehow be able to take possession of the vineyard.¹⁹ Jesus then asks his hearers what they think the landlord will do to the tenants when he returns. His listeners correctly conclude that he will put the wicked men to death.²⁰ With this answer the chief priests and elders condemn themselves, as Jesus’ response shows.²¹

The fact that in Mark 12:9 and Luke 20:16 Jesus himself gives the answer is one of the many small differences in the Synoptics. Generally, Jesus does not answer the questions to which his parables often lead.²² In this case, most likely, Jesus repeats the answer of the priests and elders to emphasize the gravity of their response. Matthew records what actually happened by giving us the answer

¹⁴ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 2:262. See also Jeremias, 74.

¹⁵ An example where farmers refused to give produce to the agent of an ancient landowner in Galilee is given in M. Hengel, “Das Gleichnis von den Weingärtern Mc 12,1–12 im Lichte der Zenonpapyri und der rabbinischen Gleichnisse,” *ZNW* 59 (1968): 13–16.

¹⁶ Most of the Old Testament prophets were persecuted by the Jews in one way or another, cf. Matt 5:12; 23:34–36; Acts 7:52.

¹⁷ Perhaps a reference to the fact that Jesus was killed outside the city walls (John 19:20; Heb 13:12). I. H. Marshall believes that “there would be objection to leaving the body in the vineyard to contaminate the place and make it unfit (ritually) for crops. Luke and Matthew may have this thought in mind” (I. Howard Marshall, *Luke*, NIGC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978], 731).

¹⁸ That this refers to the death of Jesus is acknowledged by most commentators. See D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, EBC, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 453; Robert H. Mounce, *Matthew*, NIBC (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 201; Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1995), 621; R. T. France, *Matthew*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 309; Jeremias, 76; Davies and Allison, 176; Barclay, 264, etc.

¹⁹ Jeremias believes that under specific circumstances an inheritance could be regarded as ownerless property, which could then be claimed by anyone, with the proviso that the prior right belongs to the claimant who comes first. He also suggests that the vinedressers assumed that the owner was dead and that the son came to claim his inheritance (*Parables*, 75, 76). J. D. M. Derrett argues that the owner’s failure to obtain rent for four years would forfeit his title to the property. The son’s coming in the parable would have been in the fourth year (J. D. M. Derrett, *Law in the New Testament* [London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1970], 300–306).

²⁰ Many commentators assume that this found its fulfillment in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. See Randolph O. Yeager, *The Renaissance New Testament* (Bowling Green, KY: Western Kentucky U, 1978), 3:147; Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1991), 302; Davies and Allison, 184; C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1961), 99.

²¹ This is similar to David’s incrimination of himself in his response to Nathan in 2 Sam 12:1–7.

²² C. H. Dodd writes, “Matthew (xxi. 41) has restored the form more usual in the conclusion of parables, by making the audience answer the question” (*Parables*, 99).

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of the priests and elders, whereas Mark and Luke report Jesus' repetition of it. This is important to keep in mind when we come to verse 43.

In verse 42 Jesus turns from the rejected son to the rejected stone.²³ "The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone."²⁴ Psalm 118:22, the text Jesus quotes, may originally have referred to David, who was overlooked (rejected) even by his own father, but chosen by God to become the king of Israel, and a type of the Messiah.²⁵

By quoting this text from Psalm 118, Jesus is not only predicting his own rejection, but also "his subsequent vindication when God raised him from the dead and set him at his right hand"²⁶ (Eph 1:20). Though rejected by many of his own people, he would become the chief cornerstone of a new temple in which God would be worshiped in spirit and in truth (John 4:24).²⁷

Verse 43, the text under investigation, is the punch line of the whole parable. In response to the question of Jesus in verse 40, "What will the owner do to the wicked vinedressers?" the chief priests and elders of the people have responded, "He will destroy them." In response, Jesus reveals the real plot. He identifies the priests and elders as the wicked vinedressers and says to them, "Therefore I say to you [you who are the wicked vinedressers], the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it."²⁸

Before we proceed further, we need to define the term "kingdom of God." What did Jesus mean by this expression?

²³ In Hebrew there is a word play involving son (*ben*) and stone (*eben*).

²⁴ הַבֵּן שֶׁבְּאַרְבָּעוֹת אוὐ κεφαλὴν γωνίας is literally "the head of the corner." Cornerstones of ancient buildings were often of enormous size and therefore costly. At the southeast corner of the temple area in Jerusalem can be seen a cornerstone nearly 24 x 5 x 3 feet. The cornerstone, which was laid first, was the most important stone in the foundation of a building (Isa 28:16). In the pseudepigraphal book *The Testament of Solomon* (22:7), the cornerstone is placed "at the head of the corner to complete the Temple of God." J. Jeremias, therefore, identifies the cornerstone with the keystone or capstone of an arch (cited in NIDNTT, 3:389). Whatever the case, the cornerstone was the stone on which the structure depended.

²⁵ Most commentators identify the rejected cornerstone with the nation of Israel. It was the nation that was despised and rejected. The Israelites had been servants of many nations, "but none the less the nation which all men despised was the chosen people of God" (Barclay, 264). See also Davies and Allison, 309; Carson, 453; France, 309.

²⁶ France, 309.

²⁷ The "rejected cornerstone" symbolism was important in the early church, since it provided a perfect analogy to the rejection and exaltation of Jesus (see Acts 4:11; Rom 9:33; 1 Peter 2:6).

²⁸ This verse is omitted in Mark and Luke. Many scholars therefore see it as a redactional interpolation. See Davies and Allison, 186; W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann, *Matthew*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 265.

The Kingdom of God

The expression “kingdom of God” (ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ) appears frequently in the synoptic gospels²⁹ and is seen as central to the teaching of Jesus.³⁰ The background to this expression is found in the OT. While the expression “kingdom of God” (מְלֻכּוּת אֱלֹהִים) is not found in the OT, the term “kingdom of YHWH” (מְלֻכּוּת יְהוָה) does appear twice in the Hebrew Bible (1 Chron 28:5; 2 Chron 13:8). In both cases the “kingdom of YHWH” refers to the earthly kingdom given to David and his descendants. This is also true of the expression “My kingdom” in 1 Chronicles 17:14. In the book of Psalms, however, the “Lord’s kingdom” is no longer restricted to the nation of Israel but is his universal rule over all mankind (Psalm 22:28; 103:19; 145:11–13). One characteristic of this kingdom is especially stressed in Psalm 145:13: “Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom.” In that respect it is very different from all earthly kingdoms. In the Aramaic portion of the book of Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar emphasizes the same point: “I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever: For His dominion is an everlasting dominion” (4:34). No doubt Nebuchadnezzar remembered what Daniel had told him earlier.³¹ Other texts such as 1 Chronicles 29:11 and Obadiah 21 indicate that the kingdom-of-God concept is fairly widespread in the Hebrew Scriptures. John Bright, in his book *The Kingdom of God*, writes:

While it underwent, as we shall see, a radical mutation on the lips of Jesus, it had a long history and is, in one form or another, ubiquitous in both Old Testament and New. It involves the whole notion of the rule of God over his people, and particularly the vindication of that rule and people in glory at the end of history. That was the kingdom the Jews awaited.³²

The prophet Isaiah foretold the coming of the Lord to judge the nations and deliver his people: “Be strong, do not fear! Behold, your God will come *with* vengeance [for his enemies], with the recompense of God; He will come and save you [God’s people]” (Isa 35:4).³³ Isaiah focused on the day when men will live together in peace. God shall then “judge between the nations, and rebuke many people; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore” (2:4). Not only the problems of society shall be solved, but individuals shall be made whole. “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,

²⁹ “Of the 139 New Testament references to a divine kingdom, 104 or 75 percent are in the Synoptics. Or, if 25 parallel passages are excluded, 70 out of 114 or 69 percent are” (James A. Brooks, “The Kingdom of God in the New Testament,” *SwJT* 40/2 [Spring 1998]: 25).

³⁰ Dennis C. Duling, “Kingdom of God, Kingdom of Heaven,” *ABD*, 4:49.

³¹ See Daniel 2:44.

³² John Bright, *The Kingdom of God* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1953), 18.

³³ See also Ezekiel 38 and 39 and Zechariah 14.

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and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb sing” (35:5, 6). Also, the evils of man’s physical environment shall be no more: “The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them” (11:6).

This vision of a peaceful kingdom is connected with the coming of a new David, a David *redivivus*, the Messiah, who will rule over a new and redeemed Israel (Isa 9:1–7; 11:1–5; cf. Micah 5:2–4). At that time it will be said, “the Lord is our Judge, the Lord is our Lawgiver, The Lord is our King” (Isa 33:22). In that kingdom justice will reign (11:3–5), and peace will be unbroken (2:2–4). There Israel shall at last become a blessing to the entire world.

In the intertestamental period the “kingdom of God” is mentioned a number of times in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha. The exact term appears only in Wisdom of Solomon 10:10, “She [wisdom] showed him [a righteous man] the kingdom of God,”³⁴ but related terms are “kingdom of our God” (Ps of Sol 17:3), “the kingdom of heaven” (3 Bar 11:2, Greek), “kingdom of the Lord” (Test Benj 9:1).³⁵

James A. Brooks, after studying the kingdom references in the intertestamental literature, concluded that apart from a few references to a nationalistic kingdom involving the triumph of Israel over her enemies, the kingdom of God is conceived of in ethical terms, and “it is described as an apocalyptic, eschatological kingdom which encompasses the entire universe, and not just Israel. In some passages God himself will reign; in others he will reign through the Messiah he sends.”³⁶

In the NT, the phrase “kingdom of God” is found 4 times³⁷ in Matthew,³⁸ 14 times in Mark,³⁹ and 32 times in Luke.⁴⁰ The synonymous term “kingdom of heaven” is found 32 times in Matthew only.⁴¹ In making the kingdom of God/heaven the theme of his preaching, Jesus, through his parables, explained to the people the nature of his kingdom, since they had some misguided ideas about what the kingship of God meant.

³⁴ *New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha*, Revised Standard Version (New York: Oxford UP, 1977).

³⁵ James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983–85).

³⁶ Brooks, 22.

³⁷ These figures are based on *The Concordance to the Novum Testamentum Graece* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1987).

³⁸ Matthew 12:28; 19:24; 21:31, 43.

³⁹ Mark 1:15; 4:11, 26, 30; 9:1, 47; 10:14, 15, 23, 24, 25; 12:34; 14:25; 15:43.

⁴⁰ Luke 4:43; 6:20; 7:28; 8:1, 10; 9:2, 11, 27, 60, 62; 10:9, 11; 11:20; 13:18, 20, 28, 29; 14:15; 16:16; 17:20 (twice), 21; 18:16, 17, 24, 25, 29; 19:11; 21:31; 22:16, 18; 23:51.

⁴¹ Matthew 3:2; 4:17; 5:3, 10, 19 (twice), 20; 7:21; 8:11; 10:7; 11:11, 12; 13:11, 24, 31, 33, 44, 45, 47, 52; 16:19; 18:1, 3, 4, 23; 19:12, 14, 23; 20:1; 22:2; 23:13; 25:1.

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In Matthew 3:2 and 4:17 John the Baptist and Jesus preach the same message: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” In prophetic eschatological terms, this meant for John that God was about to send the Messiah who would be the agent of the eschatological judgment to “gather His wheat into the barn” and to “burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Matt 3:12). Although with the coming of Jesus the new eschatological order had begun, it was not the “golden age” the Jews had been looking for, but the reign of God “redemptively at work among men.”⁴² It was God’s eschatological activity as ruler made manifest in the person of Jesus Christ. It involved both a fulfillment as well as a “radical reinterpretation of the OT hope.”⁴³ The kingdom he proclaimed was a present reality (Matt 12:28) as well as a future blessing (1 Cor 15:50). People could enter it 2000 years ago (Matt 21:31), and yet it is a realm into which they will enter in the future (Matt 8:11).⁴⁴ In short, “The kingdom in its dynamic aspect is the reign of God in the lives of His people.”⁴⁵ It is the result of the proclamation of the Gospel.

With the incarnation of Christ, the rule of Satan in this world (John 12:31; 14:30) is being brought to an end, and his captives are being set free. The deeds of Jesus, therefore, can be seen as a sign of the presence of the kingdom of God here on earth. This kingdom is characterized by grace, as the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matt 20:1–16) indicates. Some authors, therefore, speak of the kingdom of grace,⁴⁶ in contrast to the kingdom of glory, which is still future.

⁴² George Eldon Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 108.

⁴³ Idem, “Kingdom of God,” *ISBE*, 3:26.

⁴⁴ This tension between the “now” and the “not yet” in Scripture has led to different interpretations of the nature of the kingdom of God. Some, like Adolf von Harnack, reduced the kingdom of God to “the rule of the holy God in the hearts of the individuals” and denied that there was any historical dimension to its existence (Adolf Harnack, *What is Christianity?* [New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1903], 60–61). Proponents of consistent eschatology at the end of the nineteenth century viewed the kingdom of God only as an eschatological entity that Jesus expected to come during his lifetime (Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* [New York: Macmillan, 1964], 359). In reaction against this view, C. H. Dodd in 1935 proposed the concept of realized eschatology (Dodd, viii), by which he meant that the kingdom of God had “come upon men there and then” in the events of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus (Ibid., 159). Since then, most scholars have viewed the kingdom of God as both present and future. Oscar Cullmann, for example, advocates an “inaugurated eschatology” in which the Christ event is “D-Day” and the *parousia* is “V-Day” (Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time*, trans. F. V. Filson [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964], 3.)

⁴⁵ Brooks, 36.

⁴⁶ “The ‘kingdom of heaven’ was established at the first advent of Christ. Jesus Himself is King, and those who believe in Him become its subjects. The territory of the kingdom are the hearts and lives of the subjects. Obviously, the message Jesus bore referred to the kingdom of divine grace. But, as Jesus Himself made clear, this kingdom of grace was preparatory to the kingdom of glory (see DA 234; GC 346, 347). Concerning the latter, the disciples inquired on the day of the ascension, ‘Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?’ (see Acts 1:6, 7). The kingdom of grace was near in Christ’s day (Matt. 3:2; 4:17; 10:7), but the kingdom of glory was future (ch. 24:33). Only when the Son of man should ‘come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him’

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The teachings of Christ can also be understood as a sign of the presence of God's kingdom. "By proclaiming the kingship of God Jesus made it possible for men to turn from their sins, own His kingship and receive the blessings of His rule."⁴⁷ Thus, the message of the kingdom of God is the message of salvation.

In summary, we can say the kingdom of God is the rule of God and the message of this rule in the lives of those who submit to his authority. While this kingdom at the present time is still a spiritual kingdom, it will become a physical reality at the Second Advent.

Taking and Giving

The kingdom of God, Jesus said, would be taken from his listeners and given to a nation that would produce its fruit—that is, the fruits of the kingdom.⁴⁸ Before we proceed any further, we need to return to the question of the identity of the vineyard. In the Old Testament, "vine" and "vineyard" are often used as symbols of Israel (Ps 80:8; Isa 5:1–7; 27:2; Jer 2:21; 12:10). Is this also the meaning in the three parables where Jesus refers to a vineyard (Matt 20:1–16; 21:28–32; 21:33–46)? In the first two parables, the parable of the workers in the vineyard and the parable of the two sons, the vineyard is not identified because it only provides the setting for the points Jesus is making.⁴⁹

Although in the third parable the vineyard echoes many of the details in Isa 5:2, where the vineyard symbolizes Israel, the parallelism between verses 41 and 43 clearly identifies the vineyard with the kingdom of God, and not with Israel:

v. 41 "[he will] lease his vineyard to other vinedressers who will render to him the fruits in their season."

v. 43 "the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it."

Earlier, we identified the kingdom of God as the kingdom of grace, the rule of God, and the message of this rule in the lives of those who submit to his authority. D. Hare interprets the kingdom as a symbol for "God's sovereignty, that is, divine election, including the privileges and responsibilities of being God's elect people."⁵⁰

would 'he sit upon the throne of his glory' (ch. 25:31)." (Francis D. Nichol, *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* [Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1978], 5:318). See also R. A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985], 260. David P. Scaer, "Jurgen Moltmann And His Theology Of Hope," *JETS* 13:2 (Spring 1970): 76; John Theodore Mueller, "Luther's Doctrine of the Application of Salvation," *BSac* 113/451 (July 1956): 235.

⁴⁷ I. H. Marshall, "Kingdom of God, of Heaven," *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. M.C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 3:806

⁴⁸ The feminine pronoun *αὐτῆς* in Matt 21:43 refers to the kingdom (*βασιλεία*, v. 43), not to the vineyard (*ἀμπελῶνα*, v. 41), which is masculine.

⁴⁹ The point in the first parable (Matt 20:1–16) is God's generosity, and in the second parable (21:28–32) the point is that deeds count more than mere words.

⁵⁰ Hare, 249.

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In other words, Jesus says, “Yes, this vineyard, the kingdom of God, the sovereignty of God in your lives, your elect status, will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing its fruit.” The fact that Jesus says it will be given to “a nation” rather than to new leaders can only mean that Israel, as a nation,⁵¹ is being decommissioned and its position as “light to the Gentiles” (Isa 42:6) taken over by another people.⁵²

The words for taking (*ἀρθήσεται*)⁵³ and giving (*δοθήσεται*) are the same words Matthew uses in 13:12: “For whoever has, to him more will be given [*δοθήσεται*], and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away [*ἀρθήσεται*] from him”; and in 25:29: “For to every one who has will more be given [*δοθήσεται*], and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away [*ἀρθήσεται*].”⁵⁴

After the parable of the sower, Jesus responds in Matthew 13:12 to the question “Why do you speak to them [the multitude] in parables?” (v. 11). His argument is that the one who has (*ἔχει*) is the person who desires truth (the good ground), the person who has responded to the message of the kingdom, and has become Jesus’ disciple. This person will be given more understanding, “and that understanding will abound [*περισσευθήσεται*] in fruitfulness.”⁵⁵ On the other hand, the one who does not have (*οὐκ ἔχει*), he is the person who has not responded to the proclamation of Jesus (the stony place); therefore “even what he has will be taken away from him.” What does that mean? D. A. Hagner believes, “even what such a person is inclined to fall back on—say, trust in Jewishness and Judaism—that too will be taken away.”⁵⁶ Since all people have some measure of spiritual capacity, this epigram may refer to the fact that unless a person is willing to listen to and accept the message of the kingdom, his spiritual capacity will waste away; i.e., his heart will harden as God warned Isaiah would happen (Isa 6:10). Jesus quotes Isaiah in Matt 13:14, 15.

In the parable of the talents (Matt 25:29), the taking away and the giving refers to the talents entrusted to the servants. Faithful use of the talents entrusted leads to greater responsibility (v. 21); the talents not put to use will be removed

⁵¹ “The fact that the kingdom is taken away from the Jewish people and given to an ethnos that will bear its fruit can be taken to imply that the Jews are in some sense an ethnos – the ethnos that refused to bear the fruits of the kingdom. It is difficult to avoid this comparison implicit in 21:43 ” (John P. Meier, “Nations or Gentiles in Matthew 28:19?” *CBQ* 39 [1977]: 98).

⁵² This is also anticipated in Jesus’ words in Matthew 23:38: “See! Your house is left to you desolate.” Although it is not clear whether Jesus is referring to the temple or the city of Jerusalem, the message is the same. The presence and sovereignty of God will be withdrawn from the symbols of the Jewish nation. Hill believes the people in their entirety are symbolized by the temple (316).

⁵³ The future passive words imply God as the active agent; see Davies and Allison, 3:411.

⁵⁴ The same word pair is used in Mark 4:25 and in Luke 8:18 and 19:26. This saying was a common maxim similar to the modern words, “The rich get richer and the poor get poorer.”

⁵⁵ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1993), 373.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* So also Albright and Mann, 167.

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(v. 28). We note that in each case the removal is complete. There is no indication that the person continues to function at a reduced level—“what he has will be taken away [completely]” (v. 29).

A Nation Bearing Fruits

The kingdom of God, says Jesus, will be taken away and given to a nation that will bring forth its fruits. The word “nation” (*ἔθνος*, pl. *ἔθνη*) is used 162 times in the New Testament, of which 15 uses occur in the book of Matthew.⁵⁷ Seven of these texts refer only to the Gentiles.⁵⁸ Of the other eight, 24:14, “this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations [*ἔθνεσιν*], and then the end will come,” is clearly an explicitly universalistic use of the word. To all nations, Jews and Gentile alike, the Gospel is to be preached. Similarly, in 25:31, 32, “when the Son of Man comes in His glory . . . all nations [*πάντα τὰ ἔθνη*] will be gathered before Him.” The last judgment will not only be for Gentiles, but also for Jews.

The great commission in 28:19, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations [*πάντα τὰ ἔθνη*],” again includes the Jewish people.⁵⁹ In fact, from the NT, as well as from history, we know that the “nation”—i.e., the church Jesus built (16:18)—consisted in the beginning almost exclusively of Jews.

This use of *ἔθνος* in Matthew invalidates any attempt to see in the “nation” in 21:43 only Gentiles.⁶⁰ This “nation” which will produce fruit consists of the people who have accepted Jesus and his kingdom, both Jews and Gentiles. The first letter of Peter is addressed to “the pilgrims of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia” (1:1). These five areas cover what is called Asia Minor. The majority of the believers in these churches were Gentiles.⁶¹ Yet Peter writes, “you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation [*ἔθνος*].” Here he applies the singular *ἔθνος* to the Christian church. The context of this text also refers to the stone the builders rejected (vs. 7 and 8).

⁵⁷ 4:15; 6:32; 10:5, 18; 12:18, 21; 20:19, 25; 21:43; 24:7 (twice), 9, 14; 25:32; 28:19.

⁵⁸ Matt 4:15; 6:32; 10:5, 18; 12:18, 21; 20:19. See Meier, 95.

⁵⁹ The other uses of *ἔθνος* in 20:25, 24:7 (twice), and 24:9 can refer either to Gentiles alone or to Jews and Gentiles. See Meier, 96–99.

⁶⁰ While some commentators identify the “nation” with the Gentile church, this does not exclude Jews who have accepted Jesus. The Gentile church is the New Testament church, in contrast to the Old Testament Israelite/Jewish theocracy. See Jeremias, 70; Alexander B. Bruce, “Matthew,” *The Expositor’s Greek Testament*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980 reprint), 1:268; Mounce, 201; Francis W. Beare, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1981), 431.

⁶¹ J. R. Michaels says the evidence of the epistle “strongly favors an audience predominantly made up of Gentile Christians, ‘redeemed from the empty way of life that was your heritage’ (1:18; cf. 4:3–4).” J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1988), 6. See also Wayne Grudem, *1 Peter*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 38; Edwin A. Blum, *1 Peter*, EBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 212.

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Thus, we have in Matthew 21 Jesus speaking of the stone (himself) the builders (Jews) rejected (v. 42). This is followed by his statement that the kingdom of God will be given to a nation (*ἔθνος*) that will produce its fruit (v. 43). In 1 Peter 2, the apostle also refers to the stone (Jesus) that the builders (Jews) rejected (v. 7). This stone, he says, has become “a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence.” For whom has it become a rock of offence? Peter continues, “They stumble, being disobedient to the word, to which they also were appointed” (v. 8). This can only refer to the Jews, since “to them were committed the oracles of God” (Rom 3:2). Then in the very next verse Peter, addressing the Christian churches in Asia Minor, says, “But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation [*ἔθνος*]” (1 Peter 2:9).

The parallels between Matthew 21:42–43 and 1 Peter 2:7–9 seems to indicate that Peter at least understood the *ἔθνος* Jesus had in mind as the Christian Church, made up of both Jews and Gentiles. The Jews belong to it not because they are Jews, but because they became disciples of Christ, and the Gentiles belong to it because they joined themselves to the Jewish Messiah, despite the fact that they were Gentiles. “Nothing is clearer from the whole of Matt’s gospel than that the church of Jesus is made up of both Jews and Gentiles. It is this Jewish-Gentile church that Matt calls *ἔθνος*.”⁶²

D. J. Harrington believes the point of the parable is that the Jewish leadership is replaced with “the leaders of the Jewish Christian community.”⁶³ He rejects any identification of the “nation” in verse 43 with the Gentile Church or with “the Church understood as a ‘third race’ besides Jews and Gentiles.”⁶⁴ For him the parable teaches that the vineyard, Israel, is taken from the priests and elders and given to the leaders of the Jewish Christian community.

The idea that only the Jewish leadership was involved and that the rest of the Jewish nation was unaffected and remained God’s special people is not in harmony with the ancient Near Eastern concept of corporate personality.⁶⁵ It was common in the ancient world for a king or leader to represent corporately the whole nation. “In Hittite literature, for instance, an offence committed by the king could bring punishment on all people.”⁶⁶ As a result of the king’s action the people suffered.

We find the same notion in Israel. For example, in Joshua 7 all of Israel suffered a defeat at Ai because of Achan’s sin. Furthermore, the whole household of Achan was punished, although only he is described as committing the theft.

⁶² Meier, 97. See also France, 310; Hagner, 623.

⁶³ Harrington, 304.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ By corporate personality we mean “the treatment of the family, the clan, or the nation, as a unit in place of the individual” (Wheeler Robinson, *The People and the Book*, 376, quoted in J. R. Porter, “The Legal Aspects of Corporate Personality in the Old Testament,” *VT* 15 [1965]: 361–68).

⁶⁶ John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 2000), 354.

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Israel, and particularly Achan's household, was obviously considered to be a corporate personality.⁶⁷ Therefore the whole group received the punishment, even though only Achan had committed the crime. Another example of corporate responsibility is David's punishment for holding a census (2 Sam 24:1-7). Although it was David who erred, 70,000 of his men from Dan to Beersheba (v. 15) died as a result of it.

According to the anthropological dominant in the Old Testament a man only exists as a member of a community, there is no isolated man, there are only *bene 'adam* [sons of Adam], that is, participators in the great collective personality which is constituted by humanity and, more especially, Israel.⁶⁸

This notion of corporate personality and responsibility also has positive effects. The family of Rahab was spared in Jericho because of her well-doing (Joshua 6:17). This is not to deny that the Old Testament does not also recognize the concept of personal responsibility. Particularly from the time of Ezekiel on, personal responsibility is stressed (Ezek 18:20), but this is primarily in regard to salvation, whereas the election of Israel was for service, not for salvation.⁶⁹

In the NT the corporate personality concept seems to be present in the words of Jesus to the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23:35: "That on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar." The scribes and Pharisees had nothing to do with the murders of the righteous people from Abel to Zechariah, the first and last martyrs of the Old Testament canon (2 Chron 24:20). Zechariah died about 800 B.C., but he died at the hand of king Joash, who represented the people of Israel in his day as the scribes and Pharisees represented Israel in the days of Jesus.⁷⁰

Considering the notion of corporate personality in Israel, it seems very unlikely that in the parable of the vinedresser only the leaders of Israel are affected

⁶⁷ It was H. Wheeler Robinson in his book *The Christian Doctrine of Man* (Edinburgh, 1911) who introduced the concept of "corporate personality" into biblical interpretation (J. W. Rogerson, "Corporate Personality," *ABD*, 1:1156). See also J. W. Rogerson, "The Hebrew Conception of Corporate Personality," *JTS* 21 (1980): 1-16. Porter argues against the concept of corporate personality in the legal sphere of the OT. He believes it may have greater validity in non-legal contexts (379 n. 5).

⁶⁸ Edmond Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), 41. Other examples can be found in the episode of the Gibeonites and the descendants of Saul in 2 Sam 21, and in the law of the responsibility of a whole city for the undetected murder within its area (Deut 21:1-9).

⁶⁹ See H. H. Rowley, *The Biblical Doctrine of Election* (London: Lutterworth, 1953), 95.

⁷⁰ Davies and Allison (3:318) comment, "Perhaps the notion of communal solidarity is implicit: by their own deeds the scribes and Pharisees assent to and so join in their ancestors' crimes."

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and not the nation as a whole.⁷¹ The actions of the leaders affected all Israel.⁷² Therefore, the nation as a whole was relieved of its responsibility to proclaim the message of salvation, and the task was given to the Christians⁷³ who, it must be emphasized again, came at first almost exclusively out of Judaism. Eventually, however, Gentile Christians outnumbered Jewish Christians in the Roman Empire.

We fully agree with D. A. Hagner, who wrote:

This setting aside of the privilege of Israel as the unique people of God in favor of another people, namely, the church (*pace* Snodgrass, *Parable*), is of course nothing short of revolutionary. The singular *ἔθνος*, which means “people” or “nation,” inevitably alludes to the eventual mission to the Gentiles, the *ἔθνοι*, plural of the same word (cf. 12:21; 24:14; 28:19) . . . To be sure, as several have pointed out (e.g., Harrington), it is not *necessary* to interpret the *ἔθνος* as meaning the church. But given the total context of the Gospel, this is the most natural interpretation of the passage.⁷⁴

In recent years many Messianic Jews have developed a theology according to which God has two peoples as witnesses in this world: Christians and Jews. “Of each group there exists a remnant of believers, a Jewish remnant and a Gentile remnant. The Jewish remnant is the Israel of God, the Gentile remnant is the Gentile people of God. Together Jews and Gentiles make up the people of God, the *ekklesia*.”⁷⁵ In other words, there is no change in the New Testament

⁷¹ Francis Beare writes, “In the parable, all the tenants are involved in the same guilt, not merely their overseers. It is really ‘the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the men of Judah’ that are guilty of all these offences, culminating in the murder of the Son” (*Matthew*, 431).

⁷² Ellen White, too, recognized that although it was primarily the priests and teachers who bore the responsibility for the rejection of Jesus, the nation as a whole suffered the consequences: “In the parable of the vineyard it was the husbandmen whom Christ pronounced guilty. It was they who had refused to return to their lord the fruit of his ground. In the Jewish nation it was the priests and teachers who, by misleading the people, had robbed God of the service which He claimed. It was they *who turned the nation away from Christ* . . . For the rejection of Christ, with the results that followed, they [the priests and elders] were responsible. *A nation’s sin and a nation’s ruin* were due to the religious leaders. (*Christ’s Object Lesson* [Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1941], 304–305, emphasis supplied). She also writes, “Withdrawing the veil from the future, He showed how, by failure to fulfill His purpose, *the whole nation* was forfeiting His blessing, and bringing ruin upon itself” (*Ibid.*, 284). “All who, like Rahab the Canaanite, and Ruth the Moabitess, turned from idolatry to the worship of the true God, were to unite themselves with His chosen people. As the numbers of Israel increased they were to enlarge their borders, until their kingdom should embrace the world. . . . But *Israel did not fulfill God’s purpose*” (*Ibid.*, 294–295).

⁷³ “*As a people the Jews had failed of fulfilling God’s purpose, and the vineyard was taken from them. The privileges they had abused, the work they had slighted, was entrusted to others*” (*Ibid.*, 296). The work she mentions can only refer to the mission of bringing the message of salvation to the world.

⁷⁴ Hagner, 623.

⁷⁵ Michael Schiffman, *Return of the Remnant* (Baltimore, MD: Lederer Messianic Publishers, 1996), 82.

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from the Jewish nation as God's elect people to the Christian Church, made up of Jews and Gentiles, as God's special people.

While we agree that there is a Jewish remnant—the early church was made up primarily of Jewish believers in Christ—we find no evidence in Scripture or history for the idea of two peoples of God, side by side, witnessing to God's truth. Paul speaks only of “one body” (Eph 4:4; 1 Cor 12:5), not two. One body—the Christian Church—made up of Jews and Gentiles. In Ephesians 3:6 Paul calls Gentiles “fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel.” If Gentiles are fellow heirs with the Jews “of the same body” (σύσσωμα), the church, why would God have another body of Jews besides that one body consisting of Jews and Gentiles?

Jesus concludes the parable with a further reference to the stone the builders rejected. “Whoever falls on this stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to pieces” (21:44).⁷⁶ At the time of his ministry here on earth Jesus was a stumbling block to many in Israel,⁷⁷ when he returns in glory at the end of time to judge the world he will crush all opposition.⁷⁸

At the end of Jesus' speech the priests and elders perceived the drift of the two parables, “the two sons” and “the vinedressers,” and they wanted to apprehend him, but they were afraid of the multitude who saw him as a prophet (21:45, 46). A few days later, however, the multitude was ready to shout, “Let him be crucified!” (27:22).

Conclusion

The kingdom of God Jesus mentions in Matthew 21:43 is the rule of God in the lives of his people, the spiritual kingdom, or the kingdom of grace which he established with his first advent. It is this kingdom that was taken from the Jewish nation and given to the Christian Church, which consisted at first primarily of Jews who accepted Jesus as the Messiah, but to whom were soon added converted Gentiles.⁷⁹ Together they were given the task to go and make disciples of

⁷⁶ Many modern interpreters regard this verse as an early interpolation in Matthew, though most do not doubt its authenticity, since the same thought appears also in Luke 20:18. See Albright and Mann, 265, 266.

⁷⁷ This seems to be an allusion to “the rock of offense” in Isaiah 8:14, 15.

⁷⁸ This is a clear reference to the stone kingdom in Daniel 2:44, which, at the end of time, will break in pieces all the kingdoms of the world.

⁷⁹ Some readers will be interested in Ellen White's thoughts on this issue. They are most cogently expressed in her chapter on the Parable of the Lord's Vineyard in *Christ's Object Lessons*. Ellen White taught that the whole Jewish nation forfeited the special status as God's people because of the rejection of Christ through its leadership. Nowhere does she support the idea that the Jewish people are still his witnesses parallel to the Christian Church. (Emphasis has been supplied in the quotes that follow.)

“Withdrawing the veil from the future, He showed how, by failure to fulfill His purpose, *the whole nation* was forfeiting His blessing, and bringing ruin upon itself” (284).

“The children of Israel were to occupy all the territory which God appointed them. Those nations that rejected the worship and service of the true God were to be dispossessed. But it was God's

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all nations and baptize them “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19).

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purpose that by the revelation of His character through Israel men should be drawn unto Him. To all the world the gospel invitation was to be given. Through the teaching of the sacrificial service Christ was to be uplifted before the nations, and all who would look unto Him should live. All who, like Rahab the Canaanite, and Ruth the Moabitess, turned from idolatry to the worship of the true God, were to unite themselves with His chosen people. As the numbers of Israel increased they were to enlarge their borders, until their kingdom should embrace the world. . . . But *Israel did not fulfill God's purpose*” (290).

“In the parable of the vineyard, after Christ had portrayed before the priests their crowning act of wickedness, He put to them the question, ‘When the Lord therefore of the vineyard cometh, what will he do unto those husbandmen?’ The priests had been following the narrative with deep interest, and without considering the relation of the subject to themselves they joined with the people in answering, ‘He will miserably destroy those wicked men, and will let out His vineyard unto other husbandmen, which shall render Him the fruits in their seasons.’ Unwittingly they had pronounced their own doom. Jesus looked upon them, and under His searching gaze they knew that He read the secrets of their hearts. His divinity flashed out before them with unmistakable power. They saw in the husbandmen a picture of themselves, and they involuntarily exclaimed, ‘God forbid!’” (294–5).

“Christ would have averted *the doom of the Jewish nation* if the people had received Him. But envy and jealousy made them implacable. They determined that they would not receive Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah. They rejected the Light of the world, and thenceforth their lives were surrounded with darkness as the darkness of midnight. *The doom foretold came upon the Jewish nation*” (295).

“*As a people the Jews had failed* of fulfilling God's purpose, and the vineyard was taken from them. The privileges they had abused, the work they had slighted, was entrusted to others” (296).

“The parable of the vineyard applies not alone to the *Jewish nation*. It has a lesson for us. The church in this generation has been endowed by God with great privileges and blessings, and He expects corresponding returns” (296).

“The Lord says, ‘Shall I not visit for these things?’ Jer 5:9. Because they failed of fulfilling God's purpose, *the children of Israel were set aside*, and God's call was extended to other peoples. If these too prove unfaithful, will they not in like manner be rejected?” (304).