

# Dispensational Features in the Gospel of Matthew

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All of the Gospel accounts are compatible with a dispensational biblical theology. At the same time, each account has a distinctive emphasis. If the relationship between Israel and the church distinguishes between expressions of dispensationalism,<sup>2</sup> then Matthew and Luke reflect that distinction.

Matthew features a stated distinction between the two. Jesus' historic ministry was addressed to the house of Israel (10:6, 15:24). The church is introduced after that generation of Israel had rejected Jesus as the Son of David (12:23-42) and the disciples had confessed that the Son of Man is "the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (16:16). Although Israel reached into the past as the genealogy had indicated (1:1-17), the church would be built in the future. It would be built on the truth Peter confessed on behalf of the disciples. It was the truth revealed to the disciples about who Jesus is (16:17, 18). After Jesus' resurrection, he commanded the disciples to make disciples in the church based on the truths taught in the Gospel account addressed to them (28:16-20).

Luke features a continuity reflected in the remnant of believers in the Gospel account and Acts. Jesus was born in the midst of a believing remnant (1, 2). In Galilee a remnant of disciples were chosen (5:1-6:16), and this remnant then joined Jesus in the journey to Jerusalem (9:51). They shared in the journey as Jesus traveled to seek and to save the lost (15:1-32; 19:10). The remnant of believers who had come to Jerusalem

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<sup>2</sup> This distinction is more sharply expressed in the comparison between a dispensational and covenant theology.

became the remnant from with whom the church was born (Acts 1:1-2:46). “Those who believed were added to them” (Acts 2:47; 4:4; 23-37, etc.). Acts recorded the journey from Jerusalem where the church was founded (8:3) to Antioch, to Asia Minor, and to Europe. At Antioch the gospel began to be spoken to Hellenists (11:20), who, when they believed, were added to the Lord (11:24) and were called Christians (11:26). From that sending church, the Gospel spread into the Gentile world through Paul and the remnant of missionaries. So while Matthew features the distinction between Israel and the church, Luke-Acts features the continuity between Israel and the church.

πληρω is the key term in Matthew’s interpretation of the first advent of Jesus Christ. From the perspective of exposition, it features the completion of what God began in Israel’s history under Moses and the prophets. From the perspective of biblical theology, it featured the fulfillment of the dispensation of law.

As the texts are read from the perspective of speech-act understanding of language, God made commitments to Israel that remained unrealized in the closing of the Old Testament. In addition, Israel made commitments to God’s demands under law, which remained unmet. Further, during the times of the Gentiles, Israel’s experience under Gentile rule, introduced when the people of God went into captivity, remained to be resolved.

Matthew, in formula quotations, editorially commented on ten references to the Old Testament.<sup>3</sup> Although there are OT parallels, Matthew’s formula is a development of the early Christian use of πληρω to indicate OT texts as fulfilled in the story of Jesus. As Davies and Allison note, “Neither the Dead Sea Scrolls nor rabbinic writings offer true parallels.”<sup>4</sup> When the synoptic Gospels are compared, eight quotations “are not cited in the New Testament outside his Gospel.”<sup>5</sup>

In addition, Matthew quotes Jesus’ use of πληρω (5:17). According to Heinrich Greeven, “The goal of Jesus’ mission is

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<sup>3</sup> W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *Matthew 19-28*, ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), 3:573-77.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 574.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 576.

fulfillment. . . . Jesus does not merely affirm that he will maintain them (the Law and the prophets) but fulfill them. As he sees it, his task is to actualize the will of God made known in the Old Testament. . . .”<sup>6</sup>

Thus, Matthew’s argument that distinguishes Israel from the church is clarified. Israel’s exodus and particular promises concerning Messiah are identified by fulfillment of the Old Testament’s unrealized expectation. On the other hand, the church is not mentioned in the Old Testament. Rather, its identification is forged from Peter’s testimony of who Jesus is. This truth is the foundation upon which the church will be built. So both Israel and the church share in the benefits of Jesus’ first advent ministry. For Israel, Jesus fulfilled the unfinished revelation concerning Israel found in the Old Testament. For the church, believers received the blessings of Jesus’ finished work in his first advent work.

### **Formula Quotations in Matthew**

The first eight quotations (1:22, 23; 2:15; 2:17, 18; 2:23; 4:14-16; 8:17; 12:17-21; 13:35) explain events that were intended to fulfill what the Old Testament had prophesied about Israel or anticipated concerning Messiah. The eight quotations may be divided into two groups: the first four refer to aspects of Israel’s past to demonstrate that Jesus recapitulated Israel’s past that had been left open since the people had gone into captivity. The second four initiate first-advent ministries prophesied about Israel’s service to represent the people as the Servant. This happens as God’s purpose for his people began to be fulfilled.

### **Recapitulation of Israel’s Past as God’s Son**

#### ***Born a Davidic King (1:22, 23)***

The fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14 anticipates the theme developed in Isaiah 9:6-7 and 11:1-9. The son born is related to David, yet not fathered by David.

Ahaz was a descendent of David through Solomon (1:6, 9), yet was judged because of unbelief (Isa 7:12). That judgement

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<sup>6</sup> Heinrich Greeven, “πληρωω,” *TDNT* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 6:294.

meant that he would not father the descendent in the line of David. Yet the virgin would conceive and bear a son according to the LORD's promise (7:14), which theme was completed in Isaiah 9:6, 7 and 11:1-9, a fulfillment of a divine-human King.

This prophesied expectation was quoted to explain Mary and Joseph's experience. Mary became pregnant as a virgin through the Holy Spirit, which Joseph discovered through a dream (1:20, 21). Joseph then legally adopted the baby as the son of David when he named him Jesus (1:25).

At the same time, his birth through the virgin Mary identified him as human, an offspring of a woman. In his generation, he was called to do battle with the serpent as Eve's seed (Gen 3:15) as he was led into the wilderness (4:2). The forty days he spent in the wilderness reminds the readers of Israel's forty years in the wilderness after they had sinned (Num 14:1-38). By contrast, Jesus did conflict with Satan who tempted him as the Son of God, but he refused to sin (3:17-4:17). Thus, in the recapitulation of a birth in David's incomplete line, a new hope was introduced according to the Davidic covenant.

### *Exodus from Egypt (2:15)*

Hosea 11:1 spoke of Israel called out of Egypt as God's son. This statement in Hosea is not a prophetic promise, but a historic reference to the time when Israel first received God's promises (Exod 3:16, 17). It was a promise that Israel as God's son had initially realized in the exodus, but by the time of Hosea, what Israel realized had been lost. They were about to return to Gentile captivity in Assyria (Hos 7:11, 8:9, 9:5). However, Hosea also prophesied that theologically they would "return to Egypt" (Hos 8:13) "because they transgressed My Covenant" (8:1). So, Hosea 11:1 makes a statement of God's purpose for Israel my son.

Jesus' flight to Egypt positioned him where the people of Israel had begun their history. The original exodus was a type of which Jesus' exodus from Egypt as God's son would be an anti-type in the fulfillment of God's purpose for Israel. This recapitulation anticipated a final fulfillment in the representative Son, of what the LORD had promised (Exod 6:2-4). So the house of Israel could have hope in spite of the times of the Gentiles.

## ***Sorrow of Suffering under the Times of the Gentiles (2:17-18)***

While Jesus escaped Herod's fury, the infants in the region of Bethlehem were massacred. Jeremiah 31:15 spoke of Rachel's weeping for her children, when they had been invaded by Babylon. Although a remnant had returned to Jerusalem from captivity under Cyrus, yet Gentile persecution continued under Rome. It was in this sense that sorrow would be fulfilled. And that pain under Rome would be the setting for Jesus' ministry and crucifixion. The recapitulation represents the continuation of Israel's fate under Gentile rule.

### ***An Insignificant Place in Return to the Land of Israel (2:23)***

The basic recapitulation was to focus on Jesus' return to the land of Israel as Israel had first entered the land under Joshua. The particular location of Nazareth focuses on Jesus who did not return to the center of power in Jerusalem but to Nazareth. This insignificant location fulfilled the prophetic expectation that as the Servant, "A shoot (*nezer*) shall grow forth out of (Jesse's) roots" (Isa 11:1). Proverbially, nothing of significance had arisen from that environment. Nathanael would ask: "What good thing can come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:44).

In Jesus' recapitulation of events as the son of God, Jesus fulfilled purposes left open and unrealized in Israel's sinful history. Thus, Jesus was positioned to accomplish God's original plan. At this stage, a question may be raised; did Jesus intend to replace Israel or to represent Israel? The answer will be found in passages from Isaiah which Matthew quotes as fulfilled in decisions in Jesus' ministry.

## **Representing Israel in the Kingdom**

### ***The Great Light in the Midst of Darkness (4:14-16)***

The fulfillment of Isaiah 9:1-2 continues the theme introduced in Isaiah 7:14; "a child will be born for us... the government will be on His shoulders" (9:6). The immediate focus is on the light shining in the darkness of the "Galilee of the Gentiles." This may seem strange as Jesus had been sent to "the

lost sheep of the house of Israel” (10:6; 15:24), yet he withdrew to the darkness after John had been arrested by Rome (4:12). Zebulun and Naphtali, the two northeastern tribes of the land west of the Jordan, had been the first to be devastated and depopulated by Tiglath-Pileser (2 Kgs 15:29).

The darkness and great gloom of that region set the backdrop for Jesus’ appearance as a “great light.” He left Nazareth behind and went to live in Capernaum by the sea “along the sea road, beyond the Jordan” (4:15). So even though Jesus’ location was remote, it was strategically located near the road from the north to the south where the message could travel throughout the land.

The message, “Repent, because the kingdom of heaven had come near” (4:17), was demonstrated through miraculous tokens of heaven’s reign over evil. Thus the light showed heaven’s presence in the Davidic King (2 Sam 7:16). Disciples were called to follow (4:18-22) and numerous miracles were recorded (4:23-25). The brightness drew crowds from the whole region of Galilee, Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond Jordan (4:25). So Jesus, fulfilling the shining Light, laid claim to represent Israel expressing God’s reign in token form.

### ***Servant Assumes Man’s Weakness (8:17)***

Embedded in a list of miracles (8:1-9:33), Matthew takes note of the prophesied compassion of the Servant (Isa 53:4). This editorial interpretation followed the record of the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law and her neighbors at Capernaum (8:14-16); “the Servant takes the sickness that belongs to us and lifts them upon himself.”<sup>7</sup> These tokens of the reign of heaven meditated through Jesus fulfilled, in each instance the prophetic promise of compassion.

### ***Servant Brings Justice (12:17-21)***

As the conclusion of Jesus’ broad-based Galilean ministry, the Pharisees began to plot to destroy him. Rather than confronting the rejection, Jesus withdrew and called his followers to do the same. That strategy was followed, so that

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<sup>7</sup> Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 3:345.

Isaiah 42:1-4 might be fulfilled. Two striking issues emerge from what is promised.

First, Messiah is the Servant:

The word *servant* is empathic, for it expresses the central theme. Isaiah had already identified Israel as God's servant (41:8). Why then is there a special introduction at this point of Isaiah 42? It would seem that the word is here used in a different sense from 41:8, and is not merely an identification of Israel. In particular if the prophecy is addressed to the nation, it would be unlikely that Israel is the servant... the Targum equates the servant with Messiah.<sup>8</sup>

The Servant of Yahweh might seem to *replace* the nation-servant, except that the servant's mission is addressed to and shared by the nation-servant. Thus the relationship is not *replacement* but *representation*. And based in the Servant's representation of Israel, the nation-servant will fulfill its role.

Second, the Servant-Messiah will proclaim and establish *justice*. It will be established in an unobtrusive and quiet manner among the nations of the whole earth. As Matthew develops this theme of justice, it refers immediately to Jesus' *withdrawal* from those who plotted against him (Matt 12:16-16). As he neared Jerusalem, it meant that he would *submit* to their plot and die (Matt 16:21). Yet he would not be overcome by the opposition but he would "be raised on the third day" (16:21). Peter objected to Jesus' submission (16:22), only to be confronted by Jesus as speaking on Satan's behalf. Peter was focused on the concerns of man, not of God (16:23). In God's concern as Jesus was on the cross, the Servant-Messiah established the foundation of justice.

### ***Separation of Those He Represents (13:25)***

The division introduced by the Pharisees in their rejection of Jesus' claim (Matt 12:14) is completed by Jesus as he spoke to the crowds in parables. Speaking in parables was prophesied by the word in Psalm 78:2. Parables can obscure the teaching unless

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 108.

one recognizes the point of comparison in the analogy (Matt 13:11). Thus Jesus' disciples came to Jesus to find out the point of comparison (13:10-17). To them and to them alone, Jesus revealed the secrets of the kingdom of heaven (13:11). The secret was that a stage of kingdom ministry would precede the establishment of the mediatorial kingdom as it had been revealed to David (2 Sam 7:16). This stage of kingdom ministry had not been revealed from the foundation of the world. This period was portrayed as seed sown on earth (13:18-23) in which both wheat and tares would take root on earth (13:24-33 and 36-43). Finally, Jesus laid claim to represent the remnant of Israel in the wheat sown.

### **Division among the People of Israel**

#### ***Unambiguous Claim to be King (21:4-5)***

The division among the people became public as Jesus entered Jerusalem (21:1-3). The entry followed in detail Zechariah 9:9 as fulfillment of his prophesied triumphant arrival. The prophecy identified Jesus' generation of Zion that would see the entrance. The entrance would be marked by a donkey, on a foal of a beast of burden. His ancestor David also rode a mule (1 Kgs 1:38). It would speak of his gentleness as the ruler who had already been introduced (12:15; 14:13; 15:21).

In support of Jesus' humble claim, "crowds who went ahead of Him and those who followed kept shouting 'Hosanna'..." (Ps 118:25, 26).

When the chief priests and scribes heard this, they were indignant at the children shouting in the temple complex. Jesus reminded them of Psalm 8:2 which spoke of the children and nursing infants praising God.

#### ***The Nation's Lack of Value for the King (27:9-10)***

The value of Jesus for the chief priests was 30 pieces of silver first given to Judas to betray him. When the money was returned by a remorseful Judas, the blood money was scooped up by the chief priests to buy the potter's field. Judas had discarded the money before he committed suicide. This fulfilled what Jeremiah and Zechariah had promised (Jer 32:6-9 and Zech 11:12, 13). It became a measure of Jesus' value among "all the

people.” They would cry out later at Messiah’s crucifixion, “His blood be on us and on our children” (Matt 27:25).

### **Jesus Represents the People under the Law**

As the ten citations have been explicated, in this perspective, the purposes of God for Messiah’s first advent have been introduced. In recapitulation, Jesus was set up as God’s son to enter the inheritance of the land and the Davidic promise. In a position of representation, Jesus chose the role to serve Israel-servant as Isaiah had prophesied about the Servant of the Lord. In this perspective, another question remained: What remained to fulfill to dispensation of Law? Matthew’s answer was expressed in Jesus’ use of  $\pi\lambda\eta\rho\omega$ :

First, Matthew interpreted Jesus’ first advent in the framework of ten editorial comments. Davies and Allison note, “The historical characters do not speak them. These solemn formal citations of the Old Testament are introduced... to indicate Old Testament texts fulfilled in the story of Jesus.”<sup>9</sup>

Second, Matthew alone quotes Jesus as he introduced the second feature. “Don’t assume that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill” (Matt 5:17).

The “Law or the Prophets” provides a different emphasis than the “Mosaic covenant.” Jeremiah had already concluded that “the covenant I made with the ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of Egypt—a covenant they broke...” (Jer 31:31, 32). The broken Mosaic Covenant did not need to be fulfilled but the Law included in the covenant must be fulfilled. The Law and the Prophets give expression to God’s *demands* placed upon the people. The covenant incorporates these demands expressing a formal partnership between Israel and God. Since the old partnership was broken, a new partnership (covenant) would be ratified (Jer 31:33, 34). But Israel’s responsibility assumed when they accepted the Mosaic Covenant (Exod 19:7, 8; 24:3, 7), had never been met. Thus Jesus assumes this collective responsibility as their *Representative* under Law. All that the Lord commanded he did.

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<sup>9</sup> Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, 574.

This position that Jesus claimed is further supported by Jesus' final comments in Matthew 5:20. If the people's righteousness was to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees, would this be accomplished on their own? The answer implied that that would be impossible. This impossibility further implied that there would be a righteousness made available by Jesus, the nation's *representative*. While Matthew does not develop this implication, the Old Testament had borne witness to a righteousness by faith (Gen 15:6 and Hab 2:4). Such a faith-based righteousness is neither earned as the Pharisees sought, nor deserved as the law implied. It is given by grace as Jesus' death on the cross would provide.

### ***Fulfillment of the Law Met While Revelation of Law Continues (5:17-19)***

Fulfillment of the law does not mean termination of the law. Rather it means complete satisfaction or obedience of the obligation God demanded, which the people agreed to do (Exod 19:7, 8). What God demanded is known in Jesus' exposition of the *full* and *originally* intended meaning (5:21-48). Further, it is known in what Jesus taught in addition to what he did in obedience (28:20). Both will be considered.

Jesus' assurance that the words of the law would not pass away until all were accomplished, seems to be in tension with Jesus' promise to fulfill the law. The tension can be minimized by following the clarification suggested by Douglas Moo: the meaning depends on (1) the two *untils* (until heaven and earth pass away, and until all is accomplished, 5:18), (2) the meaning of the *law*, and (3) *all things* are accomplished.<sup>10</sup> Here is a proposed contextual interpretation of each:

- (1) Every detail demanded by the law is valid *until* the fallen world passes away,
- (2) The law remains valid until *the new covenant*, which incorporates the law, is accomplished

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<sup>10</sup> Douglas Moo, "The Law of Christ as the Fulfillment of the Law of Moses: A Modified Lutheran View," in *Five Views on Law and Gospel*, ed. Wayne Strickland et al. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 319-76,

- (3) The *all things* that are accomplished include Jesus' death and resurrection<sup>11</sup>

Thus, the *law* includes the whole Mosaic law found in the Old Testament under which Jesus and his immediate historic hearers were responsible to live. In Jesus' final word to his disciples (28:20), the law consisted in "what Jesus commanded the disciples" as reflected in the book. This may be what Paul later refers to as the "law of Christ" (Gal 6:2), since Jesus spoke of the obligations of the commands except for the law of the Sabbath.

### ***Jesus' Interpretation of the Law (5:21-48)***

There is an antithesis in all the six expositions, which introduces a comparison. In each comparison "what they had heard" is in distinction to "what Jesus has to say." That exposition focused on God's intended meaning, fleshing out attitudes that are implied in the actions addressed in the law.

- Murder begins with anger in the heart, so reach a settlement quickly with your adversary;
- Adultery arises from lust, so whatever provides a gateway to lust must be decisively rejected;
- Divorce is permitted due to hardness of hearts for limited reasons, but with consequences that follow sin, which occasioned divorce, remain to be addressed (19:1-12);
- An oath doesn't assure truth, only truth-telling does;
- Retribution for evil ought to be replaced by *not* resisting personal loss or challenge;

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<sup>11</sup> While Matthew does not consider that believers in the church which would come (16:18, 19) are not "under law," Paul does. Paul teaches that these believers are "under grace." That means that they live under the good gifts included in Christ's death and resurrection. Believers are united through Spirit baptism in Christ's death, burial, and resurrection so that they might walk in a new way of life (Romans 6:2-4). In that union with Christ, the "old man" has been crucified with Christ (Romans 6:6). As a result, "you were put to death in relation to the law through the crucified body of Messiah, so that you may belong to another—to Him who was raised from the dead—that we may bear fruit to God" (Romans 7:4).

- Love of one's neighbor ought to include an enemy neighbor as the Father treats an evil world with expressions of love.

### **Jesus' Obedience to the Law**

In Moo's overview, Jesus:

attends the major feasts in Jerusalem, pays the half-shekel temple tax (Matt 17:24-27), wears the prescribed tassel on his robe (Matt 9:20; cf. Num 15:38-41) and, whatever may be said about his disciples' behavior (Matt 12:1-8) or his teaching never clearly violates the Sabbath (Matt 12:9-14). It is only in the case of Jesus' contacts with unclean people in his healing ministry (e.g. touching a leper, Matt 8:3) that could be considered a violation of the Law of Moses. Even in this case, however, the unusual nature of Jesus' healing activities makes it difficult to identify a clear cut violation of the Law..."

"What we have then, is a Jesus who does not go out of his way to break the traditions of his day but at the same time makes clear that he considers himself free to ignore them if need demands."<sup>12</sup>

### **Purposes of the Law**

While neither Jesus nor Matthew discusses the purpose of the law, Paul's later reflection will be used. First, the demands of the law were introduced to be obeyed. Jesus stated intent was to fulfill what was meant to be obeyed. "The commandment was meant for life" (Rom 7:10), implying that life would be experienced by obedience (Lev 18:15). "Christ is the goal of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (Rom 10:4). So Jesus earned the right to life by obedience but surrendered that life to give eternal life to all who believe in him.

Second, "the law was our (Israel's) guardian (schoolmaster) until Christ.... But since faith has come, we (Jewish believers) are no longer under a guardian (Gal 3:24, 25). So the righteous demands of the law were intended to identify the Righteous One, Jesus Christ. So Jesus challenged his generation, "who among you can convict me of sin?" (John 8:46).

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<sup>12</sup> Moo, "Law of Christ," 451, 452.

Third, “it is clear that no one is justified before God by law because ‘the righteous by faith will live’ (Hab 2:4). But the law is not based on faith; instead ‘the one who does these things will live by them’ (Lev 18:5). Christ has redeemed believers from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for them because it is written ‘Everyone who is hung on a tree is cursed’” (Deuteronomy 21:23) (Gal 3:11-13). Thus, the law was intended to condemn the fallen race that believers may be redeemed through the death of the Representative of Israel as God promised to Abraham, “through you all nations will be blessed” (Gen 12:3b).

### **Conclusion**

The two governing revelations in the dispensation of law are featured in Matthew in promise and law. The law was added to promise not yet fulfilled. Matthew focuses on the climax of the dispensation by highlighting the fulfillment of the two revelations.

Matthew himself as editor uses ten fulfillment-formulas to show the relationship between the OT promise and events and teaching in Jesus’ ministry. The first four portray Jesus as recapitulating Israel’s early history from election to entrance into the land. This positioned Jesus as Israel’s representative to bring the kingdom of heaven to earth among the people. The next four citations identify Jesus as representative of Israel the servant, as Servant-King. The last two instances at the conclusion of the account contrast His divine role as King with the value the religious leaders place upon his life in his crucifixion.

On the other hand, Jesus himself claimed to be the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. That means that he would fully obey all of the commands, yet he died under the curse of the law as executed by the nation’s leaders. So the goal of the law was reached but the law continued to be relevant until the fallen creation is replaced by a new earth and a new heaven.

So Israel was left with an expectation for the future because Jesus fulfilled the revelation from the Old Testament as Israel’s representative son of God, Israel’s heir. In the meantime, the church, unknown in the Old Testament, would be built by Christ, resting on the truth of who Jesus is and what he did. Finally,

Israel's expected hope would be realized in Messiah's second advent as the Servant-King will reign in the kingdom of heaven come to earth.