

The King's Battle Plan

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Text: Matthew 4:12-23

Thesis: In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus began his public ministry as a King preparing for war.

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The King's Battle Plan¹

More than any Gospel writer, Matthew drives home the fact that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Covenant. As a Jew writing to a Jewish audience, Matthew unashamedly litters his account of Jesus' life with quotations and allusions to the writings of Moses and the prophets. It should not surprise us one bit that he would center the most important events of Jesus' life on OT passages that apply to the Christ: Such as the introduction of Jesus' ministry.

Matthew's intent is clear from the very beginning of the book, and it becomes even more obvious in Matthew chapter 4 verses 12 through 23, it is in this passage, that Matthew attempts to truly bridge the gap from Jesus' childhood into his adulthood. His identity has been tested. He has so far been a fulfillment of five OT passages that Matthew has directly quoted, and has proved himself as one who can hold his own in his knowledge of Torah. He was announced by the Father as 'the Son' at his baptism. He fulfilled "all righteousness", and was being proclaimed by John the Baptist as the one "mightier than himself".² He correctly handled the Word of God in his desert troubles with Satan. Thus far in the narrative, Matthew has made the identity of Jesus inexplicably clear.

This section of scripture is therefore, transitional. Which means it cannot be viewed appropriately without realizing what Matthew is transitioning from, and what he is transitioning to. The passage provides the reaction of Jesus to Satan's taunts and tests, as well as providing the context for the Sermon on the Mount. Its importance cannot be minimized because it bridges the narrative and sets the stage for much of what is to come. It is Matthew's story of Jesus' ministry beginnings. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus began his public ministry as a King preparing for war.

¹ All Scripture is from the New International Version 2011, unless otherwise noted.

² John records John the Baptist's description of Jesus after he baptized him.

Political Clash³

After coming out of the desert and heading toward Galilee, Matthew records Jesus truly beginning his ministry in Capernaum, and he does so with an echo of words already spoken by his forerunner, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”⁴ Though most likely spoken Rabbinically, these words also carry with it heavy political weight. Jesus is ushering in a new kingdom with this statement. He is bringing it to earth, and yet there is already a kingdom in place, with their own King, their own “Σωτήρ του Κόσμου”. When two kingdoms try to occupy the same territory, there are always problems. One of the charges even brought against Jesus by the Jewish leaders to Pilate was this very idea; Jesus talked too much about a different ‘Kingdom’ that clashed with Rome’s sovereignty. When the word ‘Kingdom’ is thrown around it turns heads. By Jesus speaking these words, it brought with it certain mindsets, certain thoughts of old into the Jewish world. They were drawn back to the days of King David and Solomon, back when they were the superpowers of the world. These images were too concrete for them to just accept the kind of King, Jesus would be. The emphasis they would have heard was not on the word, “Repent” but on “Kingdom of heaven has come”. Jesus would automatically get a following, but it would also bring trouble with the political leaders of the day, just as it did with John the Baptist. Verse 12 even points out that he “withdrew to Galilee”⁵ because he heard John had been put in prison. As France notes, “Here Antipas’ hostility to John suggests that it is wise for John’s ‘successor’ to move away to a less exposed area than that of John’s movement beside

³ All Scripture is from the New International Version 2011, unless otherwise noted.

⁴ Matthew 4:17

⁵ Matthew 4:12 English Standard Version uses the word “withdrew” rather than the NIV’s use of “departed”.

the Jordan.”⁶ We learn from Josephus, that Antipas saw the baptizing movement as a growing threat to his reign.⁷ The mention that Matthew gives, that Jesus had ‘heard’ about the arrest indicates that this news influenced his movement towards a less threatening but not a less important or political, region.

The passage Matthew quotes from Isaiah 9 creates some political clash as well. He only quotes the first two verses, with his own mixing of the Septuagint and the Masoretic texts, but the audience would have recognized the entirety of the passage as messianic. It is a passage that describes a coming King. Many Jews would attest this fulfillment to have been in Isaiah’s day with the coming of Hezekiah. Matthew attributes the absolute fulfillment to be in Jesus. Verses 6-7 are perhaps the most famous verses within this passage, as they are commonly quoted during the Advent and Christmas seasons. It speaks of the coming of the King. This same idea would have shot through the minds of Matthew’s audience too.

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end.
He will reign on David’s throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.
The zeal of the LORD Almighty
will accomplish this.

⁶ R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007). 135-145.

⁷ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.118

Jesus is beginning his reign, he is bringing in the Kingdom of Heaven on earth, and it creates strife. In any strong revolution, the politics of the replacing governing authority must be set. Jesus has spoken about repentance, and in the next chapter he will lay out the ethics of the new Kingdom. Matthew is laying out the groundwork in this passage for Jesus' "fight" to begin.

Though the political weight shows the tension of a potential battle ahead, this passage also brings an open militaristic view into what Jesus was about to accomplish. We cannot forget the events of just a few verses earlier; the narrative will not allow the readers to overlook the fact that Satan just tempted Jesus with this same idea of a ruling and reigning Kingdom. Jesus has entered a warzone, and his statement, "The Kingdom of Heaven is near", is his declaration of war on the kingdom of Satan. He has come to set up a kingdom that stands in direct contradiction to the way things have been. Satan's grip on "all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor"⁸ is about to come to an end. Jesus has already stood through the testing of His identity, he now is about to fulfill that identity. As was attested to at His baptism by God the Father and the descent of the Holy Spirit, He may be the suffering servant of Isaiah 42, but he is also the Son of God. Jesus is the warrior King of Psalm 2, and he is ready to take His inheritance. Jesus' very presence on earth has begun the process of ripping the world out of the outstretched hand of the Evil one.

Geography as Strategy

The stage is thus set for a political revolution and Matthew 4:12-13 records, "When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he withdrew to Galilee. Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali..." he deliberately skips over the rejection of Jesus at Nazareth and instead just lands him in

⁸ Matthew 4:8

Capernaum, a place that will be the base of his ministry operation for the next three years. Every Kingdom needs a base of operations, or a headquarters to work from. This speaks on the political level of a ‘capital city’⁹ and on the militaristic level by providing a place for Jesus to “withdraw” to. He had after all just been attacked by Satan for 40 days prior to this.¹⁰ Jesus chose to stay here for quite some time, it is the place he first speaks, where he chooses his first disciples, it is the place he begins healing, and it is near the mountain that he decides to give the Sermon on the Mount, his political and ethical discourse on the Kingdom of God.

Capernaum was evidently a sizable town in Jesus’ day. It was a port city on the side of the Sea of Galilee and a center for trade routes, as the main road that led to Damascus was very close by and “the way of the Sea”. Both of these major trade routes provided a commercial link with regions to the north and to the south. We know Capernaum was also a local administrative center, Jesus meets a centurion (8:5) and he calls Matthew from a tax booth (9:9). These people represent a highly important city and a political and economic hub for the region.

France commentates, “Matthew sets the geographical scene... both by noting Jesus’ removal from Nazareth to Capernaum and by giving it theological significance by means of another formula-quotation. The effect of his reference to Isaiah 9:1-2 is to designate Galilee as the place of light, as opposed to the darkness... over Judea.”¹¹ Geography is important to

⁹ The thought of Capernaum as the capital city of the Kingdom that Jesus is establishing is not a solid idea. My thought here was more of a political metaphor. Jesus is not some rebel wandering in the wilderness trying to create a revolution. He has tactics. He has a game plan. Jesus is centering his ministry in one city where he will ‘live’ while he ministers and preaches. This will change when he goes to Jerusalem, the true city that will birth the coming of the Kingdom, the ‘capital’ if you will.

¹⁰ I do not intend to show Jesus as threatened by Satan in a way that minimizes his power to overcome the devil’s schemes, but simply acknowledge the humanity of Jesus. The text reads “withdrew” as if he was escaping. It is the same Greek word used for when Joseph and Mary were fleeing to Egypt. Jesus was weakened after the wilderness episode, and his human nature demanded he rest and find a safe place to recharge. Being alone for such a long time he probably loved the idea of a big bustling city full of people.

¹¹ R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007). 135-145.

Matthew and his specific mentioning of towns and villages as opposed to Mark's use of regional descriptions shed some light on what Matthew finds especially important. It is not just what Jesus was doing, but where he was doing it that had significance. The northern part of Naphtali was inhabited by a mixed race of Jews and pagans. The Israelite population that inhabited it before the exile to Assyria had been replaced by a colony of immigrants, some kept the Jewish customs, some were less than zealous, and some were fully Gentile. This left the region tarnished, they impoverished the Jewish worship system and affected culture in such a way that there was even a noticeable accent and dialect for the region that slurred the common speech of the day.¹² Isaiah's loaded phrase, "Galilee of the nations" is not wrong by any means. There may not have been a better place for Jesus to fulfill his ministry to both the Jews and the Greeks than Capernaum. There was a common language amongst numerous ethnicities, people from all walks of life who needed to hear the good news of the Kingdom. It is in this environment that Jesus draws his sword, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near."

Light Wars Against Darkness

Jesus' choice to go to Galilee is highlighted by Matthew with the fulfillment passage, Isaiah 9:1-2,

"Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali,
the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan,
Galilee of the Gentiles—
the people living in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of the shadow of death
a light has dawned."

In this instance he may have been defending against charges that the messiah was not expected to come from Galilee, but if that was the case, Matthew could have just stopped quoting

¹² *NIV Archaeological Study Bible*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005). 1564 and 1643.

after the phrase, “Galilee of the Gentiles”. Jesus fulfilled that end of the prophecy, but Matthew is interested in more than just location, he wants to tell us what Jesus’ purpose for being there is. Therefore, he continues the quotation drawing on the ‘light’ metaphor. The people of this region were in darkness, socially, spiritually, and physically. Jesus is the light that these people see, a light has dawned, and it brings them hope.

“The imagery of darkness and light is clear and conventional,” states France, “It speaks in Isaiah of the transformation from hopelessness to hope.”¹³ Matthew does the same, as he fortifies this light, or this hope in the proclamation that Jesus’ Kingdom is near. But Matthew uses Isaiah 9:1-2 to show Jesus as more than just the fulfiller of the first two verses, he fulfills the entire passage, politically as I mentioned earlier, and also as a promise to break the yoke of oppression. The words found in Isaiah 9:4, “the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor” are three images of oppression that emphasize the suffering of the people during the period of foreign invasion and dominion. The one who is born in verse 6 will overthrow these yokes, bars, and rods and bring justice and peace. For Matthew’s purposes this is Jesus overthrowing the yoke, bars, and rods of Satan’s kingdom. The light of Jesus is a weapon to the forces of darkness, and Jesus shines this comforting, peaceful light in Matthew 4:23 by traveling “throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.”

They were a mixed group of people that were looked down upon. In an honor-shame culture, they were a society that didn’t have much honor to go around, and when someone did rise up it would be hard to stay ahead. In the Gospel of John, Nathaniel even asked, “Nazareth!

¹³ R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007). 135-145.

Can anything good come from there?”¹⁴ They were socially broken, spiritually separated, and physically ill. This is the climate where and the people who Jesus decides to “raise his banner” and start proclaiming his message to.

Recruiting the Army

Jesus has set up his base, he has begun preaching his message, and he has a small following, but now he is ready to call the people he wants right next to him. Matthew records the calling of Peter, Andrew, James, and John in chapter 4 verses 18-22,

As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.” At once they left their nets and followed him.

Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

It wasn’t a very difficult decision for these men to make; a teacher is calling out to them to follow him. In the Jewish culture if a Rabbi called out for someone to follow them, they were intentionally requesting them to become their student. A good Jewish boy would never turn down such a request.¹⁵ There also is an honor in being called. The fishermen were called out publicly; they were being given honor from Jesus. Jesus however is not a normal Rabbi just

¹⁴ John 1:46

¹⁵ Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005). 48.

Charles H. Talbert, *Matthew*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010). 74

Rob explains this position with the idea of bearing “yokes” of the Rabbis and following them as they learn their specific “yoke” or teaching. This idea is backed up by Talbert with a slight difference. He argues that Matthew could have been alluding to Socrates’ call of Xenophon, because of the manner in which he records the scene. This would make Jesus look like a more legit teacher or leader in the eyes of the Gentile onlookers. However, he states that it would not be uncommon for Rabbis to seek out those who have the initiative to study with them, which helps Rob’s argument. The only problem this would create would be in determining who Jesus was trying to catch the attention of, the Jewish community, or the Gentile community by calling the fishermen publicly. Perhaps the pericope fits within both lenses.

walking through town, he is asking these men to partner with him. He phrases it not as someone recruiting for His own purposes, but Jesus used language that the fishermen, now disciples, would understand. “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.”¹⁶

Matthew impresses upon his audience to associate these people Jesus just called to follow him with the ‘disciples’ of 5:1, the select few that heard the Sermon on the Mount up close and personal, and lived with Jesus. Matthew makes sure that the reader takes away that they are Jesus’ helpers, and as is written later on, they act as “Jesus’ army” conquering the land, in chapter 10, by spreading the message of Jesus across all of Israel.

Jesus’ strategy is laid open for all to see at this point as well, he is going to build this new kingdom through a community and it is through these disciples that Jesus will mold this new community.¹⁷ He is truly asking them to fish for people, and as they would come to understand the process of changing the world would be much like fishing. It took time, three years of living with Jesus. It took study, as they listen intently to all of Jesus’ messages and discourses. It took strength, both individually and as a group as they left their family and livelihood just to follow Jesus, and even more strength to lose their honor when facing persecution for their message.

Conclusion

Perhaps Matthew paints Jesus as preparing throughout these verses. He flees to a central location to build up a base of operation, uses very political language to describe what he came to do, he creates a community around himself, and begins to teach and heal people. These are all foundational pieces for his public ministry in Galilee and even in Judea. The text of Matthew

¹⁶ Matthew 4:19

¹⁷Richard N. Longenecker. "Discipleship in Matthew's Narrative Strategy." *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 1996.) 30-49.

4:12-23 describes a shift in the book of Matthew and a shift in the life of Jesus. Jesus is now speaking, the incarnate word of God is speaking to mankind and he is inviting us to break the shackles of Satan's pseudo-kingdom and run forward into his outstretched arms ready and willing to submit to a new authority. This passage brings the identity talk of the Christ from chapters one through three, into the person and work of the Christ, springboarding Jesus into his teaching and healing ministry.

He doesn't fight the way the world fights; he created an upside down kingdom. Nonetheless, the preparation and thought put into this time of Jesus life sharpened him to do battle. He laid his defenses, built his army, and grasped his tools. For Jesus, it was the relationship of community, the fellowship of his followers, and the words he spoke that led him to the greatest battle ever fought, as he held himself to the cursed tree. In Matthew, Jesus began his public ministry as a King preparing for war.

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