

MATTHEW 21:43 AND THE FUTURE OF ISRAEL

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WHILE GIVING SEVERAL PARABLES in Jerusalem, Jesus said, “Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing the fruit of it” (Matt. 21:43). R. T. France ventures the opinion that this verse is “the most explicit statement in Matthew of the view that there is to be a new people of God in place of Old Testament Israel.”¹ In 1992 Graham Stanton published a collection of essays on Matthew entitled *A Gospel for a New People*.² Stanton acknowledged that the title of his book summarizes his view of Matthew 21:43, in which the church as a new people, distinct from both Jews and Gentiles, replaces Israel in God’s plan. In Stanton’s view the community to whom Matthew wrote had already left Judaism and considered itself the true heirs of the blessings previously enjoyed by Israel. In their view the kingdom had been taken from Israel and given to the church. Although individual Jews might believe and become a part of this new people, the Jewish people as a whole had been rejected. Stanton says that Matthew’s theology anticipates that of the second-century text 5 Ezra, which speaks of the kingdom being given to another people or nation (*ad gentem alteram*, 1:24; other manuscripts read *ad alias gentes*, “to other nations”).³ Stanton’s view of Matthew 21:43 amounts to what Davies

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¹ R. T. France, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 310.

² Graham Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1992).

³ Fifth Ezra is the name commonly given to later Christian material that appears as chapters 1–2 of 4 Ezra. Stanton cites Matthew 21:43 about twenty times (*ibid.*, 2, 11, 18, 94, 105, 111, 118, 131, 134, 137, 140, 151–52, 154, 264, 265, 270–71, 276, 331–32, 378), but nowhere does he provide a detailed exegesis of this verse. Thus it is not an exaggeration to state that for Stanton Matthew 21:43 is the key to Matthew’s theology in which the church replaces Israel in God’s plan. For similar ap-

and Allison call “the dominant interpretation in Christian history.”⁴

However, other scholars view Stanton’s approach as anachronistic, arguing that its strict bifurcation between Matthew’s Christian community and Judaism is not founded on Matthew itself but on reading later situations and interpretations back into his Gospel. In this second view Matthew’s community was still in contact with the synagogue, although deep disagreements had arisen and withdrawal from the synagogue may have already been in process. In this reading Matthew’s community did not view itself as a “third race” (*tertium genus*) in contrast to both Israel and the Gentiles. Rather, the community understood itself as the eschatological remnant of Israel, called from the nation by Jesus, who had promised that the kingdom would be forfeited by Israel’s present leaders and given to Matthew’s community. Thus the replacement was not of the nation but of the nation’s leaders. Israel continued as God’s people, but with new leaders.⁵

Several complex issues are involved in this debate, but only a few can be addressed in this article. First, the intertextuality between Matthew and a few other biblical texts will be discussed. Second, an exegesis of key themes in Matthew 21:43 will be presented. Third, the meaning of verse 43 will be expounded in the wider context of Matthean theology.

INTERTEXTUALITY

Whatever one’s view of the relationship between the Synoptic Gospels, the text on which Matthew’s parable ultimately depends is Isaiah’s “song of the vineyard” (Isa. 5:1–7), and on Psalm 118:22,

proaches see R T France, *Matthew Evangelist and Teacher* (Grand Rapids Zondervan, 1989), 223–32, Richard E Menninger, *Israel and the Church in the Gospel of Matthew* (New York Peter Lang, 1994), 8, 33–34, 152–53, and Wolfgang Trilling, *Das Wahre Israel* (Munich Kosel, 1964), 55–65

⁴ W D Davies and Dale Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh Clark, 1997), 3 189 For patristic statements of the view see Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 26 1–2, Eusebius, *Proof of the Gospel* 9 11, Jerome, *Epistle* 42, John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew* 68 1, and *Apostolic Constitutions* 5 16

⁵ Scholars who take this view include Daniel J Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, MN Liturgical, 1991), 303–5, J Andrew Overman, *Church and Community in Crisis* (Valley Forge, PA Trinity, 1996), 302–4, *Matthew’s Community and Formative Judaism* (Minneapolis Fortress, 1990), 148–49, 151, Anthony Saldarini, *Matthew’s Christian–Jewish Community* (Chicago University of Chicago Press, 1994), 59–63, and David C Sim, *The Gospel of Matthew and Christian Judaism* (Edinburgh Clark, 1999), 148–49

which Jesus cited in Matthew 21:42 in applying the parable to the religious leaders. Such allusions and citations may be unique among the parables of Jesus. The complex matter of “inner biblical exegesis” is also important, since the vineyard motif in Isaiah 5 is also found elsewhere in the Old Testament.⁶ Since most New Testament scholars hold that the Book of Matthew is based on Mark, the Marcan version of the parable in Mark 12:1–12 is also relevant. The focus of the present study does not permit discussion of the allusion to Daniel 2:44 in the textually dubious Matthew 21:44; the possible allusions to Psalm 1:3 in Matthew 21:34, 41, 43b; or the version of the parable found in the Gospel of Thomas 65⁷ or similar parables in rabbinic literature.⁸

ISAIAH'S SONG OF THE VINEYARD

Isaiah 5:1–7 poignantly decries the unfaithfulness of Israel with the imagery of a well-cultivated vineyard that inexplicably fails to

⁶ For example Psalm 80:8–13; Isaiah 27:2–6; Jeremiah 2:21; 12:10; Ezekiel 19:10–14; Hosea 10:1. Cf. 1 Enoch 10:16; 84:6; Jubilees 1:16; Psalm of Solomon 14:3–4. Vineyard imagery is part of the larger biblical agricultural imagery that speaks of Israel being planted and uprooted. For a discussion of this “plant theology” in intertestamental Jewish literature see Mark A. Elliott, *The Survivors of Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 329–44.

⁷ The Jesus Seminar has argued that the version of the parable preserved in the Gospel of Thomas 65 is more original than that of the Synoptic Gospels because it lacks their “allegorical overlay” (Robert Funk and Roy W. Hoover, eds., *The Five Gospels* [New York: Macmillan, 1993], 233–34, 510–11). Several arguments supporting the Synoptic versions as authentic dominical tradition are given by Craig Evans, *Jesus and His Contemporaries* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 380–406 (for additional sources see 405, n. 50). Klyne Snodgrass argues that the Thomas version is secondary (“The Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen: Is the Gospel of Thomas Version the Original?” *New Testament Studies* 21 [1975]: 142–44); see also Klyne Snodgrass, *The Parable of the Wicked Tenants* (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1983), 52–71.

⁸ Several rabbinic parables are regularly cited as having similarities with this Gospel parable. See Midrash Tanhuma B Qedoshin §6, which speaks of absentee vineyard owners, and Beshallah §7, which describes the tenant of an estate who is unhappy when the king’s son claims the estate. Exodus Rabbah 30:17 on Exodus 21:18 compares Egypt to thieves who destroy a king’s vineyard and in turn are destroyed by the king. Midrash Proverbs 19:21 alludes to Isaiah 5:7 and compares God’s oversight of Israel to oversight of a vineyard. Seder Eliyahu Rabbah §28 tells the story of a foolish king who entrusts his city and his son to an evil guardian, only to have the city destroyed and the son killed. Sifre Deuteronomy §312 on Deuteronomy 32:9 describes a king who evicts dishonest tenants from his field and turns it over to their sons, who are worse than the first tenants. The king evicts the tenants’ sons when his own son is born. For discussions of these parables and their relationship to the Gospel parable see Evans, *Jesus and His Contemporaries*, 390–94; and David Stern, “Some Parables from the Perspective of the Rabbinic Literature: The Example of the Wicked Husbandmen,” in *Parable and Story in Judaism and Christianity*, ed. Clemens Thoma and Michael Wyschogrod (New York: Paulist, 1989), 42–80.

produce good fruit. The Beloved's transformation of a fertile hill into a promising vineyard is described in six steps (5:1b–2a), steps that resemble the six steps in Matthew 21:33–34, although their order differs. Also Matthew 21 does not mention the digging and removing of stones, but it adds reference to a wall. The following chart displays the similarities and the differences.

<i>Isaiah 5:1–2</i>	<i>Matthew 21:33–34</i>
1 The beloved had a vineyard	1. The landowner planted a vineyard
2 He dug it	2 He built a wall around it
3 He cleared the stones	3 He dug a winepress in it
4 He planted it with vines	4 He built a tower
5 He built a tower	5 He rented it out to tenant farmers
6 He hewed out a winepress	6 He went on a journey

Despite the obvious similarities, there remain differences between Isaiah 5:1–7 and Matthew 21:33–46. Perhaps the most obvious is that the crucial figures in Matthew, the tenant farmers, are not mentioned in Isaiah. The problem in Isaiah is the lack of good fruit, but the problem in Matthew is farmers who will not render the fruit to the owner. As a result the landowner sent his servants and ultimately his son to appeal to the farmers to pay the owner his share of the harvest. The resolution of the problem of the lack of good fruit in Isaiah is the destruction of the vineyard,⁹ but in Matthew the problem of the recalcitrant farmers is solved by replacing them with farmers who will render the harvest to the owner.

It is also interesting to compare Matthew's use of Isaiah 5 with the interpretation of Isaiah 5 in the Aramaic Targum.¹⁰ Targum 5:1 anticipates 5:7 with the words "to Israel which is likened to a vineyard." This makes the basic element of the parable explicit at the outset. The Targum speaks of the vineyard as a "heritage" or "inheritance," which coheres nicely with the recalcitrant farmers'

⁹ However, in light of Isaiah 27 2–6 the destruction of the vineyard should not be viewed as an ultimate or final rejection of Israel

¹⁰ See Bruce Chilton, *A Galilean Rabbi and His Bible Jesus' Use of the Interpreted Scripture of His Time* (Wilmington, DE Glazier, 1984), 111–14, and Evans, *Jesus and His Contemporaries*, 397–401 Evans adduces additional texts that suggest that Isaiah 5 1–2 is referring to the temple Tosefta Me'il 1 16 and Sukkot 3 15, 1 Enoch 89 56, 66–67, 73, 4Q500, lines 2–7 Evans believes that the Christian text Barnabas 16 1–5 relies on the Enochic tradition

desire (Matt. 21:38) to acquire the vineyard as an inheritance (*κληρονομία*) by killing the heir (*κληρονόμος*). Isaiah 5:1 describes the location of the vineyard as “a fertile hill” (בְּהַר בָּרֵךְ בְּרֵךְ שֶׁנֶּשְׂבָּן, literally, “on a hill, a son of fatness”). It is clear from the additions of Targum Isaiah 5:1–2 that it interprets the vineyard as the temple, since it speaks of the location of the vineyard as a “high hill” (רַם בְּמִצְרָיִם), and then interprets the tower and wine vat of 5:2 with the words “I built my sanctuary in their midst and I also gave my altar to atone for their sins.” This association of 5:1–2 with the temple coheres with the narrative context of Matthew 21. Also the good and bad grapes of Isaiah 5:2 are interpreted by the Targum as good and bad deeds, which is in keeping with the emphasis on fruit found in Matthew 21.

The use of Psalm 118:22–23 in Matthew 21:42 may also be illumined by the Psalms Targum.¹¹ Targum Psalms 118:22, which evidently relies on the paronomasia of הָבֵן (“the son”) for אֶבֶן (“the stone,” Ps. 118:22), says that a “boy [הַלֵּוֹיָהוּ] whom the builders abandoned was among the sons of Jesse and he is worthy to be appointed king and ruler.” This understanding of the verse may account for the rejected stone/son being associated with the parabolic detail of the son killed by the recalcitrant farmers (Matt. 21:38–39).

These interpretations of the Bible from the Aramaic Targums for Isaiah and Psalms are not unlike the use of the same biblical texts in Matthew 21. The targumic interpretations link Isaiah 5 to the temple and interpret the stone of Psalm 118 as a son. This lends support to the view of Matthew 21:33–46 that will be argued as this study proceeds. In this view “the parable offers a sharp prophetic criticism of the Temple establishment and a warning that its days of administration were nearing an end.”¹²

SYNOPTIC COMPARISON

The Matthean setting of the parable of the wicked tenant farmers is somewhat different from its setting in Mark and Luke. In all three Gospels Jesus began to speak in parables after jousting with the religious leaders about the source of His authority (Matt. 21:23–27; Mark 11:27–33; Luke 20:1–8). In Mark and Luke the parable occurs immediately after the question about Jesus’ authority (Mark 12:1–12; Luke 20:9–19), and it leads immediately into three additional questions by the religious leaders (Mark 12:32–34; Luke 20:20–40). But in Matthew Jesus’ parable occurs as

¹¹ Ibid., 402–5. Cf. Snodgrass, *The Parable of the Wicked Tenants*, 95–106, 113–18.

¹² Evans, *Jesus and His Contemporaries*, 406.

the second in a set of three parables. It is preceded by the parable of the two sons (21:28–32) and followed by the parable of the marriage feast (22:1–14). Thus in Matthew the parable is located in the same niche as it is in the Synoptics, but in Matthew that niche comprises a cluster of three parables. It is “another parable” (v. 33), not the beginning of a series of parables (Mark 12:1; less specifically Luke 20:9). This would seem to indicate that one should look at all three Matthean parables in interpreting any one of them.¹³

Of interest is the fact that the preceding parable of the two sons (Matt. 21:28–32) is also a vineyard parable. Instead of recalcitrant farmers the parable speaks of a son who promised to work in the vineyard but did not go. And instead of replacement farmers, a son first refused to work in the vineyard but later repented and did work there. In Jesus’ application of the parable the son who ultimately did work in the vineyard corresponds to the tax collectors and harlots who believed John the Baptist and entered the kingdom, and the son who ultimately did not work corresponds to the religious leaders who did not believe John the Baptist and did not enter the kingdom, even after they saw the faith of the tax collectors and harlots (21:32). Therefore the following parable of the wedding feast should also be interpreted as pointing to the failure of Israel’s leaders, not Israel as a whole (cf. vv. 45–46).¹⁴

When the three versions of the parable of the recalcitrant farmers are compared, one notes that Matthew alone described the man who planted the vineyard as a landowner (*οικοδεσπότης*), perhaps emphasizing the planter’s position and anticipating the identification of the planter with God.¹⁵ Also Matthew alone wrote of the landowner’s expectation of receiving his produce when a particular time had drawn near, namely, “the time of fruits” (*ὅτε δὲ ἤγγισεν ὁ καιρὸς τῶν καρπῶν*, 21:34). The use of *ἤγγισεν* (cf. 3:2; 4:17; 10:7) with the harvest imagery (cf. 3:8–10; 7:16–20; 12:33; 13:8, 24–30; 21:19) pictures eschatological judgment. It also anticipates Matthew’s version of the conclusion of the parable, where he alone noted that the landowner would give his vineyard to other tenants who would return his produce to him at harvest time (21:41). Of course this emphasis on fruit comes to its fruition in Matthew’s unique version of the conclusion to the parable—the

¹³ For a careful analysis of the similarities of the three Matthean parables see Sief Van Tilborg, *The Jewish Leaders in Matthew* (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 47–52.

¹⁴ Davies and Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Matthew*, 189.

¹⁵ *Οικοδεσπότης* also occurs in Matthew 10:25; 13:27, 52; 20:1, 11; 24:43.

kingdom of God will be given to a nation that will produce its fruit (*ἔθνει ποιούντι τοὺς καρποὺς αὐτῆς*, v. 43).

Within the parable proper, differences may also be noted in the details of the repeated overtures of the landowner to the farmers, but these are relatively minor and need not be elaborated here. However, it is important to note Matthew's unique version of the application of the parable to the listeners (21:40–41; cf. Mark 12:9; Luke 20:15b–16). In Mark and Luke Jesus answered His own rhetorical question about the landowner's response to the recalcitrant farmers, with Luke adding the sober response of the listeners (*μὴ γένοιτο*, v. 16). But in Matthew the listeners themselves answered the question in language that stresses the miserable end of the farmers (*κακοὺς κακῶς ἀπολέσει αὐτοῦς*, v. 41). But they were speaking about their own end, and so in Matthew's narrative the religious leaders condemned themselves.

CONCLUSION

The use of Isaiah 5:1–7 in the parable in Matthew 21 mainly sets a metaphorical scene for judgment. Matthew's version of the parable occurs in a context in which the failure of the leaders is being stressed repeatedly. Matthew also stressed God's ownership of Israel, Israel's responsibility to bear fruit, and the culpability of Israel's leaders in not rendering this fruit to God. These leaders were made to announce their own doom.

EXEGESIS OF MATTHEW 21:43

This verse includes two "divine passive"¹⁶ verbs (*ἀρθήσεται*, "will be taken away"; *δοθήσεται*, "will be given"), which understatedly describe God's action in taking the kingdom away from one group and transferring it to another. Three aspects of this verse must be addressed: the meaning of the kingdom of God in the context of the parable; the antecedent of "you," the group from which the kingdom will be taken; and the meaning of the word "nation," to whom the kingdom will be given.

"THE KINGDOM OF GOD"

Matthew's occasional use of *ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ* ("the kingdom of God") in 12:28; 19:24; 21:31, 43 instead of his usual *ἡ βασιλεία τῶν*

¹⁶ See the discussion and sources cited in Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 437–38.

οὐρανῶν (“the kingdom of heaven”) has occasioned much debate¹⁷ but little consensus. It is assumed here that the two phrases are semantically equivalent expressions, and that both are used for literary purposes. In the Gospels the kingdom seems to involve both present and future aspects of the reign of God. God’s rule may at some times be a present reality (e.g., 12:28) and at others a future hope (26:29), with the present aspect presented as a partial though genuine foretaste of the future glory. Which aspect is primary in 21:43?

In all likelihood verse 43 is speaking of God’s present rule, which at a point in the near future will be transferred from the aegis of one group to that of another. In reference to the parable that verse 43 applies, the kingdom of God answers to the oversight of the vineyard and its produce (v. 41). This kingdom authority is transferred from the recalcitrant farmers to other farmers who will oversee the vineyard in submission to the landowner’s authority instead of attempting to usurp the vineyard for themselves (v. 38). But what are the identities of those from whom the kingdom will be taken and to whom it will be given?

“TAKEN AWAY FROM YOU”

From whom will the kingdom of God be taken? As noted earlier, many Christian exegetes have viewed verse 43 as predicting the demise of national Israel as the people of God and its being replaced by the church. But what group is represented by the recalcitrant farmers from whom authority over the vineyard is to be taken? In terms of the parable proper, Israel is represented by the vineyard, not by the farmers, who stand for the leaders of Israel. This is made clear in the response of the religious leaders to the parable and its application by Jesus—they recognized that He had been talking about them (v. 45). They were the recalcitrant farmers (vv. 35–39), the builders who rejected the stone (v. 42), and those broken to pieces and ground into powder by the stone (v. 44).¹⁸

This interpretation is supported by the wider context. Since Jesus had arrived in Jerusalem, He had been opposed by the religious leaders. They were indignant at His actions in the temple (vv.

¹⁷ See, for example, Margaret Pamment, “The Kingdom of Heaven according to the First Gospel,” *New Testament Studies* 27 (1980–1981): 211–32.

¹⁸ Matthew 21:44 is often viewed as textually dubious. Though it is well supported in the manuscript tradition, some view it as an interpolation from Luke 20:18. Also some scholars argue that it fits better after Matthew 21:42 than 21:43. See Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2d ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), 47.

12–14) and at His acceptance of praise from children (v. 15; cf. 21:9; Ps. 118:25–26). They interrogated Jesus about the source of His authority, but were unable to answer His question about the source of John the Baptist's authority (Matt. 21:23–27). In response to their opposition Jesus told three parables, each of which confronted the leaders directly. In the first parable Jesus compared them to a rebellious son who said he would work in his father's vineyard but did not (vv. 28–32). This led to another vineyard-based parable in which Jesus compared the leaders to recalcitrant farmers (vv. 33–46). In the third parable He spoke of people who refused a king's repeated invitation to attend a wedding feast for his son (22:1–14). This parable does not single out the leaders as clearly as the previous two, but it is addressed to them (22:1), and they are likely the ones whose behavior went beyond indifference (v. 5) to killing the king's servants (v. 6), resulting in the destruction of their city (v. 7). The leaders were more blameworthy than the nation at large for rejecting Jesus in Jerusalem. This is made clear in 21:46, which concludes the parable about the recalcitrant farmers by stating that the crowd's high regard for Jesus as a prophet kept the religious leaders from arresting Him then.

In the harsh polemic of Matthew 23, in which Jesus addressed the crowds and the disciples with excoriations of the scribes and Pharisees (vv. 1–2), the animosity between Jesus and the religious leaders becomes mutual. The climactic woe pronounced against them involves their continuity with those who maltreated and murdered the prophets (vv. 29–31). Their upcoming murder of Jesus would consummate their rejection (v. 32). They would continue it by persecuting the future Christian messengers whom Jesus would send to them (vv. 34–35). This portrayal of the upcoming rejection of Jesus is played out as the Passion narrative unfolds (26:3–4, 47, 57, 59, 62–68; 27:1–2, 12, 20, 41, 62; 28:11–15).

The consistently negative portrayal of the religious leaders' response to Jesus in Jerusalem is anticipated early in Matthew. When Jesus was born, the chief priests and scribes in Jerusalem cited Micah 5:2 to the effect that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, but they did not go to Bethlehem to worship Him (Matt. 2:4–6). John the Baptist confronted the Pharisees and Sadducees with their lack of fruit and warned them against relying merely on their descent from Abraham (3:7–12). Jesus' ministry began in dark Galilee, not in the light of Jerusalem (4:13–16). In His teachings He spoke of the blessedness of those persecuted for their allegiance to Him, which placed them in the train of the previously persecuted prophets (5:10–12). His mission of fulfilling the Law and the prophets requires a righteousness that exceeds that of

the scribes and Pharisees (5:20). His way of giving, praying, and fasting was intended to confront hypocritical religious acts, presumably those of the religious leaders (6:2, 5, 16). He anticipated an eschatological banquet that would not include many of those for whom the kingdom was prepared, and this would certainly be many of the leaders. The scribes did not appreciate His authority to forgive sins (9:3), and the Pharisees objected to His eating with tax collectors and sinners (v. 11). The Pharisees attributed His exorcisms to collaboration with Satan (v. 34; 10:25; 12:24–30), and His disciples could expect similar treatment (10:16–33). Even Jesus' statement of compassion for the multitudes echoes a well-known motif from the Old Testament which implies that the religious leaders of Israel are not faithful shepherds of God's people (9:36; cf. 2:6; 25:32; 26:31).¹⁹

God the Father had hidden the truth of Jesus' message from those who were seemingly wise and intelligent (11:25), which would include the leaders of Israel. The Pharisees and Jesus had opposing views on the proper observance of the Sabbath (12:1–8). The scribes and Pharisees tested Jesus by asking for a sign (vv. 38–45), and later the Pharisees and Sadducees did the same thing (16:1–4). Soon afterward Jesus predicted several times that He would die in Jerusalem at the hands of the leaders there (16:21; 17:12, 22–23; 20:17–19). The scribes and Pharisees also clashed with Jesus on the merits of the tradition of the elders about people washing their hands before meals (15:1–19). And later the Pharisees tested Jesus on the matter of divorce (19:3).

With this background,²⁰ the reader is not surprised that the religious leaders and Jesus were at odds from the moment He arrived in Jerusalem, and that His teachings there consistently took the leaders to task. In fact with this context in mind, texts thought to implicate Israel as a whole take on a new light. For example the cursing of the fruitless fig tree (21:19), often interpreted as an acted prophecy of judgment on the nation of Israel or Judaism as a whole,²¹ should probably be viewed as primarily implicating the

¹⁹ 2 Samuel 5:2; 2 Chronicles 18:16; Isaiah 56:11; Jeremiah 3:15; 10:21; 12:10; 23:1–4; Ezekiel 34:1–24; Zechariah 10:2–3; 11:15–17.

²⁰ For a helpful summary of how Matthew presented the religious leaders as opponents of God's will see Warren Carter, *Matthew: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 229–41. See also Jack Dean Kingsbury, "The Developing Conflict between Jesus and the Jewish Leaders in Matthew's Gospel: A Literary-Critical Study," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 49 (1987): 57–73.

²¹ France, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, 303; and Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1995), 605–6.

Jerusalem religious establishment.²² Similarly the judgment that will fall on “this generation” (23:36) is contextually linked to the sins of the scribes and Pharisees, not the nation as a whole. Thus in 23:37 Jerusalem by synecdoche refers to its religious establishment, not the nation at large. Also it should be noted that the crowd’s demand for the release of Barabbas instead of Jesus was made at the instigation of the chief priests and elders (27:20).

The identification of the recalcitrant farmers of the parable with the current religious leaders seems clear.²³ Also 21:43 probably is to be understood as saying that kingdom authority is taken away from those leaders, not from the nation as a whole. This is in keeping with the denunciations by Old Testament prophets who blame the leaders of Israel for the sins of the people²⁴ and stress the sins of Jerusalem,²⁵ particularly those of the temple.²⁶ This is not to say that the people at large were not accountable for their sins, but that the leaders’ conduct was even more blameworthy. It is not simply that they did not enter the kingdom themselves but that they also prevented other people from entering it (23:13). But if 21:43 speaks of kingdom authority being taken away from these religious leaders, to whom does the text say this kingdom authority will be given?

“A NATION PRODUCING ITS FRUIT”

Some scholars take the phrase “a nation producing the fruit of it” as conclusive evidence that a new “nation” has replaced the nation of Israel in God’s plan. Hare says, “Matthew’s use of *ἐθνός* here

²² Davies and Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Matthew*, 3:151–52.

²³ Recent commentators who take this position include D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 8:454; Davies and Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Matthew*, 3:189–90; Robert Gundry, *Matthew*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 430; Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 303–5; and Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 510–11, 515–16.

²⁴ For example Isaiah 1:23–26; Jeremiah 23; Lamentations 4:13; Ezekiel 34; Micah 3:1–5; Zephaniah 3:3–4. Of course the prophets also confronted the people’s complicity in their leaders’ sins (e.g., Isa. 1:10; Jer. 5:4–5, 30–31; Hos. 4:4–6).

²⁵ For example Isaiah 1:21; Jeremiah 4:14; 8:5; Lamentations; Ezekiel 9:8–9; 16; 22; Daniel 9:7, 12, 16, 20, 24; Micah 3:9–10; Zephaniah 1:4, 12; 3:1.

²⁶ For example Jeremiah 7:1–11; Ezekiel 8; 23:38–39; 44:6–14; Zephaniah 1:4–13; 3:4; Malachi 1:6–2:9.

must be taken with full seriousness.”²⁷ This evidently means that in Hare’s view the giving of the kingdom to a nation means that it has been taken away from a nation, not merely from that nation’s leaders. For Hare this also means that the nation to which the kingdom is given is not Israel in any sense of the word, not even a new Israel but “another people, non-Israel.”²⁸ Thus Israel’s national rejection is final and complete—the discontinuity between Israel and the church is radical.

But Hare’s argument is unconvincing in view of the previous discussion of the entity from whom the kingdom is taken. The pronoun “you” in 21:43 has as its parabolic antecedent the recalcitrant farmers, not the fruitful vineyard. In verse 46 it is clear that the religious leaders believed Jesus was talking about them, not Israel as a whole. Thus it is reading far too much into this verse to view it as indicating the replacement of Israel by the Gentile church.²⁹

Nor does Matthew’s use of the word ἔθνος support Hare’s position.³⁰ If it is granted that ὑμῶν (“you”) in verse 43 refers to the leaders of Israel, it would seem that the entity signified by ἔθνεσσι need not take on an ethnic significance in which Israel is replaced by non-Israelites. Matthew’s use of ἔθνος does not contradict this understanding. The word occurs fifteen times overall, twelve times in the plural. When ἔθνος occurs in the plural, the non-Jewish nations, the ἔθνη, are usually meant (4:15; 6:32; 10:5, 18; 20:19), although there are times when the nations in general, including Israel, are probably meant (12:18, 21; 20:25; 24:9, 14; 25:32; 28:19).³¹

²⁷ Douglas R A Hare, *The Theme of Jewish Persecution of Christians in the Gospel according to Matthew* (Cambridge Cambridge University Press, 1967), 153

²⁸ *Ibid* (italics his)

²⁹ Recent commentators who take the view that the church replaces Israel include Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Churchbook Matthew 13–28* (Dallas Word, 1990), 770, Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 623, and Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1992), 544

³⁰ See Amy-Jill Levine’s comments on the weakness of lexical arguments that neglect literary critical matters (*The Social and Ethnic Dimensions of Matthean Salvation History* [Lewiston, NY Mellen, 1988], 187–89, 207–11)

³¹ The meaning of πάντα τα ἔθνη (“all the nations”) in 28 19 is much debated. It has been argued that 28 19 enjoins an exclusively Gentile mission, since God has rejected Israel (Douglas R A Hare and Daniel J Harrington, “Make Disciples of All the Gentiles’ (MT 28 19),” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 37 (1975) 359–69. It seems best to conclude that this verse does stress a mission from Matthew’s Christian Jewish community to Gentiles, but such a mission does not rule out an ongoing mission to Jews, even though by the time Matthew was written the Jewish mission had not met with great success (Levine, *The Social and Ethnic Dimensions of Matthean Salvation History*, 165–239, esp 185–97)

Two of the three uses of *ἔθνος* in the singular occur in 24:7, which describes national aggression. Such aggression likely refers to Gentile nations, but does not necessarily exclude Israel. The remaining use is 21:43, where the context indicates that a transference of the kingdom from one ethnic group, national Israel, to another, the Gentile church, is not in view. Rather, Matthew specified that the *ἔθνος* that would receive the kingdom is an ethical entity, not an ethnic entity. Those who produce fruit (*ἔθνει ποιοῦντι τοῦς καρποῦς αὐτῆς*), that is, those who practice kingdom ethics, will replace the recalcitrant farmers who refused to render the harvest to the landowner. Matthew's community and others like it, which viewed Jesus as the ultimate teacher of the Law (5:17–48), practice kingdom ethics. They are the ones who will replace the Jerusalem religious establishment as the leaders of Israel.

This contextual argument may be buttressed by lexical arguments. Saldarini's diachronic summary shows that by Hellenistic-Roman times *ἔθνος* refers occasionally to geographically, socially, or vocationally determined groups, such as trade guilds and orders of priests, and rural people as opposed to urban people.³² Plato's *Republic* (421c) calls the various groups that function in his ideal city *ἔθνη*. Such uses of *ἔθνος* for voluntary social groups support the view that Matthew's community is the *ἔθνος* to whom the kingdom is given.

Most likely *ἔθνος* in 21:43 does not focus on the Gentile church but instead reminds a Jewish audience of the lofty role God intended for their nation. While it is true that in general the Old Testament uses גוֹי or עַמִּי for Gentiles and עַם for the Jews, there are many texts, some of them crucial, that use יִשְׂרָאֵל for the nation of Israel, and the Septuagint usually translates יִשְׂרָאֵל in these texts by the word *ἔθνος*.³³ These verses include Genesis 12:2, where God promised to make Abraham into a great nation;³⁴ Exodus 19:6, where at the giving of the Law Israel's vocation as a holy nation is stressed; 2 Samuel 7:23 (cf. 1 Chron. 17:21), where David thanked God for the promise of his dynasty by reflecting on Israel as a unique nation; Psalm 33:12, where the psalmist extolled the blessedness of the nation whose God is the Lord; Isaiah 1:4, where Isaiah la-

³² Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian–Jewish Community*, 480.

³³ Occasionally the Septuagint translates עַם with *ἔθνος*, as in Deuteronomy 7:7 and Zephaniah 2:9, and יִשְׂרָאֵל with *λαός*, as in Joshua 3:17; 4:1; Isaiah 9:2; and Jeremiah 9:9.

³⁴ Echoes of this "great nation" text include Genesis 46:3; Exodus 32:10; Numbers 14:12; and Deuteronomy 4:6–8; 26:5.

mented the sinful nation; Isaiah 26:2, where Isaiah envisioned a day in which the gates of Jerusalem will be thrown open for a righteous nation; Jeremiah 31:36, which affirms that Israel will cease to be a nation only if God's decrees for the sun, moon, and stars cease; and Ezekiel 37:22, where Ezekiel envisioned Israel as one nation.³⁵ In light of the cumulative weight of these texts, approaching fifty in number, there is no reason to assume that the word *ἔθνος* refers to Gentiles as opposed to Jews. More likely, a Jewish audience would understand *ἔθνος* as echoing those verses that call on Israel to fulfill its unique role in redemptive history.³⁶

MATTHEAN THEOLOGY

Matthew 21:33–46 is part of Jesus' indictment of the religious establishment in Jerusalem, whose franchise to lead Israel would be forfeited to Matthew's Christian Jewish community. The "nation" in verse 43 speaks of the Matthean community as an eschatological messianic remnant, whose leaders will replace the current Jerusalem religious establishment and lead Israel in bearing the fruit of righteousness to God.³⁷ Thus the parable of the recalcitrant farmers is about ethics, not ethnicity, and a Jewish remnant, not a Gentile replacement. This remnant is pictured as a repentant son (v. 30), as responsible farmers (v. 41), and as responsive guests (22:9–10). None of these parabolic details need be interpreted as speaking in ethnic terms.³⁸

In light of the suggested interpretation of Matthew 21:43 a few additional Matthean themes should be examined.

Matthew frequently stressed the matter of kingdom authority for mission, whether the mission of John (3:2), Jesus (4:17, 23;

³⁵ Other verses include Exodus 33 13, Deuteronomy 4 34, 9 14, 32 28, Joshua 5 6, 8, 10 13, Judges 2 20, Psalms 43 1, 106 5, 147 20, Proverbs 14 34, Isaiah 10 6, 26 15, 58 2, 60 22, 65 1, 66 8, Jeremiah 5 9, 29, 7 28, 31 36, 33 24, Micah 4 7, Zephaniah 2 1, Haggai 2 14, and Malachi 3 9

³⁶ Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 515–16

³⁷ Elliott provides a thorough analysis of the remnant theme in pre-Christian Judaism. He only briefly sketched the implications of all this for New Testament studies (*The Survivors of Israel*, 639–64), but his conclusions in general support the position taken in the present study. Elliott's discussion of salvation for the remnant in what he calls "destruction–preservation soteriology" (*ibid.*, 621–34) is particularly interesting when one considers the theme of judgment on Israel in Matthew

³⁸ Levine's survey of Matthean texts that have been purported to teach the rejection of ethnic Israel shows that these passages should rather be understood in social and ethical categories (*The Social and Ethnic Dimensions of Matthean Salvation History*, 193–239)

7:29; 8:9; 9:6–8, 35; 21:23–27), or the disciples (10:1–7; 28:18). Thus John, Jesus, and the disciples announced their message with the authority of God's dynamic ruling power. This announcement of the kingdom message is pictured in the parable of the sower (13:19). Jesus' prediction that the kingdom of God would be taken from the religious leaders and given to a fruitful "nation" should be seen in light of the narrative as a whole, in which Jesus' disciples, who were the nascent Matthean community, received from Him the authority to carry on the kingdom mission that began with John and Jesus.

Matthew also emphasized the matter of kingdom authority for leading Israel. The keys of the kingdom were to be used by Peter, along with the other apostles, in leading the community with authoritative teaching (16:18–19) and discipline (18:18). The transferral of the kingdom to a fruitful "nation" (21:43) is thus related to the foundational role of the apostles with Peter at the head in teaching and disciplining the messianic remnant of Israel.

According to 19:28 the leadership role of the apostles is not just for the present age but will continue into the eschaton (ἐν τῇ παλιγγενεσίᾳ). The transferral of kingdom authority to Matthew's community is evidently permanent, since the apostles are promised that they will be the judges of Israel in the "regeneration." The correspondence of the twelve apostles of Jesus with the twelve tribes of Israel is significant for the national imagery of 21:43. The apostles were the new leaders of the nation; they would produce the fruit that the recalcitrant farmers refused to give the landowner.

Matthew 21:33–46 is a parabolic presentation of Israel's rejection of the prophets, which is the reason for Jesus' final pronouncement of woe on the scribes and Pharisees in 23:29–36 (cf. 5:12).³⁹ It should be noted that Jesus' woes in Matthew 23 were pronounced on the fruitless religious leaders only after He had spoken to His disciples about a proper model for fruitful servant leadership in 23:1–12. Surprisingly He acknowledged the authoritative office held by the leaders (vv. 2–3), but denied their role as proper models for ethical behavior. A new group of leaders who would exemplify humble service to their brothers and sisters in God's family was needed (cf. 20:20–28). The new "nation" of 21:43 would include these leaders.

³⁹ Though he would not necessarily agree with the conclusions of this study, David E. Garland is correct in pointing out how important the parables of Matthew 21–22 are for the interpretation of Matthew 23. The "judgmental tone" of these parables sets the scene for the woes (*The Intention of Matthew 23* [Leiden: Brill, 1979], 82–84).

CONCLUSION

The parable of the recalcitrant farmers should not be interpreted as a transferral of God's redemptive program from the nation of Israel to the church. To read this passage as Israel's rejection and replacement by the Gentile church is to read into it a later theology of supersession.⁴⁰ Such a view is dubious exegetically and has contributed, perhaps unwittingly in some cases, to anti-Semitism. The theology of supersession may not lead inexorably to the practice of anti-Semitism, but the connections are there in all too many cases in the history of the church. A dubious view that also supports a theology that is often complicit in anti-Semitism should be rejected.⁴¹

Matthew 21:33–46 should be interpreted as referring to a transfer of leadership in the kingdom from the fruitless Jerusalem religious establishment to the fruitful Matthean Christian Jewish community, led by Jesus' apostles. This community will be the eschatological remnant of Israel, which will continue its mission to Israel while expanding its horizons to all nations. Although the church will eventually expand primarily by winning Gentiles to Jesus, its roots in the promises of God to the seed of Abraham must not be forgotten. Jesus' words to the Samaritan woman—"Salvation is of the Jews"—warrant repeating (John 4:22; cf. 10:16; Acts 24:14; 28:20; Rom. 11:16–24; 15:7–13; Eph. 2:11–22; Rev. 21:12).

⁴⁰ Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 513; Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community*, 516, n. 172; and Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 372–74.

⁴¹ In a recent volume Schuler and Carter concur with Levine that Matthew 21:43 does not envision divine abandonment of the Jews in favor of the Gentile church (Amy-Jill Levine, "Anti-Judaism and the Gospel of Matthew"; Philip L. Shuler, "Response to Amy-Jill Levine"; and Warren Carter, "Response to Amy-Jill Levine," in *Anti-Judaism and the Gospels*, ed. William R. Farmer [Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 1999], 30–31, 40, 48).