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Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

Jonathan T. Pennington is an Associate Professor of New Testament Interpretation at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew* (hereafter *H&E*) is the revised version of his 2005 University of St. Andrews doctoral thesis written under the supervision of Richard Bauckham and Philip Esler. This volume was originally published in 2007 by Brill in the Novum Testamentum Supplement Series but has since been reprinted by Baker Academic (2009) in a more affordable paperback version.

In a 2008 *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* book review Andreas Köstenberger commented on something that he thought “may be inevitable in dissertations: a certain captivity to the constraints of such a work, which perhaps makes it unrealistic to expect a seminal contribution from someone seeking to earn a terminal degree in a given field of study.”¹ I found myself troubled upon my initial reading of those words; I was naively under the impression that all dissertations were supposed to make seminal contributions to their particular field and I had wrongly assumed from reading phrases like “original research” and “unique contribution” that doctoral candidates were expected to move their fields forward by producing something new, innovative, and fresh. Dozens of dissertations later I now know that this is not the case, but that’s what makes Pennington’s *H&E* so exciting, his work *is* seminal!

¹ Andreas J. Köstenberger, review of Edward W. Klink III, *The Sheep of the Fold: The Audience and Origin of the Gospel of John*, *JETS* 51 (2008), 656.

H&E is divided into two parts. The first part “Clearing Ground and Building Anew” contains four chapters, the first of which finds Pennington exposing the bankruptcy of Gustaf Dalman’s thesis (which has been followed by the majority of Matthean scholars since) that that Matthew’s use of “heaven” in the phrase “kingdom of heaven” where the other Synoptists have “kingdom of God” is some sort of “reverential circumlocution.” From here Pennington moves on to survey heaven language in the OT and various Second Temple texts (chapter 2) as well as Matthew’s Gospel (chapter 3) where he notes Matthew’s basic continuity with the Jewish literature that preceded him but observes four unique features of Matthew’s heaven language: “(1) a preference for the plural *οὐρανοί*; (2) frequent use of the heaven and earth pair; (3) use of the phrases, Father in heaven and heavenly Father; and (4) the repeated expression, kingdom of heaven.” (76, cf. 340) Part one is concluded with a chapter where Matthew’s theological “hot spots” (seven in all: [1] Matthew’s *Sitz im Leben*; [2] Christology; [3] Kingdom; [4] The Fatherhood of God; [5] Fulfillment of the Old Testament/Old Covenant; [6] The New People of God and Ecclesiology; [7] Eschatology and Apocalyptic) are briefly reviewed in light of the heaven and earth theme.

The second part “Matthew’s Idiolectic Use of Heaven Language and the Theme of Heaven and Earth” consists of eight chapters that examine the four unique features of Matthew’s heaven language noted in chapter 3 through literature surveys of the OT, Second Temple texts, and Matthew’s Gospel. Chapters 5 & 6 survey *οὐρανός* and *οὐρανοί* in the OT, Second Temple texts, and Matthew’s Gospel concluding that Matthew uses *οὐρανοί* in order to distinguish the divine realm from the created realm (*οὐρανός*). Chapters 7 & 8 survey the “heaven and earth” pair showing a fundamentally bipartite cosmological [*Weltbild*] and theological [*Weltanschauung*] worldview in the OT and Second Temple literature that Matthew emphasizes in contrastive and tensive ways in order to highlight the “oppositional duality” between God and humanity. Chapters 9 & 10 show that while the concept of God as Father is not absent from the OT and Second Temple literature, it’s emphasized in Matthew, where he contrasts God as “heavenly Father” or “Father in heaven” as opposed to earthly fathers who are always cast in negative light. Chapters 11 & 12 look to Daniel 2-7 as the foundation for Matthew’s unique phrase “kingdom of heaven,” which denotes a divine kingdom that stands over and against the various kingdoms of the earth and will eventually replace them in the eschaton.

A concluding chapter summarizes the findings and arguments presented throughout the book before highlighting the various functions of Matthew’s heaven and earth theme throughout his Gospel, to wit, it “emphasizes the universality of God’s dominion” (343), “make[s] a biblical-theological connection with the Old Testament” (344), “serves to strengthen the Christological claims of the Gospel” (345), “undergird[s] the radical nature of the ethics and teachings of Jesus” (346), and “legitimate[s] and encourage[s] Matthew’s readers that they are the true people of God.” (347) An appendix containing “Data from a Synoptic Comparison of *οὐρανός*,” a detailed bibliography, ancient text index, and modern author index complete this volume.

It's difficult, if not impossible, to offer critical remarks about this volume. To start, there's nothing to compare it to, that is, Pennington has offered the most comprehensive and exhaustive survey of heaven language and the heaven and earth theme to date. Not only does he show an impressive familiarity with the primary texts (mind you, these texts span centuries and at least three languages), but also with a wide spectrum of secondary sources. There is simply nothing in print that attains to such heights; from here on out scholars will have to rise to the standard that Pennington has set. Secondly, Pennington writes extremely well, which isn't true of most people who publish a dissertation. This is the first dissertation I've read where I haven't been bored to tears by the literature survey, and it contains ten chapters of literature survey! Finally, in addition to these positive features, Pennington's case is compelling in its own right. I can't imagine that Matthean scholars will be able to read Matthew in the same way after engaging this volume. Pennington has truly put in the work to move the field of Matthean studies forward in a fruitful and productive way and it is with these glowing remarks that I recommend Pennington's work to NT students the world over.