

**FOLLOW ME: Discipleship**  
According to Saint Matthew

YOU HAVE ONE MASTER, THE CHRIST

Matthew 23:10

**FOLLOW ME:** Discipleship  
According to Saint Matthew

By MARTIN H. FRANZMANN

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## Preface

CHRISTIANS first called themselves, and were called, disciples. The term “Christian” occurs only three times in the New Testament and is in all three cases applied to members of the believing community by men indifferent or hostile to the Christ. The term “Christian,” good as it is and indispensable as it has become, is, historically considered, an accretion to the community gathered in the name of the risen Lord. “Disciple” is native to it. And the church today must know what discipleship means if she is to be the church and is to be perpetually renewed in her churchliness, if she is to know herself both in the divine glory given her and in the duty divinely laid upon her.

All four of our Gospels are records of discipleship. But it is the Gospel according to St. Matthew which spells out most incisively the meaning of discipleship and gives the clearest and completest record of the impact which the divine revelation given in Jesus made on the men who were the first recipients and became the vehicles of that revelation. In all the Gospels Jesus’ first Messianic act is the calling of disciples. In all, the story of Jesus’ ministry develops as the mounting opposition of Israel to Jesus on the one hand and the deepening fellowship between Jesus and His disciples on the other. In all the Gospels the culminating revelation, the appearance of the risen Lord, is a revelation given to the disciples. But the whole structure of St. Matthew’s Gospel is determined by the five discourses which are addressed primarily, if not exclusively, to disciples. And the climactic word of Jesus is, in Matthew: “Make disciples” (Matthew 28:19). In his Gospel the thought implicit in all the Gospels, the thought, namely, that the Son of God sought nothing and found nothing in this world except disciples, emerges with crystalline clarity.

But his Gospel remains the Gospel of Christ, the Gospel of the kingdom of heaven, for all that; and a study of discipleship in his Gospel cannot, if it remains true to Matthew’s intention, become a study of the pedagogy of Jesus or a study of good men who, under a great teacher, became great men. It will remain a study of the Christ. God is known by His works, and the Christ is known by the disciples whom He by His call creates, and by His communion with them shapes in His own image. It is my hope, therefore, that the readers of this book will consider it an invitation to reread St. Matthew; and it is my hope and prayer that this study may help them in some small measure to see afresh a book that has without exaggeration been called the most powerful book ever written and, above all, to behold in that inspired book the Christ who in it still says what He once said by the shore of the Sea of Galilee: “Follow Me!”

## **Acknowledgment**

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MATTHEW 4:18-22; 1:1—4:16

## I. The Calling of the Disciple

THERE is probably no balder piece of narrative in all literature than Matthew's account of the calling of the first four disciples (4:18-22); there is not an adjective in it, and only one adverb; and the style is so completely nondramatic that at least one scholar has spoken of its "casualness." But this sparse and lean simplicity of narrative is anything but an indication that the event here recorded is of minor or subordinate importance; for this same Matthew records the birth and the resurrection of Jesus in subordinate clauses and devotes to the act of the crucifixion a single participle. There are events so great that man dare not wrap them in his rawer breath, incidents so incisive in the history of God and man that the bare force of their having occurred blocks out rhetoric.

### *Jesus Takes the Initiative: The Call Is an Act of Grace*

The plain facts of the narrative are pregnant with revelation. Jesus takes the initiative and calls the disciples. In many respects the circle of disciples gathered about Jesus was no startling novelty in first-century Palestine: In the terminology of "rabbi" and "disciple," in the fact that they "followed" their Master, constantly attended Him, observed Him and served Him, respected and honored Him, this circle of disciples fitted naturally and unobtrusively into the given patterns of Judaism. But in this point, in the genesis of the circle of disciples, there is a striking difference. In rabbinical circles the initiative in discipleship lay with the disciple. "Take to yourself a teacher," is the advice given to the aspiring disciple by a Jewish teacher of pre-Christian times. We have no record of a call issued by a Jewish rabbi to a disciple in all rabbinic literature, a literature which otherwise offers many instructive parallels to the association between Jesus and the men who followed Him. What in Judaism was the pious duty of the disciple is here the sovereign act of the Master.

And this is a persistent trait in the record. Jesus is singularly brusque with enthusiastic volunteers. To the scribe who offers to follow Him wherever He may go, He responds with the sober and sobering word "the Son of man has nowhere to lay His head" (8:20). He dispels the pink mists of emotional impulse with the cool air of the realities of discipleship, with the chill fact that communion with Him means a career of self-expending ministry which reduces man to a level of comfort below that of bird and beast. But He who rejects so promising a candidate

as the schooled and skillful scribe coolly calls the tax collector from his place of business. He binds to Himself in discipleship the man whom not only scribe and Pharisee but also all pious and self-respecting Jews kept at an antiseptic distance (9:9) — when the tax collector gave a dinner, his guests were limited to his class and kind, men whom the judgment of the synagog had marked as “sinners” and segregated from the faithful (9:10,11). Jesus reserves the initiative for Himself: The question concerning the way to eternal life may come from the rich young man; the summons to discipleship comes from Jesus. (19:16-21)

One is reminded of the calling of the Old Testament prophets, whose successors the disciples of Jesus were to be (5:12). They were men to whom “the word of the LORD came,” without their volition, and often against their volition. We hear of men like Moses and Jeremiah who went into the prophetic office reluctantly and only after a struggle. They were too young, they said, or they were stammerers; or they simply ran away, like Jonah. To none of the prophets did the call come in response to self-preparation or mood-making. In the last analysis, the word that came to them simply overrode them and left them with no alternative but to obey. Amos the prophet once said that men no more choose to be prophets than they choose to be afraid when the lion roars:

The lion has roared;  
who will not fear?  
The LORD GOD has spoken;  
who can but prophesy? (Amos 3:8)

The calling of Paul to discipleship and apostolate, a calling so different in other ways from that of the first disciples that Paul calls himself an untimely birth (1 Cor. 15:8), is in this respect absolutely parallel to that of the men who were in Christ before him. The initiative was not his; he was to the last the blasphemer, persecutor, and insulter of Christ and His church. He speaks repeatedly of the *grace* of God which called him — indeed it was his calling which, historically, defined the grace of God for him and made that word a peculiarly Pauline word (Gal. 1:15-17; 1 Cor. 15:7-10; 1 Tim. 1:12-16; Eph. 3:2-8). The absolute initiative of God in establishing communion with man, that spontaneous free love of God which does not find but creates its lovable object, as Luther puts it, that bare intervention of a graciously superior and regnant will — this grace of God had been unforgettably spelled out for him in his call. He saw in his own call the classic prototype of all God’s gracious calling.

This mark of the sovereignly divine initiative was stamped upon the existence of the disciples from the first. They were not impelled to a decision by any of the human devices for bringing on a decision. They were not played upon, emotionally or psychologically, and snapped up in a moment of high enthusiasm or in a mood of desperation. They were simply called. Their call had about it the high sobriety of a deliberate divine act, and it set them free for a waking, conscious response. The words of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel could stand as caption over every story of the calling of disciples: “You did not choose Me, but I chose you.” (John 15:16)

### *No Stress on the Quality of the Person Called*

The call is Jesus’ sovereign act. And so there is no emphasis whatever, in Matthew’s account, on the qualifications of the persons called. There are no likely candidates for discipleship. All

that we learn of the first four who were called is that they were fishermen; and even that is no picturesque detail but is recorded to enable the reader to appreciate the metaphor with which Jesus described their future task: "I will make you fishers of men" (4:19). The list of the twelve apostles indicates that they were an oddly assorted lot of men, ranging, as regards religious convictions, from the tax collector, who had decided to take the cash of this world and let the credit of Israel's promise go, to the Zealot, who was willing to stake his life on the strength of God's promise to Israel, however blindly and mistakenly he did it (10:2-4). But the disciples are never really characterized very fully in the Gospels. Beyond a few obvious and dramatic traits, such as the volatility of Peter, we know next to nothing about them as personalities. People who write character sketches of disciples and apostles are to be admired for their enterprise; they do not have much to work with. The one thing that is certain about them all becomes clear from Jesus' reply to Peter when Peter asked, "How often shall I forgive?" In the parable of the Unforgiving Servant Jesus is treating Peter's case as normal and is making plain what the call meant for the disciple. This, Jesus says, is what happens when the kingdom of heaven reaches a man in the call — this establishes the rule of forgiveness between brother and brother. The normal, usual, characteristic thing about the called disciple is that he is like a forgiven debtor. The call has reached him in a situation of desperation and has meant release and restoration of a man whose whole existence was a lost and forfeited existence, an existence under inexorable judgment (18:21-35). That is the characteristic of the called disciple at his calling. It is no wonder that the word "call" came to be so loaded a term in the New Testament proclamation of the Christ: Paul speaks of *called* saints; and the New Testament knows no other kind.

### *The Call Demands Obedience and Renunciation*

Calling is really a divine act. God called Abraham; He called Israel—"Out of Egypt I called My son" (Hos. 11:1); God called Moses; God called the prophets. Jesus in calling men in this same decisive and exclusive sense is exercising a divine function and prerogative. And so His call, like the call of God, is an imperious confiscation, a laying-claim to man. The four who were first called were expected to obey, and they did obey, and that "immediately" and implicitly: "They followed Him." The word "follow" here begins to get the rich connotation of complete committal and unstinted devotion which it has in the New Testament (cf. Rev. 14:1-5). This obedience involved renunciation; the four left their boats, their nets, their fathers and their fathers' house. Matthew left his tax office as a matter of course (9:9), when Jesus called him. To the candidate for discipleship who wanted to go home and first bury his father Jesus made clear the rigor of the renunciation which He demanded by replying, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead" (8:22). The disciple in coming to Jesus was leaving the world of the dead and entering on life, and nothing was allowed to impede him in that movement. He was not permitted to do even that which filial piety claimed of him, a piety rooted in the Fourth Commandment and strongly felt in Judaism. There was denied him even that which was permitted for the common priest. He who was more than the temple claimed of His own the singleness of devotion which the Law demanded only of the High Priest: "He shall not go in to any dead body, nor defile himself, even for his father or his mother ... for the consecration of the anointing oil of his God is upon him: I am the LORD" (Lev. 21:11, 12). The disciple's devotion to Him who called was to be like that of the Nazarite, who was so completely separated and consecrated to God that

he did not go near a dead body all the days of his separation, “neither for his father nor for his mother, nor for brother or sister ... because his separation to God is upon his head.” (Num. 6:7)

But in this Jesus is evangelist, not legislator. His claim is the personal claim of grace, not the external pressure of law. This is seen clearly in the fact that He made no rule or pattern of renunciation. His claim overrode the claim of wife and family and home, but He founded no order of cloistered celibates. He asked that men be ready to cut off their right hands for His sake, but we hear nothing of an Order of Mutilated Martyrs. He asked that men renounce the sustaining comfort of the majority (7:13), but this does not mean that His followers become a sequestered sect. They go on a narrow way through the world into the Kingdom, but they do not leave the world.

By the same token the renunciation which Jesus demands does not degenerate into an ascetic exercise, into a sort of religious calisthenics on a par with the renunciations of self-centered religiosity. The renunciation which He claims is the renunciation of the man who “in his joy” sells all that he has in order to buy the one field which contains the unexampled treasure (13:44). This renunciation is mans turning to the kingdom of heaven drawn nigh. It is mans turning to the royally working grace of God which fills the hungry with good things, a turning so complete that it turns a mans back on everything else. The renunciation involved in the response to Jesus’ creative call is therefore no leap into the dark with eyes closed and teeth clenched. It is a leap into the arms of the Father who clothes the lilies and feeds the birds.

In other words, the call of Jesus in asking renunciation and making men capable of it creates faith in the disciple. Jesus is creating the little ones who believe in Him (18:6). And this faith is from the beginning marked and molded as a faith which works through love: “I will make you fishers of men” (4:19). That still lies in the future; but the signature of ministry, universal ministry to “men” without qualification or restriction, is upon their discipleship from the beginning. The line begins here and runs clearly through all the record of Jesus’ association with the disciples, to reach the goal in Jesus’ command to “make disciples of all nations” in Matthew’s last chapter. (28:19)

### *Jesus Calls to Himself Alone; He Alone Is the Basis of His Claim*

We can call this will created in the disciple nothing less than faith, faith in Jesus. For Jesus bases His claim to obedience, renunciation, and ministry on nothing but Himself. He calls to Himself, simply that: “Follow Me.” Incredible as it may seem, the records are unanimous on this point. The disciples who left the record of their call never assigned to it any basis but that of the person of Him who called them. Their relationship to Jesus was never a merely human master-disciple relationship. The record of their years with Jesus does not picture the gradual ripening of a human relationship into a religious one; it is the record of the deepening and enriching of a relationship which was from the beginning religious and was based solely on the person of Jesus. That person dominated the call and all that followed upon the call.

The usual rabbi-disciple relationship had its basis in something which transcended both rabbi and disciple: the Torah. It was respect for the rabbi’s knowledge of the Law, admiration for his skill in expounding the Law, and reverence for his devotion in fulfilling it that attracted the disciple to the rabbi and determined his relationship to his master. But in the case of Jesus

there is not a syllable in the records which indicates that anything beside or beyond Jesus Himself, anything detachable from His person, anything possessible apart from Him, ever determined the relationship of His disciples to Him. This is confirmed by three traits in the New Testament witness to Jesus. For one thing, it is notable that Jesus never permits admiration of Himself as a teacher: The rich young man in Matthew (19:17) and both Nicodemus and the Jews in John (John 3:1 ff.; 7:14-17) receive curt and deprecatory replies when they express admiration for the Teacher. For another, the behavior of the disciples at the death of Jesus is eloquent testimony on this point. None of them takes comfort in the fact that the legacy of Jesus' teaching, at least, is left them; having lost Jesus, they have lost all. And thirdly, the nature of the apostolic witness to Jesus is significant. The disciples preserved the record of Jesus' words and deeds, of course. But they do not appear in history as expositors of Jesus' words; it is remarkable how rarely Jesus' words are cited in the apostolic writings. They are His witnesses, witnesses to His person and His history, His words and works in indissoluble unity. Jesus calls to Himself; His disciples were summoned to Him alone and to Him wholly. He gave Himself to them wholly; they believed Him wholly and their words, under the afflatus of the Spirit whom He sent, transmitted Him wholly to the church.

### *Who Calls, Rabbi or Messiah?*

The very baldness of the narrative in Matthew attests the fact that nothing less than the imperiously royal grace of God was in that call; the complete absence of every motivation except the call itself witnesses to that. The call of the disciple is the first item under the heading: "The kingdom of heaven is at hand" (4:17). And the narrative with which Matthew prefaces that programmatic utterance of Jesus answers the question, "Who calls, rabbi or Messiah?" quite unambiguously. Matthew by his record of Jesus' beginnings in his first four chapters has expressed the same conviction that Paul expressed concerning his own call in the Epistle to the Galatians: "When He who had set me apart before I was born and had called me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son to me" (Gal. 1:15,16) — the conviction that it was the eternal counsels of God which brought His Son into the lives of Peter and Andrew, James and John, and Matthew too, and transfigured those lives. Matthew defines the Caller, not by abstract disquisition but in characteristically Biblical fashion by a recital of the deeds of God which led up to the call. By the genealogy of Jesus and the series of seven events, all of them fulfillments of Scripture, he interprets the calling of the four men by the Sea of Galilee as the first impetus of God's last motion towards the goal of all His gracious governance of history — the ingathering of a redeemed and glorified people of God.

### *He Who Calls, the Goal and Fulfillment of Israel's History: The Genealogy*

The form which Matthew's recital first takes, that of a table of the ancestors of Jesus, is strange to us and repellent to modern taste (one modern translator has practically omitted it in his rendering of Matthew). Matthew wrote, of course, for a church in which the history of Israel was a vibrantly living tradition, a church for which the Old Testament was the very air it breathed. He wrote for men to whom Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were near neighbors. Writing

for such men, he could hardly have found a more economical and more telling means of placing before his readers the indispensable background of the story he had to tell than the clipped recital of the genealogy (1:1-17). For Matthew is telling the story of Jesus the “Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham” (1:1). This Jesus is the Goal and Fulfillment of that history which began when God called Abraham to be the first of a chosen and separated people of God, the people through whom God’s redemptive purpose for all mankind was to be realized (Gen. 18:18). Jesus is the Fulfillment of the promise given to David (and kept alive and enriched by a succession of prophets) of a reign of God incarnate, a reign by His Anointed King from the house of David, a reign destined to restore the paradisaal world which man’s sin had marred. (Is. 11:1-10)

That history moved on sure and measured paths of providence; that is the meaning of the symmetry of numbers in the genealogy, the 3×14 generations; it moves from Abraham to the splendor of David’s reign, from that high point to the deportation of God’s people to Babylon, and thence to a man no one had ever heard of, Joseph, whose sole distinction is, again, that he is the husband of an equally obscure Mary. Even so much is enough to reveal that the ways of God in history have been strange and wondrous ways, that the God of Israel and Israel’s Savior is a God “who hides Himself” (Is. 45:15). His sovereign lordship of history is no transparently obvious fact; it is not documented in a rectilinear development of forces present in history toward a predictable goal. His people does not produce the Christ as the triumphant climax to a brilliant history. His people is made to pass through the fires of national humiliation and through divine judgment upon its sins. The house of David is reduced to insignificance and obscurity; the royal tree of Jesse is cut down to a stump before the promise made to David is fulfilled. When the sin of Israel has made the coming of the mighty Anointed King impossible, then the Christ comes, solely as God’s gift, purely as God’s gracious intervention, not as Israel’s contribution to the weal of mankind.

What is plain from the very structure of Israel’s history as the genealogy schematically presents it is underscored by the presence of the four women in the genealogy — Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and the wife of Uriah (1:3, 5, 6). The presence of women is in itself singular enough; they were rarely included in Jewish genealogies. But more striking still is the kind of women here included. These are not the renowned four of Judaism, the celebrated mothers of the race, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah. Here are four, but four of quite another kind. Three of them certainly, perhaps all of them, are not even born Israelites. They came by curious ways into the people of God and into the Messianic line. And they are anything but paragons of virtue; incest, harlotry, and adultery mark the careers of three of them. They appear, moreover, at key points in Israel’s history: Tamar beside Judah, the head of the tribe of the promise; Rahab at the entry into the promised land; Ruth in the history of the house of the Anointed King; and the wife of Uriah (Matthew very pointedly calls her that) beside King David, as the mother of Solomon. They are firmly enmeshed in the history of God’s chosen people, and their presence speaks eloquently of the fact that this history is not the story of man’s glory but of God’s grace. It proclaims the fact that this grace is wholly independent of the potentialities of man. The God of Israel, the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, is the God who “chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing the things that are” (ICor. 1:28). When Israel’s kingdom has fallen under God’s judgment, then God’s royal reign can arise.

### *The First Fulfillment of Prophecy: Emmanuel, 1:18-25*

The Jesus who calls is thus firmly anchored in the history of His people; but it is history conceived of as the dress wherein the sovereign Creator God clothes Himself in order to reveal Himself. Every step of Jesus' way, even the first, is therefore marked as being under the guidance and governance of God. His coming is the creative act of God whereby He fulfills His promises — in history, to be sure, but by a more than historical intervention in the course of history. Jesus is the Son of David, born to Joseph, the son of Jacob. But He is therefore no less the Son of God, in whom God gave to Joseph and to mankind what mankind cannot give itself, what history cannot produce. His birth signifies the fulfillment of the promise given through the prophet Isaiah; it signifies "Emmanuel, God with us" (Is. 7:14; Matt. 1:23). And God comes to be with man, not when a religious genius or a series of religious geniuses give man a clearer and nobler conception of God but when God acts, in inexplicable mercy to unite Himself with man. Jesus therefore enters history as the Son of a mother who is "with child of the Holy Spirit" (1:18). "Spirit" marks the living, dynamic presence of God, His creative interposition in history — here as of old in the story of creation, as in prophecy, as in the divine inspiration of the strong deliverers of Israel. So it is that God Himself gives the Child His significant name, Jesus, "for He will save His people from their sins" (1:21). In Him the faithful God of the covenant, the LORD (whose name is a component of the Hebrew name which we use in its Hellenized form, Jesus), is present to deliver His people; and this deliverance is the radical deliverance from sin. Jesus' name is the crystallization of the psalmist's words:

O Israel, hope in the LORD!  
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,  
and with Him is plenteous redemption.  
And He will redeem Israel  
from all his iniquities. (Ps. 130:7, 8)

The strictly divine character of this intervention in history is marked, further, by the fact that it cuts athwart the normal thinking of man, even of pious man. Joseph, the son of David, just man though he be, has no eyes for the working of God. His objections must be overcome; the son of David must be compelled to accept the gift God gives to David's house (1:19-25). God's ways surprise man and humble him. The disciples who recorded this act of Joseph did so in the consciousness that they, too, had been graciously overpowered. They had not left their trades and their homes at the stirring of their nobler impulses but by the intervening will of God.

### *The Second Fulfillment: Born in Bethlehem, 2:1-12*

Jesus is Messiah, Son of David; as such He is destined to be born in David's city, Bethlehem. This too comes to pass (2:1-12); and the fulfillment of prophecy is attested in a strangely contradictory way. Israel's alien Idumean king, Herod the Great, is prompted by the inquiry of Gentile stargazers and his own fears of a threatening Messianic movement to elicit the prophecy from the scribes, the stewards of God's Word to Israel. It is they who, perfunctorily enough, become the spokesmen of God to proclaim His fulfillment of His promise:

And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for from you shall come a ruler  
who will govern My people Israel. (2:6; Micah 5:2)

Only Gentiles sought out the King of Israel; and they were by no means the splendid and colorful train that Christian tradition and sacred art have since made of them. They were not kings according to the record of Matthew, for all the richness of their gifts. And the King they came to was King only to the eyes of faith. The line of David lived on in utter obscurity, and the King was indeed a shoot from the stump of Jesse (Is. 11:1). And yet, and just in this way, God was carrying out His purposes, carrying them out in such a way that the history of the Messiah's infancy became prophetic for the whole history of His mission. The story of the Magi is both the fulfillment of prophecy and itself a prophecy. Israel remains indifferent to her King and rejects Him; the good news of His reign goes to the Gentiles.

### *The Third Fulfillment: The Son Called Out of Egypt, 2:13-15*

“Out of Egypt have I called My son” (2:15; Hosea 11:1). God's governing hand is manifest in the history of the Messianic Child. The Gentiles who sought out the King born to be the Light of the nations, God led safely home again. He thus thwarted the purposes of the earthly king who sought to use them and the revelation given to them to secure himself in his kingship. God will not be so exploited. God removed the Child to Egypt when His life was threatened by the suspicious king. Once Israel had gone down to Egypt, in a history determined by the guilt of the patriarchs, and had to all seeming been buried there, lost to the mission in the world which God's promise had assigned to her. God's comprehensive governance of history had used that guilt and that history for His own gracious ends, and He had in His love recalled His “first-born” from the land of Egypt (Hos. 11:1). So now the guilt of God's people had banished to Egypt Him who was the compendium of the people of God, the inclusive representative of Israel, *the* Descendant of Abraham. The overruling providence of God used that history, too, to reveal God's Son as the one in whom His will and intention to have a people in communion with Himself was to be finally and fully realized. The words on the calling love of God which Hosea had spoken as a reproach to an ingrate and apostate people are on the pages of the evangelist a bright promise and benediction for all who come to sonship by the Son, for the true Israel of God. (cf. Gal. 6:16)

### *The Fourth Fulfillment: Rachel Weeping, 2:16-18*

The history of Israel had been a history for lamentation; and tears fell now. When Israel went into captivity, the prophet Jeremiah heard the mother of the race weeping from her grave:

A voice is heard in Ramah,  
lamentation and bitter weeping.  
Rachel is weeping for her children. (Jer. 31:15)

Rachel wept then; Matthew heard her weep again (2:18), now at the climax of that long and somber history of guilt and judgment which is the history of Israel. She weeps now when she sees how once again the purposes of God collide with the sinful rebellion of man and God's saving intent, pregnant with peace, becomes the occasion of the inconsolable sorrow of the mothers of Bethlehem whose children Herod slew.

But those words of sorrow from Jeremiah would have for Matthew's readers an overtone of hope; they would remember how the word of the LORD continued:

Keep your voice from weeping,  
and your eyes from tears....  
There is hope for your future. (Jer. 31:16,17)

They would remember the pathos of the LORD'S yearning for His "darling child" Ephraim, even in His wrath. They would recall the bright promise for the days to come, when the LORD would make a new and better covenant with a people whom He Himself had renewed by forgiving their iniquity and remembering their sins no more (Jer. 31:20, 31-34), and Israel's history would no longer be a history for tears.

#### *The Fifth Fulfillment: Called a Nazarene, 2:19-23*

Rachel weeps, and the cessation of her tears is not yet. The Messiah lives on in the obscurity of little Galilean Nazareth, and the fulfillment of the hope which shall put an end to all weeping, the coming of the new covenant, seems as remote as ever. But Matthew sees in this, too, the fulfillment of prophecy. The obscurity of the Messiah is under the governance of God. Which Old Testament prophecy is meant remains obscure for us; some link of thought which Matthew could assume for his first readers has apparently been lost to us. But the main point is certain; for the faith of Matthew it was no accident that Jesus was called "Nazarene." (2:19-23)

#### *The Sixth Fulfillment: The Voice in the Wilderness, 3:1-12*

But at last the obscurity is ended, and the silence is broken. A voice is heard crying in the wilderness, again in fulfillment of prophecy. For of John the Baptist it is said: "This is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said,

The voice of one crying in the wilderness:  
Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make His paths straight" (3:3; Isaiah 40:3)

Many titles are applied to John in the New Testament: Prophet and more than a prophet, Messenger, Elijah, Baptist, Witness. But none describes him better than the word from Isaiah, the Voice. For John lives and dies solely intent upon the task given him to do. The man John is expended in his office; the crier is consumed in his cry.

## *Johns Proclamation: The Kingdom at Hand*

That cry stirred all Israel; and well it might. For John spoke of the drawing near of the kingdom of heaven; which meant, since for Johns contemporaries and countrymen “heaven” was one of a number of reverential periphrases for the name of God, that the reign of God was near at hand. He spoke of the near advent of God the King. “Kingdom of heaven” stirred a thousand memories in every pious Jew and roused a mighty hope. John did not explain to his contemporaries what the “kingdom of heaven” was or tell them that there was a “kingdom of heaven.” No good Jew needed to be told what the kingdom of heaven was. His Old Testament told him that on every page; it meant: “Thy God reigneth!”

When John’s contemporaries heard “kingdom of heaven,” they would recall the God of creation and the Lord of history as the Old Testament proclaimed Him. Psalm 29, for example, celebrates Him as the Lord of all, whose voice shakes and shatters the world in the glory of its might, a might which is to those who believe in Him the signature of His Godhead, so that in God’s temple all cry out, “Glory!” (Ps. 29:9). The awed obeisance of the psalm culminates in the declaration and acknowledgment of God’s kingship:

The LORD sits enthroned over the flood;  
The LORD sits enthroned as King forever. (Ps. 29:10)

The word here used for flood is the word which the Old Testament reserves for *the* Flood, the Deluge of Genesis 7, and the parallelism of the Hebrew poetry signifies: God’s glory and God’s kingship remain untouched by even the mightiest catastrophes on earth. As He sat exalted over the Flood when mankind perished and the world seemed lost, so He now sits exalted above the forces of chaos and shall so sit forever. He is King without restriction or limitation, independent of space and time. And this is not a piece of theology to be abstractly considered; this is the content of men’s faith and is in the texture of their prayers, as the conclusion of the psalm shows:

May the LORD give strength to His people!  
May the LORD bless His people with peace! (Ps. 29:11)

He, the God of undisputed power and tremendous majesty, is the source of strength and the sure ground of hope for His people. The people of God therefore hail Him who is King above all gods as the Rock of their salvation and come into His presence with thanksgiving (Ps. 95:1-3). And the prophet comforts and reassures the people of God with these words:

The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst;  
You shall fear evil no more. (Zeph. 3:15)

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of this King (Zeph. 3:5), but the power which makes His wrath and judgment inescapable also makes His love the pledge of sure salvation: “He will renew you in His love.” (Zeph. 3:17)

The God revealed in the Old Testament is primarily King of Israel; but God’s kingship over Israel does not make Him King only of Israel. He remains Lord of all creation: “The earth is the LORD’S and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein” (Ps. 24:1); and He is

Lord of all history: “The Most High rules the kingdoms of men” (Dan. 4:25). The mightiest kings on earth do His service; the king of Assyria is His judgmental razor (Is. 7:20), the rod of His anger, the staff of His fury (Is. 10:5). God is the First and the Last; He shall have the last word in history, as He had the first word in Creation.

The Kingdom comes, according to the proclamation of John the Baptist, in the person of a Mightier One who follows John upon the stage of history and is in the midst of the people of Palestine (3:11,12). This, too, has its roots in the Old Testament, in the relationship between the kingship of God and that of the human kings of Israel there depicted. God’s sole kingship over Israel excluded any thought of a human king apart from God the King; it made impossible the thought of a human king whose kingship should in any way call into question or obscure the sovereignty of God the King. When the men of Israel asked their deliverer Gideon to rule over them and establish a dynasty, Gideon replied, with a genuinely religious Kingdom-conviction: “I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the LORD will rule over you” (Judg. 8:23). And when the elders of Israel asked Samuel to appoint for them a king to govern them “like all the nations” (1 Sam. 8:5), there lived in that request an apostasy from the Israelite faith in God the King. They wanted, not an unseen LORD of hosts but a visible and substantial king to go before them and to fight their battles (1 Sam. 8:19, 20). The LORD Himself branded this request as rebellion against Himself: “They have rejected Me from being King over them” (1 Sam. 8:7). But God’s counsels had ordained kings for Israel from the beginning, as His promises to Abraham and His blessing upon Jacob show (Gen. 17:6; Gen. 35:11). And the grace of God overruled the sin of His people here, too, in their apostasy. The king whom they have chosen is still the king whom the LORD has set over them (1 Sam. 12:13); and this theocratic impress set upon Israel’s royalty at its beginning remained the characteristic token of kingship in Israel, however much all the sins of king and people might again and again contradict and obscure it. The throne of David remains in Israel’s faith what the chronicler called it, “the throne of the kingdom of the LORD over Israel” (1 Chron. 28:5). The kingship of the descendants of David remains the “kingdom of the LORD in the hand of the sons of David” (2 Chron. 13:8). The rule and dominion of the anointed king whom God has set upon the throne remains God’s rule. The reign of God has made a visible beginning on earth. His kingship is no longer merely a reign over the history of men and nations; it is in the midst of the history of men and nations; it has, in a sense, become incarnate.

“The kingdom of the LORD in the hand of the sons of David” (2 Chron. 13:8), a kingship limited to a corner of the world and marred and thwarted by the tragic failure of His anointed kings, is not and cannot be the ultimate kingship of God in human history. The Davidic kingship is but a preliminary and partial incarnation of it, a standard set up on the field of history marking God’s claim to the whole field. It points beyond itself to a greater and complete realization. And Israel’s prophets continue to point Israel beyond the judgment of God upon Israel’s failure and apostasy to the ultimate and universal establishment of His reign over all nations in all the earth forever. One or two utterances may serve as representative of the voices of many:

It shall come to pass in the latter days  
that the mountain of the house of the LORD  
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,  
and shall be raised up above the hills;

and peoples shall flow to it,  
 and many nations shall come, and say:  
 “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,  
 to the house of the God of Jacob;  
 that He may teach us His ways  
 and we may walk in His paths.”  
 For out of Zion shall go forth the Law,  
 and the Word of the LORD from Jerusalem.  
 He shall judge between many peoples,  
 and shall decide for strong nations afar off;  
 and 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 any more;  
 But they shall sit every man under his vine and under  
     his fig tree,  
 and none shall make them afraid;  
 for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken....  
 In that day, says the LORD,  
 I will assemble the lame  
 And gather those who have been driven away,  
 And those whom I have afflicted;  
 and the lame I will make the remnant;  
 and those who were cast off, a strong nation;  
*and the LORD will reign over them in Mount Zion  
 from this time forth and for evermore.* (Micah 4:1-4,6,7)

God shall be King! Through judgment and redemptive restoration His reign shall be universally established and universally acknowledged. “The LORD will become King over all the earth; on that day the LORD will be one”—all competing claims will have been forever silenced — “and His name one”: His name alone, His revelation of Himself in judgment and mercy, will claim all men’s faith and will shape all men’s worship (Zech. 14:9). All that the church has since learned to pray for in the first three petitions of the Lord’s Prayer will be realized: His name will be hallowed, His will done, and thereby His kingdom shall come.

In all this God’s Yea to His anointed king on earth is not withdrawn; the promise made to David is not annulled. The LORD will yet make David a house, set up his seed after him, and establish his kingdom and throne forever (2 Sam. 7:11, 12,16). The hope of David, founded on the covenant “ordered in all things and secure” which God had made with him, shall not be put to shame. David shall yet see the Righteous Ruler rising out of his house “like the morning light, like the sun shining forth upon a cloudless morning, like rain that makes grass to sprout from the earth” (2 Sam. 23:3-5). The prophet Micah, who speaks of the universal reign of God “in the latter days,” goes on to link that universal reign with the coming of “the former dominion” (that is, the Davidic kingship) to Zion:

And you, O tower of the flock,

hill of the daughter of Zion,  
to you shall it come,  
the former dominion shall come,  
the kingdom of the daughter of Jerusalem. (Micah 4:8)

The promised reign of God will be a reign incarnate, enmeshed in history, tied directly to the world of men and events. A persistent strain of prophecy keeps alive the hope of the Coming King, under various figures and in a prodigal variety of imagery. But one motif unites all the figures and is common to all the imagery, whether the Coming One is explicitly linked with the kingdom of God or not: God will in the latter days establish His reign, and that in and through One whom He raises up in history for a mission and a ministry in history. Whether He be called David, or Immanuel, or Child (with wondrous titles which reveal the benediction of His reign — “Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace”), or “Shoot from the stump of Jesse” (that is, offspring of the judged and ruined house of David), or Ruler from little Bethlehem Ephrathah who shall be great to the ends of the earth, or Righteous Branch raised up for David (whose name spells salvation: “The LORD is our righteousness”), or David the Shepherd of the gathered flock of God, or the Meek King who speaks peace to the nations, or Son of man, or Servant of the LORD — always the hope that God’s ultimate reign will be established and that God’s new and better order will prevail is linked with the person and the work of the One who is to come in history.

The various and resplendent colors in which the reign of the Coming One are pictured have this in common also: they all point up the fact that the kingdom which God is to establish in and through the Coming One breaks the limits of the merely historical. It transcends anything which men might expect from the normal course of historical development. The kingdom of God is not the development of forces latent in mankind and mankind’s history. It comes by way of a radical break with the merely historical, by a direct intervention of God in history, an irruption of the divinely more than historical into the world of history. What the prophetic vision implied, Israel’s own history spelled out unmistakably. The Captivity and the piteously fragmentary character of the Restoration wiped out every hope of any merely political, mundane restoration of the Davidic kingdom. Men’s ears were therefore attuned by their history to prophecies such as the second chapter of Daniel, which made plain that the Kingdom would come solely by a sovereign act of God. The dream of the king as interpreted by Daniel sets the imposing colossus of the world empires over against the kingdom of God. The mighty figure of gold and silver and bronze and iron and clay is struck by a stone and is broken to pieces and becomes like the chaff of the summer threshing floor; and the wind carries it away, so that no trace of it remains; while the stone becomes a great mountain and fills the whole earth. (Dan. 2:31-45)

It is “a stone cut out by no human hand” (Dan. 2:34) which puts an end to all human greatness and all human dominion and thus clears the way for the coming of the sole and unclouded reign of God. The God who in this age acts through the agency of men, who executes His wrath with the Assyrian as His rod (Is. 10:5) and employs a Cyrus as shepherd to His people (Is. 44:28), will in the last days establish His reign by an act of His own hand. There shall come into the world that which is not of this world (John 18:36), something which no longer fits into the framework and the categories of normal human history. There shall be an act “by no human hand,” beyond human capacities and beyond human grasp. The Kingdom to

come is absolutely transcendent, not a development from below but an intervention from above. And as such it shall be universal in its workings; the stone becomes a mountain which fills the whole earth. God shall reign supreme and alone.

That stone is, compared with the colossus of the world's powers, not an impressive entity. It is only a stone; not a single adjective of splendor graces it. When God Himself acts, He acts by contraries. He chooses the things which are base, despised, the things which are nothing in this world, in order to confound the things that are. He chose the least of all people to be the bearers of His promise and the vehicles of His regnant grace. And the history of that people culminates in insignificance: A child is born in a stable; a sower goes out to sow, and the seed grows silently — and that is the beginning of the kingdom of God, the beginning and the guarantee of the new world of God. The kingdom of God is in its beginnings like the Servant of God; it has no form or comeliness to commend it.

In proclaiming the kingdom of heaven John was attaching to a thought which was for his contemporaries a living one. Men of Israel in John's time spoke of "taking the yoke of the Kingdom," that is, of acknowledging God as their King, their sole Lord and God. A convert to Judaism was said "to take upon himself the yoke of the Kingdom" at his conversion; that is, he accepted and confessed the divine King of Israel as his King. Even the recitation of the Judaic creed, the Shema: "Hear, O Israel; the LORD our God is one LORD" (Deut. 6:4), was called "taking upon oneself the yoke of the Kingdom." And men of John's day prayed that the Kingdom might become manifest. The fact that men could still either "take the yoke of the Kingdom" or "cast it from them" was evidence enough that it had not yet been manifested; for once it appeared, all men would have to acknowledge the King. For the Jews of John's day the thought of the Kingdom was a personal thought and a religious one, a thought not so much encrusted with ideas of national prerogative and materialistic desires as the thought of the Messiah. In the thought of the Kingdom their more purely religious hope found its expression.

But "thought" is too pale a term for all that lay in the word "kingdom of heaven." When John spoke of the kingdom of heaven, he evoked living and dynamic echoes in the hearts of his countrymen. They would think, in terms of the Old Testament, of God as the Creator of the universe and its King, the LORD of all history, the God who was peculiarly the King of His chosen people, the God whose royal reign had found a preliminary, partial, and predictive incarnation in the reign of the Davidic kings, the God whose ultimate and triumphant self-assertion prophet after prophet had foretold. They would think of Him as laying bare His holy and puissant arm for the last time in history, to lead all history to its conclusion and goal, to triumph forever in judgment over all the powers of evil, and to lead His own safely home for a life of unbroken communion with Himself.

### *John's Proclamation: The Coming of the Mightier One: Wrath*

John was renewing the voice of prophecy when he spoke of the Kingdom. But he spoke of it as "at hand" — at hand, moreover, in the person of a Mightier One who was to follow him on earth, in history. Both in his announcement of the near advent of the Kingdom and in his witness to the Mightier One, John's first act was to shatter Judaic complacency by the proclamation of the wrath of God. He was a latter-day Amos, who had to do once more for his generation what Amos had done for his. The popular hope of Amos' contemporaries looked to the arrival of the Day of the LORD, the Day when He would assert His kingship and reign, as