

Does the Church Qualify as the “Nation” in Matthew 21:43?

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*Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you
and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it.
Matthew 21:43 (NKJV)*

Matthew 21:43 is a major verse cited by supersessionists to support their belief that the Church has replaced Israel, thus becoming the “new Israel” or the “true Israel of God.” On the face of it, this verse appears to be teaching that the kingdom that had been offered to Israel would be taken from them and given to the Church. Early dispensational authors agreed that this verse was not to be understood according to a supersessionist viewpoint; however, surprisingly, some dispensational authors have adopted the supersessionist view. In my opinion, this is inconsistent, unwise, and unnecessary. This paper will examine this verse exegetically according to its context, lexical data, and theological implications. My conclusion is that the “nation” to which the kingdom was to be given was none other than the nation of Israel, but it is Israel as seen in its eschatological, converted state when God fulfills the New Covenant with Israel.

The distinction between Israel and the Church, Ryrie’s first component of the *sine qua non*,¹ is in direct opposition to the long-standing supersessionist position of much of Christendom. The transferring of Israel’s kingdom promises to the Church essentially constitutes the Church as the “true Israel of God.” One of the verses used to support such a notion of transference, has been Matthew 21:43. At least since the time of Origen, Christian interpreters have asserted on the basis of this verse that the kingdom has been taken from the nation of Israel and has been given to the (Gentile) Church. Origen put it this way, “Our Lord, seeing the conduct of the Jews not to be at all in keeping with the teaching of the prophets, inculcated by a parable that the kingdom of God would be taken from them, and given to the converts from heathenism.”² This became the prevailing view through the middle ages and continued among the reformers. Calvin, for example, comments: “The Jews thought that the kingdom of God dwelt among them by hereditary right, and therefore they adhered obstinately to their vices. We have unexpectedly come into their room contrary to nature, and therefore much less is the

¹ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 39.

² Origen, *Against Celsus*, 2.5. (Cited in Michael Vlach, *The Church as a Replacement of Israel: An Analysis of Supersessionism*, [Frankfurt: Peter Lang GmbH, 2009], 99). Other early fathers who promoted a supersessionist interpretation of this verse include Irenaeus (*Against Heresies*, 4.36) and Chrysostom (*Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew*).

kingdom of God bound to us, if it be not rooted in true godliness.”³ Among non-dispensationalists today, the supersessionist view still pervades. Ladd is representative in his comment on Matthew 21:43,

Here is an unambiguous statement. Israel had been the possessor of the Kingdom of God... Gentiles could share these blessings only by entering into relationship with Israel. However ... Israel rejected both the Kingdom and the Bearer of the Kingdom. Therefore the Kingdom in its new manifestation was taken away from Israel and given to a new People. This new people is the Church.⁴

Early dispensational authors disagreed and affirmed that this verse was *not* to be understood according to a supersessionist viewpoint; Typical of these dispensationalists is McClain:

... this Kingdom, as foreseen by the prophets and announced by our Lord, is not therefore metamorphosed into something else... the Kingdom was taken from a nation of our Lord’s day because of its sin; and it shall be given to a nation which brings forth proper fruit. The difference between the two nations is spiritual and moral, not racial. That nation on which the Kingdom is bestowed will be the nation of *Israel*, in harmony with all Old Testament prophecy; but an Israel repentant and regenerated.⁵

The same interpretation was echoed by Ryrie in the 1950s:

To whom would the kingdom be given? By *application*, the “nation bringing forth the fruits thereof” may mean any generation which will turn to Christ; but in its strictest *interpretation* it refers to the nation Israel when she shall turn to the Lord and be saved before entering the millennial kingdom.⁶

However, surprisingly, some dispensational authors have adopted the supersessionist view of this verse – albeit in a modified form that allows for a future fulfillment by national Israel as well. For instance Ryrie, who earlier denied that the Church could be the “nation” of

³ John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, vol. 3 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 38.

⁴ George Eldon Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 114. Other contemporary authors sharing this view as noted by Vlach (p. 99 n.62) include: Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 157; R. T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, TNTC, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985; reprint, 1987), 310; Gohn Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hayatt, 1991), 190-91; Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1930), 172; Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Seabury, 1978), 337; Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, trans. H. de Jongste (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1962), 352-53; Francis Wright Beare, *The Gospel According to Matthew: A Commentary* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), 431; John Bright, *The Kingdom of God* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1953), 226.

⁵ Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, (Winona Lake: BMH, 1974), 296-97.

⁶ Charles Ryrie, *Basis of the Premillennial Faith*, (Neptune New Jersey: Loizeaux, 1953), 71. Sharing the same interpretation was Arno C. Gabelin, *The Gospel of Matthew*, (New York: Our Hope, 1910), II, 138.

Matthew 21:43, writes in his *Study Bible* in the note on this verse, “... i.e., taken from the Jews and given to the Church, which is composed largely of Gentiles (1 Peter 2:9).”⁷ No less surprising is Toussaint’s comment on this verse:

A fourth view states that the nation is the church. This position is the most tenable for several reasons. The church is said to enter into the blessings of the kingdom (Galatians 3:7-9, 29; Romans 11:20-24)... Not only does the church inherit the kingdom with Israel, but the church is also called a nation (1 Peter 2:9-10; Romans 10:19). The logical conclusion is, therefore, that the church is the nation to whom the kingdom is given in Matthew 21:43.⁸

Such an accommodation by dispensationalists is unnecessary, and plays into the hands of Covenant Theology, New Covenant Theology, and Progressive Dispensationalism. Today’s New Calvinists are popularizing among the coming generation of young Christian leaders a non-dispensational view of the Church that espouses either a full supersessionist view or an already-not-yet view of the kingdom.

Definition of Supersessionism

An alternate name for supersessionism is “replacement theology.” Recent literature has popularized the use of the phrase “replacement theology;” however, in this paper the more formal term “supersessionism” will be preferred.⁹ Vlach’s dissertation and book, *The Church as a Replacement of Israel: An Analysis of Supersessionism*, is definitive on the subject. He defines supersessionism based on “two core beliefs: (1) national Israel has somehow completed or forfeited its status as the people of God and will never again possess a unique role or function apart from the church; and (2) the church is now the true Israel that has permanently replaced or superseded national Israel as the people of God.”¹⁰ While some supersessionists see a future salvation of ethnic Jews, their position is still supersessionist because of their denial of a future restoration of national Israel in the program of God. Vlach maintains, “The key dividing line

⁷ Charles C. Ryrie, *Ryrie Study Bible: Expanded Edition* (Chicago: Moody, 1986), 1458.

⁸ Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew*, (Portland, Multnomah Press, 1980), 251. In support of this interpretation, Toussaint cites McClain’s view that the Mediatorial Kingdom has “a present *de jure* existence” in the Church by virtue of the fact that “we enter *judicially* into the kingdom before its establishment” (McClain, *Greatness of the Kingdom*, 439). But Toussaint fails to mention that McClain did not support the view that the Church is the “nation” of Matthew 21:43. Pentecost mentions both views, citing Ryrie’s interpretation from *Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (see above) with approval on p. 90, but then citing Peters’ view that the church is the nation on p. 466 and equivocating by saying, “Whichever of these two views be adopted...” (J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958]).

⁹ Some have deemed “replacement theology” to bear too pejorative a connotation. This may be true, but the term “supersessionism” is also generally considered to be pejorative. However, at least some reformed theologians are willing to embrace the supersessionist terminology, even wearing it as a badge of honor; see, e.g., Peter Enns’ review of Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), where he says, “The label ‘supersessionism’ is far too visceral and imbalanced a term to be of much use. Although Christianity is born out of Second Temple Judaism, it is still a different religion, and one that claims in its own canon to, well, ‘supersede’ Judaism” (*Westminster Theological Journal* 64:1 [2002], 206).

¹⁰ Vlach, 27.

between supersessionism and ... non-supersessionism ... is the issue of ‘restoration.’ Non-supersessionists hold to both a national salvation and a restoration of national Israel. While moderate forms of supersessionism affirm a national *salvation* of Israel, they do not affirm a *restoration* of national Israel.”¹¹ Thus, Vlach defines supersessionism as follows: “... the view that the New Testament church is the new Israel that has forever superseded national Israel as the people of God.”¹²

In this paper a distinction will be made between strong supersessionism and mild supersessionism; however, both versions fit the above definition of supersessionism.¹³

1. Strong Supersessionism

Throughout most of church history, Christians have held that the church completely and forever replaces Israel and receives Israel’s Old Testament promises spiritually. According to this view, there are two possible explanations for Israel’s current status: (1) Israel so seriously violated God’s covenant in their rejection of Christ at His first coming that God has finally and forever condemned Israel punitively to rejection from the status of the people of God; or (2) Israel simply served in the Old Testament as a type of the church and now that the church has come into existence, Israel as a separate entity has simply become irrelevant.

2. Mild Supersessionism

Some supersessionists do acknowledge that the Bible tells of a future for Israel based on God’s promises. These supersessionists speak of a salvation for ethnic Israel but are either silent about, or deny, a future restoration of national Israel. They refer to a future work of salvation among the Jews, but they can generally be recognized as supersessionist by their appeal to the adjective “ethnic” as a qualifier of the noun “Israel,” as opposed to non-supersessionists who tend to use the adjective “national” to qualify the noun “Israel.” According to this view, the church replaces Israel and receives Israel’s Old Testament promises spiritually; however, the promise of Israel’s regathering will be fulfilled in the end times by a vast ingathering of ethnic Jews into the Church by conversion to Christianity.

¹¹ Vlach, 33, n.71. Emphasis Vlach’s.

¹² Ibid., 27.

¹³ Vlach lists the following three major forms of supersessionism: (1) Punitive Supersessionism, (2) Economic Supersessionism, and (3) Structural Supersessionism (pp. 27-32); this three-fold division was apparently first noted by Soulen, (R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996] 30-34, 181 n. 6, cited by Craig Blaising, “The Future of Israel As a Theological Question,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44 [2001], 436). But Vlach also refers to “moderate forms of supersessionism” (p. 33) which hold to a future salvation for ethnic Israel while denying a future restoration for national Israel. This dissertation will refer to Vlach’s “moderate forms” as “mild supersessionism.”

Matthew 21:43

Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people (ἔθνος, “nation”), producing the fruit of it. (NASB95)

Supersessionists take this verse to mean that because of Israel’s rejection of Jesus at His first coming, the kingdom has been taken away from Israel and given to the Gentiles (the Church). Piper, for example, said, “. . . Israel’s trespass, in rejecting the Messiah, happened so that God might give the kingdom—the heritage of Israel—to those who follow him,”¹⁴ and “‘Therefore,’ he says—that is, ‘because’ you reject the son—the kingdom will pass over to the Gentiles who obey.”¹⁵ Piper is representative of most New Calvinists when he holds that the Abrahamic covenant is conditional,¹⁶ and that since the rejection of Jesus is “the ultimate act of covenant-breaking,”¹⁷ Israel no longer has legal claim either to the land or to the kingdom.¹⁸ Piper also reflects supersessionist thinking in his explanation of the origin of Christianity: “Christianity began, pushed out of Judaism by those who rejected Jesus as the Christ, but in God’s sight heirs of the promise and possessors of the kingdom (Matthew 21:43).”¹⁹

1. Contextual Considerations

When Matthew 21:43 is read with supersessionist presuppositions, its meaning appears to be fairly straightforward, but the verse is not quite as straightforward as the supersessionist argument might purport. This verse should not be viewed apart from its context. The verse is Jesus’ conclusion to the parable of the wicked tenants found in verses 33-41. According to Fuhrmann, the parable of the wicked tenants is “one of the most controversial and misunderstood of Jesus’ parables. At nearly every point, there is significant disagreement.”²⁰ Laying aside theological presupposition, there are several exegetical problems that need to be resolved regarding the understanding of this verse. There are at least three exegetical questions that must be answered: (1) From whom is the kingdom taken? (2) To whom is it given? (3) For how long is it taken away?

i. From whom is the kingdom taken? According to the context, it is taken from the leaders of Israel, not the entire nation. The referent to the pronoun “you” (“The kingdom of God will be taken away from you. . .”) is clearly the chief priests and the elders of the people. This parable is one in a series of parables addressed to the chief priests and elders. This group of

¹⁴ John Piper, “Did Israel Stumble in Order That They Might Fall?” Preached December 7, 2003, *Sermons from John Piper (2000–2014)* (Minneapolis, MN: Desiring God, 2014).

¹⁵ John Piper, “God’s Design for History: The Glory of His Mercy,” Preached March 14, 2004, *Ibid.*

¹⁶ John Piper, “Land Divine?” *World*, May 11, 2002, 51.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ John Piper, “The Sacrifice of a Shared Life,” preached on September 24, 1989, *Sermons from John Piper (1980–1989)* (Minneapolis, MN: Desiring God, 2007).

²⁰ Justin M. Fuhrmann, “The Use of Psalm 118:22-23 in the Parable of the Wicked Tenants,” *Proceedings* (Grand Rapids, Mich.) 27, (January 1, 2007), 67.

Jewish leaders had confronted Jesus upon His entering into the temple the day following the triumphal entry (Matthew 21:23). They desired to know the authority that justified Jesus’ actions and words. Jesus’ reply consisted in a counter-question regarding the authority of John (21:24-27) followed by a series of three parables (the parable of the two sons, 21:28-32; the parable of the wicked tenants, 21:33-41; and the parable of the marriage feast, 22:1-14). All three of these parables are addressed to the same group of leaders (21:28, 33; 22:1). So, when Jesus said that “the kingdom of God will be taken away from you,” He was stating that the kingdom was being taken from the leaders of His day, not necessarily from the nation. Furthermore, the tenants in the parable cannot represent national Israel, since “Israel is represented by the vineyard, not by the farmers, who stand for the leaders of Israel.”²¹ Peters refers to this as:

... a collision between Jesus and the chief priests and elders (ch. 21:23, etc.), in which the latter question Christ’s authority, and are silenced by the reply of Jesus. The crisis is then nigh at hand, for He tells them (ch. 21:28–46) that they were *unrepentant*, and that the Kingdom so graciously offered to them, and in which they enjoyed *a covenanted right*, should be *taken from them* and given to others. Jesus speaks even more plainly (chs. 22 and 23), culminating in expressly predicting that *the desolate Davidic house*, the tabernacle in ruins, should *remain thus until His Second Coming*.²²

ii. To whom is it given? It is given to a nation (ἔθνος). The question that must be addressed is whether ἔθνος is to be taken literally or metaphorically. The supersessionist position takes a metaphorical sense, making ἔθνος refer to the Church. On the other hand, if taken literally, then ἔθνος must refer either to national Israel or to one of the Gentile nations. As to the metaphorical meaning, there is nothing in the context to suggest that the Church could have been conceptualized by Jesus’ hearers as a “nation.” Apart from His disciples who heard a few brief words about the Church in Matthew 16 and 18, there was virtually no way for his hearers to conceive of the Church at all. And, though it is possible that Jesus may have spoken these words in anticipation of future readers being able to make sense of His words, it remains questionable whether the term “nation” is a suitable metaphor for the Church.²³ With regards to the literal sense of ἔθνος there is absolutely no Biblical argument that can possibly support the notion of the kingdom being given to any Gentile nation. But with respect to its being given to national Israel, there is conceptual support within the book of Matthew that a future generation of Israel will receive the kingdom (see the next sub-point, “iii. For how long is it taken away?”). If this be the case, then one might understand the participle “producing” (ποιοῦντι) as conveying a temporal sense: “a nation when it produces its fruits.”

iii. For how long is it taken away? A strong supersessionist approach would say that the kingdom is forever, irrevocably taken away from Israel. Even a mild supersessionist approach sees a permanent change in national Israel’s status vis-à-vis an earthly kingdom. However, both

²¹ David L. Turner, “Matthew 21:43 and the Future of Israel,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159/633 (2002), 53.

²² George N. H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom of Our Lord Jesus, the Christ*, vol. 3 (New York; London: Funk & Wagnalls, 1884), 351. Emphasis his. In fairness to Peters it should be noted that, though he sees ultimately a fulfillment in an eschatological repentant Israel, he also sees a current fulfillment in the Church. This is essentially the same position taken by Toussaint and entertained as a possibility by Pentecost; see comments above.

²³ See further below under “Lexical Considerations.”

Matthew’s Gospel, the Old Testament prophets, and the New Testament epistles affirm that Israel’s status would be temporarily removed from them, only to be restored at a future date when the nation is spiritually revived. In the Old Testament this is seen quite clearly in the message of Hosea (especially Hos. 1:10-2:23; also Isa. 66:5-13; Mic. 4:6-8). The apostle Paul affirmed this same theme in Romans 11:11-15. Matthew also speaks of a future generation (γενεά) of Israel that will receive Jesus as her King (Matt. 24:34; 23:36-39).

There are other contextual considerations that tie the nation of verse 23 with Israel. Verse 43 begins with διὰ τοῦτο, which ties this logically to the preceding verse, a quote from Psalm 118:22-23. In its original context, this quote continued to verse 26, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” Jesus also quoted Ps. 118:26 in Matthew 23:37-39 where He foresees a future time when the nation will receive Him. Psalm 118 lies richly in the background of the context of Matthew 21. It is referred to earlier in the chapter in connection with the Triumphal Entry (Matt. 21:9, also quoting Psalm 118:25, 26). These quotes, along with Isaiah 56:7 (quoted in Matt. 21:13) are prophetic verses describing the blessings of the Messianic Kingdom. Similarly, Matthew 21:16 cites Psalm 8:2 which is identified by verse 5 and 6 as being a kingdom setting as well.

It is also helpful to note the progression of thought through Matthew 21. (1) Verses 1-11, The Triumphal Entry - Arrival of the kingdom announced; (2) Verses 12-17, The Cleansing of the Temple - Necessary preparations for the kingdom; (3) Verses 18-22, The Cursing of the Fig Tree - Symbol of a fruitless generation; (4) Verses 23-27, Jesus’ Authority Challenged - Evidence of the fruitless generation; (5) Verses 28-32, The Parable of the Two Sons - A future repentance foretold; (6) Verses 33-46, The Parable of the Landowner - A future repentance foretold. The broad context of the chapter seems to point to a future national fulfillment of God’s kingdom program for national Israel.

2. Lexical Considerations

a. ἄλλος “Other”

One possible lexical consideration involves the adjective “other.” Those to whom it was to be given were described as “other” farmers. The Greek word is ἄλλος, not ἕτερος. If the kingdom were to be taken from Israel and given to a non-Israelite nation, one might expect the word ἕτερος.

b. ἔθνος “Nation”

The main lexical objection to the supersessionist interpretation, however, involves the use of the term ἔθνος and whether this could be a suitable term to describe the Church. The term is used in Matthew 21:43 in the singular. Of the 39 occurrences of the word ἔθνος in the Gospels, it is always a reference to the Gentiles when it is plural. However, when used in the singular (14 times), it nearly always refers to Israel (Matt. 21:43; Luke 7:5; 23:2; John 11:48, 50, 51, 52; 18:35). The only exception to this singular usage is in the grammatically singular expression, “nation will rise against nation” (Matt. 24:7; Mark 13:8; Luke 21:10) which involves a plural sense when understood as a phrase. It is nearly inconceivable that Jesus would have referred to the kingdom being given to any nation other than Israel. His use of the singular ἔθνος almost certainly means that the kingdom is to be given to national Israel, but it is a future generation of Israel that will produce the fruits of the kingdom when it experiences the fulfillment of the New

Covenant (Jer. 31:31-33). Outside the Gospels there are at least six other New Testament references where ἔθνος refers to Israel (Acts 10:22; 24:2, 10, 17; 26:4; 28:19).²⁴

Ἐθνος in 1 Peter 2:9. To turn this argument a different way, it might legitimately be questioned whether the term ἔθνος is a suitable term for the church. If it be countered that the term is so used in 1 Peter 2:9, there is a two-fold response: (1) It is not without significance that 1 Peter is specifically addressed to Hebrew Christians. The expression “holy nation” is part of a quote taken from Exodus 19:6 (23:22 LXX) which directly addresses the nation of Israel. The recipients of 1 Peter were the elect of diaspora Israel (1 Peter 1:1), not saved Gentiles. So the term was more aptly used of them than it would have been in an epistle addressed to a church comprised mostly of Gentile believers. (2) 1 Peter 2:9 is not saying that the church is that holy nation referred to in Exodus 19:6; rather, Peter is applying a principle; namely, that God’s people should be a holy people (as in 1:16). The focus is on holiness, not nationhood. In the context of Exodus the people referred to were in fact a nation. Whether or not Peter’s readers are a nation is somewhat beside the point. The point is that God’s people should be a holy people. The term ἔθνος is used, not as a reference to the church, but as a reference to national Israel.²⁵

Furthermore, to argue that the church is the nation that is now given the kingdom results in the absurdity that the church is no more successful in bearing the fruits of the kingdom than Israel ever was. This is seen nowhere more clearly than in Jesus’ letters to the seven churches of Asia in Revelation 2-3. Jesus’ condemnation of the church’s works is nearly as condemnatory as it was of the Scribes and Pharisees.²⁶ It would have been nearly impossible for Jesus’ hearers to understand his use of ἔθνος to refer to any nation other than Israel. As Peters put it:

*It is a logical sequence from the premises laid down. For, so long as one nation is chosen from among all others (Prop. 24), and the Kingdom is covenanted by oath to that nation (Prop. 49), it is impossible for other nations ... to be thus elected. It would be a violating of the most solemnly given covenants and assurances.*²⁷

The nation to whom the kingdom of God will be given is none other than Israel, regathered in the last days, regenerated under the New Covenant, and reconstituted as a theocracy under the Messiah’s rule.²⁸

MacArthur displays a mix of both non-supersessionist and supersessionist understanding of this verse. A non-supersessionist comment appears as follows: “... Israel will one day return to God and bear fruit for His kingdom. ‘God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew,’ Paul assured his fellow Jews. And when ‘the fullness of the Gentiles has come, ... all Israel will be saved....’” But then he adds the following supersessionist comment: “The nation, or people,

²⁴ See also Gen. 25:23 (LXX); Ex. 19:6 (23:22 LXX); Jos. *Ant.* 12, 6; 12, 135; Philo, *Decalogue*, 96.

²⁵ McClain, *Greatness of the Kingdom*, 296.

²⁶ I am indebted to Dr. David Olander in a private telephone conversation for this observation.

²⁷ Peters, *Theocratic Kingdom*, vol. 1, 392.

²⁸ John F. Walvoord, *Israel in Prophecy*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), 60.

who produce the fruit of the kingdom is the church, ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation....’²⁹

Gundry, who adopts a supersessionist interpretation, illustrates the predicaments one encounters when attempting to maintain the supersessionist view. Gundry encountered two contradictions that he could not reconcile. First, he believes that the nation (ἐθνεῖ) in view in verse 43 “refers to the church.”³⁰ He admits, on the one hand, that Matthew’s use of ἐθνεῖ comes from Daniel 2:44,

In the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed, and that kingdom will not be left for another people; it will crush and put an end to all these kingdoms, but it will itself endure forever.

But this presents a dilemma: “Daniel predicts that the kingdom will *not* be passed on to another people, or nation; Matthew writes that it *will* be transferred.”³¹ Gundry offers no solution for this apparent contradiction. But if Matthew’s nation is a future, repentant nation of Israel, the dilemma disappears.

3. Chronological Considerations

The other contradiction observed by Gundry involves a matter of timing:

On the one hand, the taking of the kingdom from the Jewish leaders and the fruit bearing of the church refer to the past and present. On the other hand, Matthew’s distinctive allusion to Jesus’ Parousia (“Therefore when the owner [‘Lord’] of the vineyard comes,” v 40) and the use of Daniel’s figures for the last judgment (v 44) point to the future.³²

Gundry can only reconcile this chronological conundrum by appealing to an “already and not yet” schema.³³ Gundry’s chronological problem disappears without having to resort to an “already and not yet” explanation when this verse is seen in the broader context of Matthew’s message. Peters observed in his Proposition 58, “Jesus, toward the close of His ministry, preached that the Kingdom was not nigh.”³⁴ In other words, if the nation to whom the kingdom was given was the future eschatological nation of Israel, transformed by the implementation of

²⁹ John MacArthur, Matthew 16-23, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), 299.

³⁰ Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 430.

³¹ *Ibid.* Emphasis his.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Peters, *Theocratic Kingdom*, vol. 1, 379. There is an extended discussion in Peters, *Theocratic Kingdom*, vol. 1, pp. 386-391, which is generally good, but he includes the church by virtue of its being grafted into Abraham’s seed. Yet, he sees the kingdom as future. So Peters actually ends up with an already not yet scenario, due to his misunderstanding of the olive tree metaphor.

the New Covenant, then there is no need to see any kind of a present kingdom fulfillment in the church.

Conclusion

At the first coming of Jesus there were actually many Jews who did respond positively to His message of forgiveness of sins. In addition to the twelve disciples, there were more than 500 believers even before His ascension who witnessed the resurrected Christ. Then there were the thousands of Jews who believed on the Day of Pentecost and the days following. But notably absent from the followers of Jesus were the leaders of Israel. The leaders proved to be false shepherds who might have led Israel into the green pastures of the kingdom. But because of their stubborn refusal to repent, the kingdom was taken from them until a future day when the entire nation would repent and produce the fruits of the kingdom. In the meantime, Christ is raising up His Church, a body distinct from national Israel, having no national distinction or characteristics. The Church is His bride, but not His elect nation. Unfortunately, throughout much of church history, Christians have conceptualized the church as a nation. The Byzantine Empire, the Holy Roman Empire, the “Christian Nations” of the Reformation era, all made the mistake of combining the sword with the Word. But the church has never been a nation and can in no way inherit the national promises that God made to Israel. Failure to acknowledge a clear distinction between Israel and the Church can only be sustained by adopting a less than literal hermeneutic. Furthermore, attempts to force the Church into some kind of a present-day realized (though spiritualized) kingdom ultimately results in a view of a God who is unfaithful to His promises at worst, and unclear about how He would fulfill His promises at best. Attempts to make the Church fulfill the role of the nation that would be given Israel’s kingdom must be weighed in the balances and found wanting. God will faithfully bring Israel into the New Covenant one day – perhaps soon – and give the kingdom to a nation producing its fruits.