

*Interpreting the
Gospel of
Matthew*

By

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Preface

The Gospel of Matthew stands first in the New Testament. This position testifies to its continuing significance for the church. This monograph provides an introduction to and interpretation of this Gospel narrative. I have prepared it based on notes that I developed for teaching the exposition of Matthew's Gospel numerous times at Northwest Baptist Seminary and the Associated Canadian Theological Schools from 2000-2017.

I have tried to indicate in footnotes the sources that have enriched my understanding of this Gospel, but undoubtedly have not identified all to whom I am indebted.

Of course, much more could and needs to be said about this Gospel than I have included in this monograph. However, I think that a careful reading of this monograph, done in tandem with a close reading of this Gospel's narrative, will enable a person to grasp the writer's key ideas about Jesus Messiah, his mission, message, and mode of ministry, and their continuing significance.

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Table of Contents

Preface	2
Introduction: Gaining Perspective on a Gospel	4-21
The Birth Narrative (Matthew 1-2)	22-40
John the Baptist and Jesus' Call (Matthew 3-4)	41-58
First Discourse: Sermon on the Mount. Part I (Matthew 5:1-12)	59-76
First Discourse: Sermon on the Mount. Part II (Matthew 5:13-7:29)	77-99
The Mission of Jesus (Matthew 8-9)	100-108
Second Discourse: Discipleship (Matthew 10)	109-118
Response to the Mystery of Jesus Messiah (Matthew 11-12)	119-129
Third Discourse: Parables (Matthew 13)	130-137
Polarization — Growing Rejection, Growing Acceptance (Matthew 13:53-16:20)	138-155
Passion Predictions and Fourth Discourse (Matthew 16:21-18:35)	156-168
True Discipleship (Matthew 19-20)	169-178
Jesus in Jerusalem — The First Part of the Week (Matthew 21-22)	179-188
Fifth Discourse: Prophetic Woes and Judgment (Matthew 23-25)	189-202
Passion, Crucifixion and Resurrection (Matthew 26-28)	203-213
Selective Bibliography	218-219

Introduction

Gaining Perspective on a Gospel

Pick up any copy of the New Testament and you will discover the initial four books are entitled “Gospels.” But what is a Gospel?¹ Richard Burridge demonstrates² that “the synoptic gospels belong within the overall genre of βίαι [lives].” He argues this based upon internal features:

- their introductions, naming the subject at the beginning (Mark and Matthew) or starting with a formal preface (Luke);
- half of the verbs are taken up with Jesus’ words and deeds, a concentration on the primary subject found in Greco-Roman βίαι;
- the focus on the death of the subject (15-20% of the narrative) in the Synoptics is similar to that in contemporary βίαι;
- the topics of ancestry, birth, boyhood and education, great deeds, virtues and death reveal a similar range;
- the style and form of Greek is compatible with βίαι;
- they have a serious and respectful air, appropriate to their subject matter;
- Jesus is a real character, not a mere stereotype;

and external features:

- they use prose narrative, just as contemporary βίαι;
- their length is comparable (Matthew 18,305 words, Mark 11,242 and Luke 19,428) situating them as medium length writings;
- they are chronological accounts moving from Jesus’ baptism to his passion, with topical materials inserted, like contemporary βίαι;
- in terms of scale they focus primarily on one person;
- the combination of stories, sayings and speeches in the Synoptics is similar to that found in various βίαι;
- the use of various sources is comparable;
- and they develop our sense of Jesus’ character by reporting his words and deeds.

¹ “Gospel” refers to a written narrative that presents the story of Jesus; “gospel” refers to the oral message of salvation that early Christians presented after the resurrection of Jesus.

² Richard Burridge, *What are the Gospels?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004, second edition), 212. “Bioi” were a form of literature common in the first century of the Greco-Roman period. They focused on significant figures and the writers wrote with various motives in mind.

I would concur with Burridge's evaluation. Given the range of authorial intent and purpose that we find in these contemporary βίoi, it is not surprising to see apologetic, ideological, and didactic purposes as primary and frequent emphases within the Synoptics.

If Matthew³ is incorporating major portions of Mark's Gospel into his narrative, using it as a source, then we see him tidying it up in terms of style, adding ancestry, birth and infancy narratives, as well as defining the chronological structure more clearly and adding more topics. In other words, Matthew brings the Gospel genre into closer affinity with the βίoi genre.⁴ He also validates the contents of Mark's Gospel by doing so.

We also, however, must realize that these materials were written (at least in the case of Mark and Matthew) by Jewish people primarily for a Jewish audience, familiar with the sacred writings that grounded Judaism. While we may not be able to speak of a Jewish canon of religious writings at this point, there does seem to be some consensus that the Torah, Psalms (wisdom materials) and Prophets (including historical books) did form a sacred collection of diverse scrolls -- no books yet (cf. Introduction to Ben Sirach, Qumran document 4QMMT C 10-11(159-52 BCE) "the book of Moses and the books of the Prophets and (the writings) of David..."; Luke 24:45ff, Josephus' materials (*Contra Apionem* 1.37-41 "22 sacred books – 5 of the Law, 13 Prophets, and 4 others"). When we consider that much of this material also incorporated content that was somewhat biographical in nature (e.g., Exodus 1-20 – Moses) and dealt with similar motifs, as well as the fact that the Gospel writers, particularly Matthew, deliberately makes fundamental connections with this sacred literature, we must consider the influence of Jewish literary form and style upon these early Christian narratives as well. To name just three examples, the form of the genealogy in Matthew 1 and the many parables that Jesus taught, reflect similar materials in the Jewish Scriptures. As well, the narrative materials in Exodus 1-20 which describe the life and leadership of Moses feature similar interests. And then, we cannot ignore the element of fulfillment that permeates the text. So, while we can agree with Burridge's general definition of the Synoptic Gospels as part of the family of Greco-Roman βίoi, we must also keep our eyes on this Jewish heritage and its formative influence in these narratives.

What are some of the implications for interpretation that we must keep in mind?

1. The Gospels are not unique literary documents. They share too many features with similar βίoi in the Greco-Roman world and also Jewish literary precedents.

³ The term "Matthew" refers to the person who wrote this Gospel and sometimes to the Gospel narrative that bears this name. Whether one of the apostles named Matthew composed it is certainly the view in the patristic literature, but contemporary scholars question whether this is the case.

⁴ Also Burridge, 241.

2. Our expectations of the narrative must be the same as the original Jewish author and audience would have had. So, when we seek to ‘decode’ the story, we must be careful not to use modern concepts of biography or historiography.
3. While ancient βίοι had various purposes, including entertainment, we discern that those written about the founders of schools of philosophy or religious movements tended to focus on apologetic and teaching functions and so we might not be far wrong to begin our exploration of Matthew’s Gospel with a similar perspective, unless the text leads us to a different conclusion. It is a useful starting point.
4. The key to the interpretation of and motive for writing the Gospel must lie in the primary character, namely Jesus. So, we must seek to understand this emphasis upon Jesus hermeneutically. Why was he chosen as the central figure and what does the writer want to affirm about him? We might suggest that Christology must be one of, if not the most singular focus of our attention, because it was the primary concern of the writer.
5. Because a Gospel is a form of βίος there are constraints upon free composition. We can discern truth about the historical Jesus from Matthew’s βίος Ἰησοῦ. We want to discern what each passage will reveal about the central character and his significance in the light of the Evangelist’s comprehensive purpose.

Ben Witherington⁵ in his commentary on Mark’s Gospel agreed with Burridge’s perspective and indicated that this means our interpretation must consider the Evangelist’s intent to ask and answer some key questions – who was Jesus, what was he like, and why is he worth writing a biography about? In the case of Matthew, we might also discern a closer interest in cause-effect relationships between events, particularly those described in the Jewish Scriptures.⁶

Burridge also makes the interesting argument that the production of a Christian βίος with Jesus as the hero makes “an enormous Christological claim.”⁷ In comparison to the first century Jewish context, “no rabbi is that unique; each rabbi is only important in as much as he represents the Torah, which holds the central place. To write a biography is to replace the Torah by putting a human person in the centre of

⁵ Ben Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 5.

⁶ The absence of Rabbinic parallels to Gospels is remarkable. If the materials we find in the Gospels circulated like Rabbinic stories, aphorisms and parables, then why did the Gospels emerge as connected narratives focused around Jesus, but nothing similar emerges in Rabbinic Judaism devoted to other Jewish figures? Jacob Neusner also argues that there are no Tannaitic Parallels to Gospels. The Rabbinic anecdotes centre around teaching and the proposed Q materials and the so-called Gospel of Thomas are more like these Rabbinic materials. But Q and Thomas are not βίοι. The primary reason is that the Gospels focus upon the uniqueness of the hero and this adds the creative element necessary to produce a βίος.

⁷ Burridge, 304.

the stage. The literary genre makes a major theological shift which becomes an explicit Christological claim – that Jesus of Nazareth is Torah embodied.”⁸

The understanding of Gospels as βίοι also has implications for the use of Gospels in discerning Christian ethics/moral instruction. In ancient βίοι virtue was revealed through a person’s words and deeds. So in a Christian Gospel narrative, we discover Jesus’ teaching and how he personally expressed and practiced these values. Thus, people are urged to follow Jesus, not just listen to his words or meditate on his teachings. Imitation is critical. Speeches offer crystalized representations of the hero’s point of view. The intimations of his deity or at least very close relationship with the deity urge our careful attention to what he says and does.

While in terms of genre a gospel shares many features with a Greco-Roman βίος, it also has some features that link it with historiography (i.e., the form of Luke’s preface which is similar to that found at the beginning of contemporary historical writings) and theology – the attempt to explain who God is and what he is doing in the world. The narrative gains sense and impact because it is historically rooted and connected. Jesus is a real person who lived in Galilee and Judea during the first third of the first century during the reign of Herod Antipas. His followers became key leaders in the emergent Christian church. While the events that the Gospels relate preceded the writing of many if not most of the NT epistles, the Gospels themselves probably postdate these same epistles. So we must ask ourselves at some point why did Gospels, these Jesus books, begin to emerge in the middle of the 60’s, at the time when the Jewish war against Rome broke out and after the production of a significant number of formal epistles written by Christian leaders? How did they contribute to the establishment of the Christian movement and inform the division between Christianity and Judaism that occurs at that time? As well, what relationship to these Gospel narratives have with the thematic focuses expressed in the epistolary literature? And also, what relationship does a Gospel (in our case Matthew’s Gospel) have with the events narrated, i.e., what sources were used? Who is the person named “Matthew” in the Gospel tradition and what connection did he have personally with the Historical Jesus and with the composition of this Gospel?

In my view we have to consider these Gospel narratives as essentially biographical and historical documents, but written with a theological (or ideological) purpose. They demonstrate how God’s plans find expression in human lives and history and what sense humans should make of these events for themselves, their communities and for defining their worldview. Within the Jewish context of the first century CE they provide a distinctive Jewish view on the interpretation of the Jewish scriptures and Yahweh’s purposes for Israel, that contest other current Jewish ideologies presented by the Essenes, Pharisees, and Sadducees.

⁸ Ibid.

The fact that we have four Gospels within the NT Canon should also be considered carefully.

Gaining Perspective on the Synoptic Question

Although Matthew occupies first position in our New Testament canon, it is followed by two other closely related Gospel narratives, named Mark and Luke. These three are categorized as the “Synoptic Gospels” because they have so much material in common. We do not know who created this order or what the motivation was. The literary, historical, theological, and social relationships among these three narratives continue to engage scholarly attention.

1. In terms of literary issues the primary questions relate to the sources used by each writer in the preparation of their narratives and how the current structure of the Gospels relate to these sources. The verbal and sequential parallels, similarities and dissimilarities found in these Gospels lead us to conclude that they did not merely have access to the same sources, but in fact one or two of them knew of and used the other Gospel(s) as a literary source. What the precise relationship might be remains debated. The evidence seems to point to what is called ‘Markan priority’, with Matthew and Luke in varying degrees incorporating Markan materials into their later compositions. Whether the ‘edition’ Matthew or Luke may have had of this Markan material differed from ours or whether it was our current Markan gospel, again is debated.

Matthew and Luke share material not found in Mark. While some might argue that Matthew or Luke borrowed from one or the other, most scholars think that they had access to a common source and this unknown and currently non-existent exemplar is named ‘Q’ (from the German word *Quelle* = source). Whether ‘Q’ ever existed as a distinct literary composition is not a settled matter. Second century gospel documents such as the “Gospel of Thomas” seem to have a form that ‘Q’ is postulated to have had – a series of Jesus sayings without narrative setting. However, this document reflects theological motifs that characterize some second century Christian groups and is de-historicized, i.e., it does not set the sayings of Jesus in any historically-based narrative.

Further, we also find materials in Matthew that are peculiar to it and in Luke that are peculiar to it. This suggests that Matthew had access to at least three different sources – Mark, Q traditions, and additional materials. Apart from Mark, we cannot ‘recover’ these other sources with any degree of certainty. However, comparing the way that Matthew incorporates Markan materials within his Gospel can give us some perspective on the emphases that Matthew wishes to communicate through his narrative. This, of course, presumes Markan priority as a working assumption. And we cannot then overlook the significance of this writer using the Markan account so extensively in composing his Gospel.

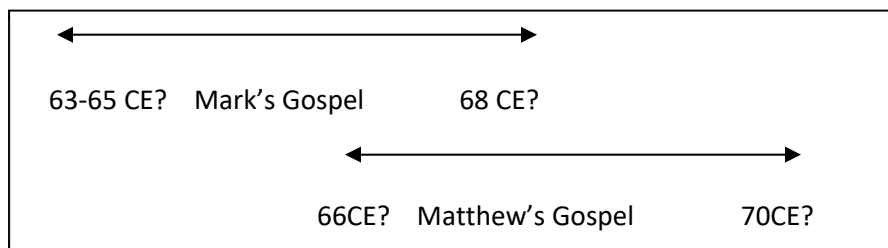
We have little understanding about the historical relationship between Matthew and Luke. However, where they both use the same materials, we again need to consider what we might learn about

Matthew's theological perspective by comparing his presentation in such cases with Luke's, considering both similarities and differences.

One of the tools we have for studying these NT Gospel narratives is called a "Synopsis." The narratives of these three Gospels, often accompanied by the materials from John's Gospel, are placed in parallel columns for easy comparison. Your study of Matthew will be enriched if you take time to access a synopsis. You should use a resource of this nature when doing research for various assignments in this course.

2. If Mark was the first gospel narrative composed, as many think, then Matthew and Luke must follow it chronologically. However, the actual degree of chronological separation between Matthew and Mark is disputed. There seems to be a quotation from Matthew's Gospel in Ignatius' letter *To The Smyrneans* 1.1, to be dated c. A.D. 110-115. In reference to Jesus, Ignatius writes that he was "baptized by John, that 'all righteousness might be fulfilled by him'" (βεβαπτισμένον ὑπὸ Ἰωάννου, ἵνα πληρωθῆ ἅσα δικαιοσύνη ὑπ' αὐτοῦ; cf. Matthew 3:15 πληρῶσαι ἅσαν δικαιοσύνην).

If Mark was written after Peter's death and prior to the end of the Roman-Jewish war (AD 70), then Matthew's Gospel must be placed either in the late 60's or early 70's of the first decade.



We have no sense from Matthew's Gospel that Jerusalem and the Temple are destroyed (70CE) and so we probably need to presume it was composed prior to or very close to the events of 70CE. Although other elements are appealed to frequently (i.e., claimed confusion in Matthew's references to Jewish religious leaders; use of the term 'Rabbi' (23:7-8); reference to Zechariah son of Berechiah is identified by some as Zechariah son of Baris assassinated in the Temple area by Zealots prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70CE; we know that the Sadducees as a movement did not survive the destruction of Jerusalem. So if, as some suppose, Matthew is written 80-100CE, why is there so much concern about a Jewish sect that no longer exists?

3. The earliest references to Matthew as the writer of this Gospel in the patristic records occur in quotes from a work by Papias (early second century CE), quoted by Eusebius in *Historia Ecclesiastica* 5.8.2. Papias stated that Ματθαῖος μὲν οὖν Ἑβραΐδι διάλεκτῳ ἢ λόγια συνετάξατο, ἡρμήνευσεν δ' αὐτὰ ὡς ἦν δυνατὸς ἕκαστος ("Matthew then compiled the oracles in the Hebrew/Aramaic language, and each

interpreted/translated them as they were able”). The current Greek Matthew shows little indication of being a translated document. So we cannot discern any direct linkage between the Greek Matthew and this Aramaic collection of Jesus’ oracles described by Papias. The author of this Greek gospel may have incorporated sayings from this Aramaic source into his narrative (perhaps into the five or six large sections of discourse), but if so, they already seem to have been in Greek form. Note that in the introduction to his Gospel, Luke indicates he had access to many different sources for his narrative and we should assume that Matthew had similar sources at his disposal.

4. Another matter of historical connectivity is the linkage between Matthew’s Gospel and the words and deeds of the historical Jesus. If Matthew’s Gospel does predate the Roman-Jewish war’s destruction of Jerusalem, and the author is the apostle Matthew or someone close to him, then the author’s life does overlap with key figures in the development of Christianity, including the apostles, as well as Jesus himself. Peter, as far as we can determine, probably perished during the persecution that occurred in aftermath of the burning of Rome (c. 64CE). Eyewitnesses of Jesus’ words, deeds and resurrection were still alive (the apostle John seems to survive into the 80’s of the first century). We have every reason to believe that the sources would present an accurate picture of the reality of Jesus. Do we have any evidence that the first Christians and their leaders engaged in substantial embellishment of these traditions and created new materials, with no foundation in the historical reality of Jesus? None at all. Rather we see them being very careful to present the Gospel truthfully. A significant element in the Gospel presentation after the resurrection was the connection of people with the events that defined the historical Jesus, just as Israel’s sacred writings sought to connect subsequent generations of Jewish people with Israel’s origins.⁹ The focus on “witnessing” the resurrection particularly (Acts 1) indicates that this was a very critical issue in the presentation of the good news (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:1-12).

5. Social relationships within early Christianity are not easy to discern or document. However, all indications we do have from the NT documents is that the leaders and early writers, e.g., Paul, Peter, James, Luke, Mark, were networked, knowing and interacting with one another. When Matthew decided to use Mark’s Gospel as the framework for his narrative, what did this say about the way Mark’s Gospel was being perceived in the early church? If Mark’s narrative was primarily intended for Gentile readers and if Matthew’s narrative was primarily intended for Jewish readers, then what was Matthew saying when he incorporated it into his Gospel?

Attempts to connect this Gospel with a specific community have occurred numerous times. The most commonly accept hypothesis is that Matthew wrote his Gospel in the context of a Jewish-Christian community in or around Antioch. However, in suggesting this, we should not suppose that Matthew wrote

⁹ R. Bauckham. *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

intentionally only for part of the church community. He may have written out of a concern for some social groups within the church, but he intends his Gospel to speak to all believers who are forming the new people of God created in the Messiah Jesus. He certainly wants Jewish Christians to understand how the Gospel enables them to live in covenant faithfulness before God, even as they are committed to Jesus as Messiah. He also wants to affirm that the Messiah is the one who initiates and authorizes the mission to the nations with all of its attendant changes. So Matthew incorporates elements that show how Jesus' teachings related to the minutiae of the Mosaic Law. Yet Jesus' mission is for all nations and this includes the Jewish people.

I would suggest we need to read Matthew's Gospel along with Hebrews and James – epistles addressed primarily to Jewish Christians, and perhaps 1 Peter. As well, we should consider Paul's discussion in Romans 9-11 and Ephesians 2 about the plans of God for Jewish people in the context of the Messiah's death and resurrection. Matthew writes at a time when Christianity was establishing its own identity separate from Judaism, but co-existing with it and desiring to demonstrate that Christianity represented the final phase of God's covenant promise to Abraham. Jews who oppose God in this are not participants in the Abrahamic covenant, despite their protests to the contrary. The imminent destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple have to be assessed in the light of Jesus' prophetic words (Matthew 23-25). This is the new reality that the Messiah's death and resurrection have created. Those Jews who are truly obedient to God will embrace Jesus as Messiah. This does not mean the abandonment of all Jewish religious practices, but it does mean a re-evaluation of their continuing import and practice. Matthew's Gospel presents a new vision of the true Israel that Jews have to consider if they are to be faithful to Yahweh's covenant with Abraham.

So the Synoptic relationships and social/historical contexts in which Matthew exists must be kept constantly in our mind's eye as we seek to understand Matthew's narrative and its message.

At this point we might address the question why the canonical Gospels began to emerge in the 60's of the first century. Most of Paul's letters were written prior to their appearance. Perhaps as well we should include 1 Peter, James and Hebrews in this situation too. We often forget this sequence in our interpretation of the Gospels. Did Matthew write in full knowledge of Paul's letters or those of Peter or James or Hebrews? If so, is Matthew writing in positive response to the issues Paul expresses, explaining how Jesus' teachings and actions provided the basis for Paul's Gospel, or does he seek to correct wrong impressions? When we consider that terms such as 'disciple', 'Kingdom of God' and 'son of man', common to Jesus' teaching occur infrequently or not at all in NT Epistles and that terms such as 'church' occur very rarely in the Gospels, then we have to ask how to read these different parts of the NT in the light of each other.

This becomes particularly important when we consider the different emphases placed upon the significance of Jesus' life and death in the Epistles and the Gospels, i.e., concepts of atonement, salvation, etc. Today we continue to struggle to understand and define the relationship between kingdom and church and much of this occurs because of the diverse terminology in these various writings.

In the case of Matthew, however, I think that he is particularly concerned to define clearly the shift in covenant understanding and the definition of the people of God that has occurred in the coming of Jesus. Judaism, as defined in Essene, Pharisee, Sadducee ideologies, no longer represents God's program in the world. Rather, it sits under God's judgment because it has rejected Jesus as Messiah. This is the new reality that has to be understood by Jews and non-Jews. The program of Jesus has redefined the nature of God's people. As Matthew says, Jesus is "building my assembly and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." I think this means that we must pay attention to the theme of divine judgment in Matthew's Gospel, especially in the light of the history of God's dealing with Israel, i.e., the prior destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in the 6th century BCE. The stylized genealogy in Matthew 1 may in fact be signaling that this phase of God's salvation history has ended and now something quite new is beginning – the Emmanuel period -- following the three earlier periods reflected in the structure of the genealogy. Who will be the "sons of Jesus Messiah," who is the "son of God," in this new period of God's relationship with Israel and humanity in general?

To a very significant degree, one of the primary issues addressed by Matthew's Gospel (and for the other Gospel writers) is a hermeneutical question. Who is reading the Jewish Sacred Scriptures correctly and interpreting Yahweh's vision for Israel accurately? Is Jesus, who claims to be Messiah and his followers, the authoritative interpreter, or do one of several Jewish religious groups (i.e., Pharisees, Essenes, Sadducees) have this authority? The significant emphasis in Matthew's Gospel upon the right reading of the Old Testament and its fulfillment in the actions and teachings of Jesus must be accounted for. It seems to me that Matthew is arguing the case that Jesus both as prophetic voice and Messiah presents the hermeneutical key to understanding Yahweh's covenant direction and outcome, as expressed in the Jewish Scriptures. If this is the case, then our interpretation of the OT or Jewish Scriptures will need to follow Jesus' lead in this matter. [Consider the parallel in Josephus' composition "The Jewish War." Those who represent truly Judaism are not the rebels. Note also the prophetic voices in the mid-first century he reports that forecast the destruction of the Temple.]

Matthew's Connection with Jewish Religious Sources

One of the significant characteristics of Matthew's Gospel is the linkage of his story with Jewish Sacred Scriptures. The fulfillment motif receives continued attention, both in the teaching of Jesus himself, as well as in the editorial sections. Such a connection joins the events and teachings of Jesus

integrally with divine initiatives in the Old Testament. God continues to carry forward his ancient covenant program, but things are taking a new direction in Jesus.

In several of Paul's letters, particularly Romans, Galatians and Ephesians, and in the Epistle to the Hebrews the question of the relationship that Jesus and Christianity have with Judaism and the Old Testament receives detailed attention. Several significant questions are addressed:

- a. in what sense does God's work in Jesus bring to completion what he initiated in the first covenant?
- b. do the Jewish people continue to have a special covenant relationship with God outside of Messiah Jesus' "new covenant," or does this new covenant incorporate what God had initiated in the old covenant?
- c. is participation in the new Messianic assembly now the way in which God expects Jewish people to express their covenant loyalty to him?
- d. what happens to promises about the land or a new Davidic reign that are part of the first covenant? Do they continue or are they transformed into new spiritual realities in the second covenant established in Jesus?
- e. how should Jewish Christians understand and relate to God's commands given to Israel through Moses? Do things continue unchanged or can Jewish Christians now treat the commands about Sabbath, circumcision, clean vs. unclean, etc. in a new way? Did Jesus give direction to his followers about such core parts of Judaism? What principles do Jewish Christians and other believers use to interpret and apply the Jewish Scriptures to their life under the rule of the Messiah?
- f. in what sense did Jewish Scriptures now become Christian Scriptures? What is the new key to their understanding and interpretation?

Matthew seeks to address these and other questions that Jewish Christians wrestled with.

Inherent within these interactions is a significant apologetic purpose. Much was at stake. We know from second century Christian writers that the engagement with Judaism continued to be a very difficult challenge.

First, we need to note the ten OT citations that Matthew introduces with variations on the expression "all this happened so that what was spoken by the Lord (κυρίου refers to Yahweh) through the prophets might be fulfilled" (ἵνα πληρωθῆ τὸ ῥηθὲν ὑπὸ κυρίου διὰ τοῦ προφήτου λέγοντος. 1:22-23; 2:15; 2:17-18; 2:23; 4:14-16; 8:17; 12:17-21; 13:35; 21:4-5; 27:9-10). We might also include with this number 2:5-6 (where the verb πληρῶω is omitted) and 13:14; 26:54, 56 (which include the verb πληρῶω but no other components of the formula). This formulaic introduction is found only in Matthew.

πληροῦν (to fulfill) – 16x(Mt) 2x(Mk) 9x(Lk). In all of Matthew’s uses (except 13:48) this word has a significant theological sense.

τὸ ῥηθὲν (that which was said) - found thirteen times (cf. 3:3; 22:31; 24:15) in Matthew’s Gospel and nowhere else in the NT.

διὰ τοῦ προφήτου (through the prophet) - peculiar to Matthew (cf. also 2:5; 3:3; 24:15).

Prabhu notes that “the closest parallels to the fulfillment formulas of MT are...not to be found in the New Testament, nor in the Jewish or Christian literature of the time, but in the Old Testament.”¹⁰ We might consider 2 Chronicles 36:21-22 “to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah” (cf. 1 Kgs 2:27; Ezra 1:1).¹¹ Why has Matthew incorporated this expression and placed it so often and so strategically within his Gospel narrative? As well we should note that in most of the other quotations that Matthew incorporates into his narrative and shared with other Synoptic Gospels, he tends to follow the Septuagint text, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. However, in these formula quotations (apart from 1:23) the “text differs substantially from the Septuagint...In most cases...Matthew’s version seems to be simply an independent and ‘free’ rendering of the passage concerned, sometimes apparently adapting the text to allow the reader to see more clearly how it has found its fulfillment in Jesus.”¹² So Matthew is doing something very deliberate when he uses these materials in the formation of his narrative.

We will need to take special note of the content of each quotation in their Old Testament and Matthean contexts and how they point us towards key elements in Matthew’s theological presentation. Whether as Stendahl¹³ hypothesized, these quotations and their interpretation point to the existence of a “Matthean School” of early Jewish-Christian interpretation, similar to the Qumran Peshet tradition, is yet to be established. However, as Gundry notes, Matthew incorporates OT materials into his narrative as he considered it helpful and using the fulfillment formula was only one of many ways that he does this. So we have to be careful not to segment the ‘formula quotations’ as forming in Matthew’s mind a particularly distinctive group of OT references. They do tend to occur, however, in those parts of the narrative that are peculiar to Matthew and so this might explain why their OT text form is different from other quotations in those parts of his narrative that parallel the Synoptic Gospels.

Of course there are many other ways that Matthew links the story of Jesus with the Old Testament framework. The first two or three chapters do this extensively, using the genealogy, the text of

¹⁰ George M. Soares Prabhu, *The Formula Quotations in the Infancy Narrative of Matthew* (Analecta Biblica 63; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1976), 61.

¹¹ Three of these relate to prophecies spoken through Jeremiah (2 Chron. 36:21, 22 and Ezra 1:1) in the context of the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile. Is this significant considering the oracles of Jesus that he spoke against Jerusalem and Matthew’s focus upon the theme of judgment?

¹² R. T. France, *Matthew. Evangelist and Teacher* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004), 173-174.

¹³ Krister Stendahl, *The School of St. Matthew and Its Use of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968).

Matthew 1:1, and his deliberate usage of religious language found in the Greek translation of the OT, as well as reference to OT characters, visions, and angels. However, as Matthew's narrative unfolds, we discern dependence upon materials from the Mosaic Law (Sermon on the Mount) as well.

Who Wrote this Gospel?

The traditional ascription for this narrative is κατὰ Μαθθαῖον. Hengel in *Four Gospels*¹⁴ argues that titles such as this go back to the first century. However, even so, we cannot be sure they relate to authorship. Literally the title means "According to Matthew." The only Matthew mentioned in the text is the apostle whose name occurs at 9:9 and 10:3. As already noted, Papias says that "Matthew compiled the oracles in the Hebrew/Aramaic language." However, we are not certain about the relationship between this compilation and the Greek Gospel of Matthew that we find in the NT. Irenaeus, who writes around 180 AD repeats the essence of Papias' statement (Haereses 3.1.1.), saying that Matthew wrote "a Gospel for the Hebrews in their own language." As stated earlier, we have no indication that the Greek Gospel of Matthew is a translation from Hebrew or Aramaic.¹⁵ Thus Irenaeus must be referring to a different document or an earlier edition of the Gospel of Matthew as we know it.

It is quite possible that the apostle Matthew did compile a collection of Jesus' sayings in Hebrew or Aramaic. However, if that is the case, then to our knowledge it has not survived. If there is linkage between this Hebrew document and our Greek Matthew, then we have no sense of their relationship. Whether we are to suppose that traces of this compilation formed the basis for the six great blocks of teaching in this Gospel remains a very uncertain hypothesis.

Some have pointed to Matthew 13:52 which, it is argued, may be an "oblique self-reference." The term γραμματεὺς in this passage does not mean "teacher of the law", but a "clerk, secular scribe, recorder." C.F. D. Moule considers it not inconceivable that the Lord Jesus said to tax-collector Matthew, "You have been a 'writer'...; you have had plenty to do with the commercial side of just the topics alluded to in the parables – farmer's stock, fields, treasure-grove, fishing revenues; now that you have become a disciple, you can bring all this out again – but with a difference."¹⁶ Alternatively Jesus may be indicating the future, intended role of his followers as Messianically authorized interpreters of the Jewish Scriptures, replacing the current scribal class operating in Judaism in this respect. I do not think this text provides any indication about the question of authorship for this Gospel.

¹⁴ Martin Hengel, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2000).

¹⁵ Josephus claims that he wrote his "Jewish Wars" first in Aramaic and then wrote it again in Greek. However, if this true, then he did not create a Greek "translation" of the Aramaic, but wrote it as a Greek composition. *Bellum I.3*. As translated in the Loeb edition "by translating (μετάλαβον – transferring, interchanging)" into Greek the account which I previously composed in my vernacular tongue and sent to the barbarians in the interior."

¹⁶ C.F.D. Moule, "St. Matthew's Gospel: Some Neglected Features," *Studia Evangelica* 2(1964), 98.

We just do not know who wrote this Gospel, if it was not the apostle Matthew. We will continue to use the term “Gospel of Matthew” for convenience, but we are not saying by this that the apostle Matthew wrote this Gospel. He may well have and I have not discerned anything in this narrative that would preclude him from authorship. Perhaps, like the traditions that claim Mark was dependent upon Peter’s preaching for the substance of his Gospel, the person who wrote the Gospel of Matthew similarly was dependent upon material that the apostle Matthew had compiled. Who this writer was, if not the apostle Matthew, remains a mystery.

In reaching this conclusion, we must be careful not to draw unwarranted negative conclusions about the authenticity or historical rootedness of its material. Most of the documents in the OT are anonymous as they have come to us, in that we do not know for sure who wrote them. Within Jewish tradition authorship was not a major issue. If, as we have argued, this narrative was written before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, then its connection with early Christian sources is established, particularly since it seems to have incorporated most of Mark’s narrative. As well, its acceptance early in the church’s life as a trustworthy account deserves notice.

How Does this Narrative Work?

John Nolland in his recent commentary on Matthew’s Gospel¹⁷ provides an excellent summary of the various, characteristic compositional and literary techniques that the author uses to tie his narrative together. Some of these were identified through redaction-critical studies and some more recently through the application of “narrative criticism.”

1. Repetition of Formulas
 - a. The writer uses them to identify sets of materials scattered throughout his narrative, e.g., formulaic introduction to the ten OT citations. He concludes five of the discourses with “it so happened that when Jesus had finished these words....”
 - b. Repeated formulas unite sections within a segment, e.g., beatitudes, “you have heard that it was said to the people of old....But I say to you”; the woes in Matt.23, or the formula introducing parables in Matt.13 “the kingdom of heaven is like.”
 - c. Six uses of the expression (beginning in 8:12) “there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”
2. Framing (symmetrical paralleling of events)
 - a. The call by Jesus for people to follow him (8:18-22) and his call to Levi/Matthew (9:9-13) frames the section on miracles in 8:23-9:8 that comments on what discipleship entails.

¹⁷ John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*. NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 23-29.

- b. Perhaps in the Passion Narrative (26-27) framing plays a significant part in the way the author seeks to help the readers understand what is happening.
- 3. Chiasm – symmetrical framing of diverse elements around an emphasized centre.
 - a. 1:1,17 – order of genealogical elements (ABC – CBA).
 - i. V.1 – “Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham
 - ii. V. 17 – “From Abraham to David, from David to the exile, from the exile to the Christ.
 - b. Jesus’ arrival in and departure from Galilee (3:13; 4:12) – frame Jesus’ preparation for his ministry.
- 4. Parallelism
 - a. The denial by Peter (26:20-25, (30)31-35) and betrayal by Judas (26:47-56, 69-75) are set in parallel.
 - b. The use by John and Jesus of the same words to summarize their message (3:2; 4:17).
 - c. Sometimes the parallels are not perfect.
- 5. Internal Cross-referencing by means of language echoes
 - a. The introduction of the term *παραλαμβάνειν* in the temptation narrative may cross-reference the antithetical parallelism between Joseph and Herod, where the term first occurs.
 - b. There seem to be several cross-references linking 2:22-3:2 with 4:12-17
- 6. Theme-setting episodes
 - a. 9:14-17 seems to provide a set of themes that are further elaborated in the entire subsection 9:14-33.
 - b. The thrust towards Jerusalem is introduced in 16:21 and then emphasized in 17:22; 19:1 and 20:17, until Jesus enters Jerusalem in 21:11.
- 7. Sectional overlaps
 - a. Often sections are clearly ended and new ones begun. However, sometimes material seems to overlap. For example 2:22-3:2 both ends the Infancy narrative and introduces the ministry of John and Jesus.
- 8. Dramatisation
 - a. Matthew prefers to tell his story through the words of his characters, rather than their actions, in comparison to Mark, for example. Matthew abbreviates narratives but does not seem to abbreviate the words of his characters. For example, he narrates one additional prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane (26:42) and in 26:72 he records one additional denial by Peter.

- b. The words of Judas add drama in 26:15.
- c. Parables also contain an unusual amount of conversation.

Along with these more formal, literary structures and techniques, we must also consider such narratological features such as how characters function and are defined, the nature of the plot and how it unfolds, the use of time and place (chronological and geographical space), and the way the whole story fits together. All of these are in the service of the rhetorical intention of the writer – what is he seeking to persuade his reader/listener to do in response to this story? And, what clues does the writer provide in his editorial materials to help us identify this rhetorical purpose?

Interpreting Matthew Today

In my opinion we need to explore the meaning of Matthew’s Gospel at three levels:

1. What did Jesus say and do and how were these messages and deeds understood by Jewish people in Palestine in the first part of the first century CE?
2. What did Matthew, presumably one of the apostles, want to communicate about Jesus and his significance through this narrative to first century Jewish Christians and non-believing Jews? Presumably he writes during the turbulent, tragic years of the Jewish-Roman War and the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. He writes to explain what God is doing in and through these events, all tied in some way to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Messiah.
3. What does the Holy Spirit want to communicate to us who are Jesus followers today and how do we understand this message accurately as we navigate the great cultural differences between the social context of this Gospel and the 21st century context of our respective cultures?

None of these questions are easy to investigate or answer, but they are the necessary questions we have to consider if we are going to understand the meaning of Matthew’s narrative for God’s people today.

Key Theological Themes

While these themes are not exclusive to this Gospel’s narrative, they do seem to receive some emphasis in the way the narrator has arranged his materials.

1. Salvation History – the place of Jesus in the plan of God for his people. The initial genealogy in Matthew 1 segments God’s dealings with his people into four eras – Abraham to David, David to the exile, the exile to the Messiah, the Messiah to the “end of the age.” The narrative is set within the junction that is occurring between the third and fourth eras. This fourth era is the last one in human history and will end when the Son of Man returns. The coming of the Messiah inaugurates this final era and puts an eschatological cast on the whole narrative – one that emphasized fulfillment and consummation. Within this final era, salvation for Israel and for non-Jews is

defined in terms of human response to the Messiah and the significance of his life, death, and resurrection.

2. Faithfulness of God/Yahweh (righteousness). Matthew's understanding of God is essentially Jewish – monotheistic, creator, covenant-making, salvation-giving. Yet this God holds every human being accountable. Matthew emphasizes this accountability more than any other of the Gospels. God intends his rule to gain expression within human history as his people are formed and live in obedience to him. While evil is nurtured and promoted by Satan in order to thwart God's plans, God has the wisdom, power and intention to destroy him and those associated with him. In all of this, God has revealed his plans to humanity and shows himself faithful and trustworthy in keeping his promises. Finally, Matthew expresses a clear sense that while God is one, he is still Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
3. Jesus – Messiah, King, Son of God. The central character in Matthew's Gospel is Jesus. As argued earlier, Matthew basically follows the literary convention of βίαι, 'Lives', as he structures his narrative. The advent of Jesus is in response to the promise in the OT prophets. Angels announce his birth and protect his life. John the Baptist, the last and greatest of the OT prophets, blazes the trail for this Lord, calling Israel to repentant discipleship. Jesus' words and deeds reveal clearly his intent to establish "my assembly," based upon a radical obedience to God and trust in the Messiah's sacrificial death for forgiveness and reconciliation with God. In the last Passover Jesus declares that the cup "is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (26:28). The Messiah introduces the presence of God – his will and his authority – into the human domain in a fresh, radical way. The value of a person's life will now be measured by his or her response to the Messiah and his message. We will seek to discern in what ways Matthew defines Jesus as "God."
4. The People of God. The era that precedes that of the Messiah is defined as "from the exile to the Messiah." In the last several decades the works of N.T. Wright have challenged us to read the actions and words of Jesus as producing the spiritual return from exile that Israel had not yet experienced, even though physically it occupied Palestine. As Messiah, he offers the restoration that Israel's prophets had promised, but which had not yet occurred in the glorious terms with which they described it (e.g., Isaiah 40). There is no doubt that Matthew regards the coming of Jesus as fulfilling the prophetic program offered by Isaiah. However, as Wright himself argues, Jesus' presentation is doubly anti-revolutionary. He challenges the nationalistic vision of a restored and dominant Israel, no longer subservient to Rome, and which projected an anti-Gentile bias, as well as incorporating violent responses. As well, he challenges the political agenda of Rome, as in some sense presenting the divine plan for humanity. Rather Jesus presents his own

revolutionary program, centred on the concept of the Kingdom of God. He offered liberation from Satan's evil control and an opportunity for Israel to recover its role as God's covenant people. But in reformulating the people of God, Jesus offers a much more inclusive vision that incorporates Jews and non-Jews, and redefines the moral basis for this people's way of life. As Jesus says in Matthew 16, "I will build my assembly and the gates of Hell shall not stand against it." The Beatitudes outline the blessings that the Messiah's people will experience. Discipleship becomes the model by which the Messiah's people operationalize their commitment. An apocalyptic worldview undergirds the Messiah's vision for a new people. His vision is for a people of God that no longer use temples, sacrifices, or priests.

5. Kingdom ethics. Much of Jesus' teaching in Matthew's Gospel explains the radical values that define discipleship. Jesus' ethics are quite subversive, overturning or inverting commonly assumed human values within the Jewish and the Greco-Roman social realities. While the Law of Moses is important, it is redefined by Jesus and no longer is the touchstone by which the Messiah's people are identified. Nowhere is this more evident than in Jesus' discussions about the nature of leadership within his assembly. He models this paradigm through his own willingness to pursue the will of God even though it meant his own terrible suffering and death. God's righteousness is more important than personal privilege, glory or wellbeing. The essential life-principles that Jesus expresses coincide with the two great commands, and a third that he adds in Matthew 28:19-20.
6. Israel and the *Missio Dei*. The Jewish focus within Matthew's narrative is evident. He makes a conscious effort to explain that the coming of Jesus as Messiah marks a fundamental change in the way God is relating to historic Israel. The privileged position is ending. All peoples will now have the opportunity to experience a covenant relationship directly and personally with God/Yahweh and participate in his Kingdom program, i.e., carrying forward the *mission Dei* in this age, as per the Great Commission. In my view the believing remnant of Israel, the people of God, is subsumed within the Messiah's new assembly, i.e., within the Kingdom. We get no hint from Matthew, in my view, that ethnic Israel retains any special place in God's program, other than the opportunity to participate in the new Messianic assembly, just like any other human being. Conversely, the strongest warnings about divine judgment that Jesus gives in Matthew narrative are to the leaders and people of Israel, should they reject what God is doing in the Messiah Jesus. The language of imminent judgment occupies a significant place within Matthew's Gospel, because it occupied a significant place in Jesus' teaching.

We might add other elements, but these will suffice for an initial orientation. As Stephen Westerholm argues, "Although Matthew has written an inexhaustible text, readers from the first century

until our own have derived the same basic message from his Gospel: Jesus...is a fit object of devotion and discipleship.”¹⁸ Matthew writes so that we will know why this is the case.

A Proposed Outline of Matthew’s Narrative

1. The Birth and Preparation of Jesus, Messiah (1:1-4:16)
 - a. Birth and Childhood (1-2)
 - b. Preparation for Jesus’ Public Ministry (3-4:16)
2. Public Ministry in and around Galilee (4:17-16:20)
 - a. Introduction to Public Ministry (4:17-25)
 - b. Jesus’ Teaching on Life in the Kingdom (5:1-7:29) [Discourse: Sermon on the Mount]
 - c. A Selection of Jesus’ Miracles (8:1-9:34)
 - d. Parallel Ministry of the Disciples (9:35-11:1) [Discourse: Discipleship]
 - e. Varying Response to Jesus’ Messianic Activity (11:2 – 12:50)
 - f. Jesus’ Teaching in Parables (13) [Discourse: Parables]
 - g. Varying Responses to Jesus’ Teaching and Miracles (13:54-16:20)
3. Private Ministry in Galilee: Preparing the Disciples (16:21-18:35)
 - a. Teaching on Jesus’ Mission (16:21-17:27)
 - b. Teaching on Relationships among the Disciples (18:1-19:2) [Discourse: the Messiah’s Assembly]
4. Ministry in Judaea (19:3-25:2)
 - a. On the Way to Jerusalem (19:1-20:34)
 - b. Arrival in Jerusalem (21:1-22)
 - c. Controversies with Jewish Leaders (21:23 – 23:39) [Discourse: Woes against the Religious Leaders]
 - d. Jesus’ Teaching about the Future (24:1 – 26:2) [Discourse: Destruction of Jerusalem and the Return of the Son of Man]
5. The Death and Resurrection of Jesus (26:3-28:20)
 - a. Preparation for the Passion (26:3-46)
 - b. The Arrest and Trial of Jesus (26:47-27:26)
 - c. The Crucifixion of Jesus (27:27-56)

¹⁸ Stephen Westerholm, *Understanding Matthew. The Early Christian Worldview of the First Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 14.

d. The Burial and Resurrection of Jesus (27:57-28:20)¹⁹

¹⁹ Taken largely from R. T. France, *Matthew. Tyndale New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 63-67. There is some borrowing from Turner's outline (David Turner, *Matthew. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008).

The Birth Narrative (Matthew 1-2)

The four canonical Gospels begin in diverse ways and each starting point is linked to the essential purpose of that respective Gospel. Matthew's Gospel begins with a genealogy based in Jewish history, dividing it into four segments, and then flows immediately into details surrounding the family and birth of Jesus Messiah. Matthew, more than any other Gospel, makes explicit the intimate connection that Jesus has with previous Jewish history, expressing a deep sense of fulfillment, and prepares us for the critical role Jesus will play in inaugurating the final and most important segment of that history. Matthew demonstrates great boldness in making these claims towards the end of the 60's. At the very point when Jewish nationalism is reaching boiling point and eschatological expectations are heightened, Matthew declares that all this ferment within Judaism is misdirected, evidence of rebellion against Yahweh, and ultimately destructive. Jesus as Messiah is the central feature in God's future for his people and there is a cause-effect relationship between his treatment by Jewish religious leaders and the tragic events culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.

If Matthew's Gospel has a prologue, i.e., a preparatory section introducing key themes and motifs, it probably is chapters 1-4. In these chapters the writer introduces us to Jesus as Messiah and key character, grounds his narrative in the OT story, indicates God's protective support of Jesus, recognizes the reality of new revelation from God, speaks about "righteousness" (a key concept), identifies the opposition that Jesus will face (Satan), and describes how Jesus inaugurates his mission with the assistance of the Holy Spirit.

The first sentence of Matthew's narrative really says it all. He identifies Jesus as "the Messiah, son of David, son of Abraam." These names and titles insert us directly into the worldview within which Matthew's narrative operates. It is essentially Jewish. But by using the term "Messiah" Matthew asserts (to any Jew who would care to read or listen) that this person Jesus occupies a very special place in God's plans for the Jewish people and comes to inaugurate a whole new era of blessing for the covenant people in fulfillment of Yahweh's promises. This word "Messiah" by itself launches us into an eschatological frame of reference that shapes everything that Matthew presents in his story. However, it is an eschatology quite different from that commonly understood among the various sects in first century Judaism.

The first two words of Matthew's Gospel, "book of origin" (βιβλος γενέσεως),²⁰ represent the same formula used in Greek Genesis 2:4 ("this is the book of heaven and earth's origin" αὕτη ἡ βιβλος

²⁰ Examples of this use of βιβλος or cognates within Judaism to introduce a book/scroll in connection with a genealogy are quite frequent. Consider Nahum 1:1 ("An oracle concerning Nineveh. Book (βιβλίον) of the vision of Nahum of Elkosh"); Tobit 1:1; Baruch 1:1; 2 Esdras 1:1-3.

γενέσεως οὐρανοῦ καὶ γῆς) and 5:1 (“this is the book of humans’ origin” αὕτη ἡ βίβλος γενέσεως ἀνθρώπων). In these instances the phrase seems to mean “this is the book of the history/origin of heaven and earth” and “this is the book of the history/origin of human beings” (consider the use of γένεσις in Exodus 6:24-25 describing the ancestral history of some groups in the Levi tribe). Of course, the name for the Greek translation of the first book in the Hebrew canon was fixed as “Genesis” (Γένεσις) several centuries before Matthew was writing. So on both counts it is probable that Matthew is purposeful in his choice of terms and wants his readers to reflect on the significance of Jesus’ birth in relation to Yahweh’s purposes for the creation of the world and humanity. Perhaps even Matthew would have us consider Jesus’ birth the start of a new creation (cf. Paul’s language in 2 Corinthians 5:17). We need to hear these echoes as we begin this Gospel (cf. John 1:1-3 and the interplay of the Word’s presence and involvement in creation).

We also note that the word γένεσις appears again in v. 18 (“the origin of Jesus Messiah” τοῦ δὲ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἡ γένεσις). In this context the term plainly means birth/origin. This would suggest that Matthew’s first words should also lead us to consider this narrative as “the book of the birth/origin of Jesus Messiah.” Matthew also follows his initial verse by a genealogy and γένεσεως certainly can have this significance – “the book of the genealogy of Jesus Messiah.” Perhaps Matthew intends his readers to keep all three elements (the intertextual resonances with the origin of creation and the name of the first book in the Jewish scriptures, as well as the reference to genealogy) in view as his narrative begins. These words function as the title for the entire narrative, as well as the introduction to the birth narrative of Jesus and the genealogies it contains.

What kind of “book” would Matthew write? Probably a scroll. Larry Hurtado’s recent *The Earliest Christian Artifacts*²¹ gives the quantitative evidence for literary printing materials that have survived from the first and second centuries of our era. Scrolls predominate in the first century. However, in Christian materials the codex soon became predominate and this as early as the second century. If Matthew’s narrative first appeared as a scroll, then this would control to some degree how long his narrative could be, before he would have to split it into two volumes (as Luke-Acts). The earliest unambiguous evidence for a four Gospel codex is Papyrus 45 (Chester Beatty) 45, dated to c.250 CE. All Gospel codices dated to the 2- early 3rd century appear to contain only one Gospel (p52²² John, p66 John, p77 Matthew, p90 John, p103 Matthew, p104 Matthew)²³. However, the order of the Gospels in the major codices, with the exception of D, begin with Matthew (A, B).

²¹ Larry Hurtado. *The Earliest Christian Artifacts. Manuscripts and Christian Origins* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. 2006), 45ff.

²² ‘p52’ means ‘papyrus #52’ in the catalogue of papyri that contain New Testament Greek texts.

²³ Ibid., 72.

The three proper names Matthew mentions in 1:1 create a chiasm with respect to the actual outline of the genealogy in 1:2-17/18. Both David and Abraham were recipients of explicit promises from God that were significant messianically for first century Jewish groups and that for Matthew and other NT writers find their fulfillment in Jesus as Messiah. Through Abraham God promised to bless all the families of the earth (Gen. 12ff). Paul sees the gift of the Holy Spirit to Gentile believers as the fulfillment of this promise (Galatians 3:7-14). In the case of David God promises (2 Samuel 7:11-16) to build an eternal dynasty through him and this promise is transformed in the OT prophets into references to the root or branch of David/Jesse who would come and restore salvation to Israel (e.g., Jeremiah 31-33). In both cases God makes covenant promises. In Jesus as Messiah God will make new covenant promises. That Jesus is a descendant from Abraham defines him ethnically as a Jewish person. That Jesus is a descendant of David makes him eligible to fill the Messianic role.

But Matthew also defines Jesus as Messiah. Perhaps this is the most astounding information that Matthew presents in the title to his narrative. In many ways his narrative, as Mark's Gospel does, seeks to explain how a person executed as a political criminal by the Romans through crucifixion, rejected as a false-messiah by the Jewish religious establishment, and disinterested in restoring Israel's political fortunes and liberating Israel from Roman subjection, is nevertheless the Messiah of God. Jesus' presence brought no release for Israel from Roman subjugation; it did not propel Israel into the position of world dominance; Satan remained active. So if these elements that were central to most Israelite messianic expectation had not occurred through Jesus, and Jesus had been executed, how could he be the Messiah God had promised? It did not make sense to many in Israel. As Paul says, "Christ crucified" trips up Jewish people – it promotes apostasy in the view of traditional Jews. They have great difficulty seeing in Jesus their promised Messiah. Yet this is the central claim that Matthew makes. In so doing it makes his writing essentially Jewish, particularly as it is joined with the figures of Abraham and David. When you compare the initial segment in Mark, you note that Jesus is defined as "Messiah, Son of God" ["son" language also in Matt. 2:15; 3:17; 4:3] and the content of his story is "good news." Maybe for Mark's purpose this is all the genealogy Jesus needs.

Matthew makes a point of using the term "Messiah" (Χριστός *christos*) in a technical sense. The double expression "Jesus Christ" only occurs in v.1 and in 16:21 (but there is textual variation in this context). According to 1:16 Jesus is "the one called the Messiah," an expression repeated in 27:17, 22. So obviously *christos* (Χριστός) has a specific sense. Normally people would not be given this designation. Josephus, in his writings, uses this same expression. Its historical usage in Matt. 16:16 by Peter (and Jesus' response in v. 20) may be the reason why Matthew employs the double expression in 16:21.

1:2-17 – Genealogy

In his stylized, condensed overview of Jewish history in the form of a genealogy, Matthew places Jesus in the context of God’s historical dealings with His people. He focuses on the beginning with Abraham, the Davidic establishment of the Kingdom, and the disaster of the exile. Matthew does not mention Moses or any of the prophets in his survey. However, he is careful to do several things:

- a. He structures each era into segments of 14 generations (cf. v. 17). This is somewhat stylized in that some generations are omitted in some sections. We find similarly structured definitions of historical eras or ages (αιών) present in apocalyptic literature. Such conventions speak to the orderly nature of God’s planning for his people, as well as the limitation of current evil. The presumption is that the era of the Messiah is equally ordered by God and will have a specific conclusion – “the end of the age” (ἡ συντελεῖα τοῦ αἰῶνος 28:20), when the Messiah returns a second time, a phrase that is of particular importance to Matthew (13:39,40,49; 24:3 - only elsewhere in NT at Hebrews 9:26 where the plural “ages” (αιώνων) is used). This is apocalyptic terminology (as in Greek Daniel 8:19; 9:7; 11:35,40; 12:4,7 and the Second Temple, Testament literature Zeb. 9:9; B. 11:3; Levi 10:2; R. 6:8) and it signifies the end of time, often with the sense of completion. Matthew is careful to state in Jesus’ words that the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple will not mark the end (τέλος 24:6).

Some suggest that the number fourteen (generations) is arrived at from the combination of the letters in David’s name – Hebrew $d + w + d = 4 + 6 + 4 = 14$. We do know from other Jewish apocalyptic writings of that era that some were intrigued with the patterns of numbers related to chronology and names. Daniel for example talks about seven weeks of years (= 490 years). However, if this is the source of Matthew’s scheme of 14, then he has not made much of it.

- b. The contents of the genealogy are found in genealogies in the Greek Old Testament (e.g., 1 Chronicles 1-3), plus records that Matthew must have had access to for the post-exilic period. The fact that Joseph knew he had to return to Bethlehem for purposes of revising the taxation lists (census), indicates that some Jews at the time of Jesus were aware of their family histories.

Normally Jewish genealogies do not mention the mother, yet Matthew incorporates four women into this genealogy. Two are certainly gentiles (Rahab – Joshua 2 and Ruth – Ruth 1-2). Tamar may also be Gentile. Jubilees 41:1-2 and Test. Jud. 10:1-2 say she is “a daughter of Aram.” Judah had married a Canaanite woman, Shua, (Gen.38:2) and Er was their son. Since Uriah was a Hittite (2 Sam. 12:9; 1 Kings 15:5), it is quite probable that Bathsheba too was a Gentile. So one of the reasons for naming these four women might be to indicate how God

- had incorporated gentile blood into the Messianic ancestry. This in turn indicates God's intention to incorporate the Gentiles into the Messiah's new assembly. However, each of these women also have rather irregular relationships with men and yet the progeny of these relationships become integral links in the Messiah's ancestry. Tamar was Judah's daughter-in-law. Before she was married, Rahab was a prostitute. Solomon was born through the adultery that David commits with Bathsheba. Given the strange and extraordinary nature of Jesus' birth through Mary, the inclusion of these women in the genealogy serves to demonstrate how God works his "strange righteousness" even through such irregular relationships. We hear nothing about Sarah or Rachel.
- c. In the first segment, Matthew is in essential agreement with Luke's Genealogy (Luke 3:31-34). It ends with David who is described as "the King." Much of this data is also found in the short genealogy in Ruth 4:18-22. The second segment covers the period from Solomon's kingship to the exile (*metoikesia* (μετοικεσία) = deportation, a word only occurring here in the NT). The disaster of deportation is in sharp contrast to the kingship of David that ends the first segment. Jewish people in the first century discussed what God's purpose might have been in the sixth century BCE deportations. Probably this data is taken from 1 Chronicles 3:10-15. Matthew follows the line of Judaeen kings, those that ruled the southern kingdom. Luke traces Jesus' ancestry not through Solomon, but through Nathan, another of David's sons (3:31). Also in the third period Matthew diverges from Luke once Zerubbabel is named. Luke has almost twice as many names as Matthew for this segment. However, we have no OT materials that might be considered a source in this third segment so we do not know how complete either is or what system they have chosen in forming this part of their genealogies. The end of the Matthean genealogy is signaled by the use of different wording to describe the offspring of Joseph – "the husband of Mary from whom Jesus, who is called Messiah, was born." (v.16).
- d. There were various stories circulating in Judaism regarding the paternity of Jesus. We discover these in Rabbinic sources – Jesus Ben Pantera or Ben Pandira, probably a corruption of the Greek term for virgin *parthenos* – υἱος τῆς παρθένου (b. Sanh. 67a; Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 1:32-33). Matthew uses a passive verb "was generated, conceived, born" ἐγεννήθη in v. 16 (ἐξ ἧς ἐγεννήθη Ἰησοῦς ὁ λεγόμενος Χριστός "from whom Jesus, the one called Messiah, was born/generated [by...]" to describe the generation of Jesus, meaning either "be born" or "be conceived." Usually the father is subject of this verb. All other forms of this verb in vv. 2-16 are active. With a passive form the Greek language usually has an implied or explicit agent. Often in the New Testament when the agent is not named, it is assumed to be

- divine, i.e., God the Father, Jesus, the Son, or the Holy Spirit. So Matthew in using the passive may be anticipating the story that is about to unfold. He is interested in the legal paternity of Jesus, not the physical paternity. But in fact we have the issue of descent described on two levels – the human ancestry through Joseph into the Davidic line by adoption, and the divine ancestry through Mary to God. Joseph acknowledges his legal relationship to Jesus by giving him his name. Matthew certainly believed in the virginal conception and birth of Jesus.
- e. Matthew ends the genealogy by defining Jesus as “the one who is called Messiah.”²⁴ This takes us back to 1:1 where Matthew had described his narrative as “the book of the history/birth/genealogy of Jesus Messiah.”²⁵ Is *christos* (Χριστός) ever a name in Matthew or always is it to be regarded as a title? Note that in v. 17 it plainly is read as a title “until the Messiah/*christos*.” However, what about v. 18 “This is how the birth of Jesus Messiah came about.” I think that if we translate *christos*/Χριστός as Messiah and do not transliterate it as “Christ,” then we will discern the proper sense of this word whenever it does occur in Matthew’s Gospel (17x).²⁶ The double term only occurs in Matthew at 1:1, 18; (at 16:20, 21 textual variants occur and so we do not know for sure what Matthew wrote). So the double name only occurs in the text surrounding the genealogy in Matthew. But what is Matthew affirming about Jesus to his readers by using this title? For Jewish people the term “Messiah” had particular significance, but non-Jewish people would have no context whereby to understand the significance of a title that meant “anointed.”
- f. V. 17 then summarizes the information given in the genealogy emphasizing the connection between Abraham, David and the deportation to Babylon and the Messiah. While each segment historically was not exactly fourteen generations, we must ask what Matthew seeks to communicate through this imposed structure? We should note that Matthew summarizes frequently in his narrative and this is the first of many instances. It signals the ending and beginning of narrative sequences.

Both Jewish and Hellenistic narratives about important people often begin with genealogical information. Perhaps Matthew is communicating that Jesus came at just the right time. It should not have been a surprise that the Messiah came when he did, given how God had acted previously at specific times

²⁴ The same expression occurs at Matthew 27:17, 22 in the trial scene with Pilate.

²⁵ Josephus (*Antiquities* 20.200) describes James as “the brother of Jesus who is called Messiah (Ἰησοῦ τοῦ λεγομένου Χριστοῦ).

²⁶ Additional occurrences are found in 2:4 (title); 11:2(title); 16:16 (title); 16:20 (title), 21 (Jesus Messiah – but a variant reading just has Jesus); 22:42 (title); 23:10 (title); 24:5(title),23(title); 26:63(title), 68(title); 27:17(title), 22(title).

in Israel's history. The quest of the Magi may also be linked to this. Why were they looking for the Messiah's star at that time? Galatians 4:4 – Jesus arrived “when the fullness of time came.” Those who linked their lives with the Messiah, appropriated the Messiah's heritage.

Matthew shows that the Christian movement grows out of the Israelite/Jewish theological tradition and history. In fact it is the culmination of it and the divinely created conclusion to it. People cannot understand what Yahweh was doing in Jesus as Messiah, if they are unwilling to read and understand the Old Testament. Yahweh's plan to create a people for himself begins in the first chapters of Genesis. The story enters its final chapter in terms of human history when Jesus comes as Messiah. He represents the most significant part of God's plan. We must remember that the Jewish Scriptures became the Christian Scriptures before any of the New Testament was written. So Matthew is laying claim to this sacred tradition as Christian. But in doing so, he is doing nothing different from Jesus or Paul (cf. Romans 1:1-7; 16:25-27) and is plainly offering an interpretation of these Jewish Scriptures that is at odds with that promoted by other Jewish sects of his day.

1:18-2:23 – The Birth and Infancy of Jesus

The narrative about Jesus' birth and early years comprises several smaller units:

1:18-25 – revelations to Joseph and the birth and naming of Jesus;

2:1-12 – the visit of the Magi when Jesus is about two years old;

2:13-18 – Joseph's escape to Egypt and Herod's slaughter of children in Bethlehem;

2:19-23 -- Herod's death and Joseph's return to Palestine and settlement in Nazareth.

The primary action in these sections is between Joseph, an angel of the Lord, and Herod. Three times (1:20; 2:13,19) an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph “in a dream” and gives specific instructions concerning the birth of the child and its protection from Herod's plot to kill it. Once a message of warning is given to the Magi “in a dream” (2:12), but Matthew does not mention an angel. So God is very engaged in the advent activities to protect Joseph, Mary and the child Jesus, and the Magi.

We might consider why these four stories were selected by Matthew for inclusion in his narrative. Luke's Gospel indicates that other stories were circulating (e.g., shepherds, parallels with John's birth, etc.). If the author knew of these stories, then his selection of these four must in his view be more pertinent to his purposes than other stories of Jesus' birth and early years. Perhaps the linkage between specific OT prophecies and these events is the critical issue. Or perhaps he is emphasizing the opposition to Jesus entrenched in Jewish leadership circles, as well as parallels with prior Jewish leaders, e.g., Moses. Or he may be emphasizing that Herod, despite any pretensions he might have, is certainly not the Messiah.

In the OT the divine agent who leads Israel through the Wilderness is the “angel/messenger of Yahweh/Lord²⁷” (Mt.1:20). The Psalmist declares that “the angel of Yahweh encamps around those that fear him.” This heavenly agent also announces special births in Genesis 16:7 and Judges 13:3. We also meet this figure in Matthew 28:2 at the empty tomb, again delivering a message that explains and encourages.

In both Jewish and Hellenistic culture divine messages were believed to come through dreams or visions. In the OT God speaks to pagan rulers such as Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar in dreams, and then sends a Jewish prophet to interpret the significance of these dreams. Consider also Job 33:15-17. In the case of Joseph and his dreams, Yahweh sends a heavenly agent to do the explaining.

The parallels between this account of Jesus’ birth and infancy and the stories of Moses’ birth are quite striking (cf. Josephus *Antiquities* 2:205ff). We do not know how widespread these ideas about Moses were at the time when Matthew was writing, but Josephus seems to assume they are accepted elements of Moses’ story. If this is the case, then Jewish people hearing or reading Matthew’s narrative would be struck by the parallels and be led to ask whether Jesus is in fact a new Moses. God forecasts to Moses’ father the birth of the child, his role in delivering Israel, and assurance that Pharaoh’s attempts to kill all new-born male Hebrew children would not destroy Moses.

Within this section we also find the first set of formula quotations (1:22-3; 2:5b-6, 15b-c, 17-18 and 23b). Each narrative segment contains one and assures the reader that these events are unfolding precisely as God intended. He is not caught by surprise or thwarted by human wickedness. There is a significant juxtaposition of new divine revelation in dreams, with previous divine revelation in Scripture, but they are implicitly coherent. These quotations:

- a. explain Jesus’ birth as a virgin birth and his significance is defined in the name “Emmanuel” (1:23 = Isaiah 7:14). It is unclear whether this quotation is part of the angel’s message or an editorial comment by the writer;
- b. explain the place where the Messiah is born as Bethlehem (2:5b-6 = Micah 5:2) and his role to “shepherd God’s people, Israel”;
- c. explain the escape to Egypt (2:15b-c = Hosea 11:1);
- d. explain the killing of the infants in Bethlehem (2:17-18 = Jeremiah 31:15);
- e. explain the reference to Jesus being a ‘Nazōraios’ (2:23b = ?? Judges 13:5,7; Isaiah 11:1; 53:2).

Matthew characterizes Joseph as being just (in the sense of acting in accord with the covenant/Law of Moses), gracious, deliberate. He is contracted to be married to Mary. While not yet co-

²⁷ The Greek term κύριος (Lord) translates the proper name of God (Yahweh) in the Greek translation of the Old Testament.

habiting, legally they were considered married (Deut. 22:23-27) and so divorce and widowhood were potential implications of this state. In v. 19 Joseph is called Mary's "husband (ὁ ἀνὴρ αὐτῆς)." During the period of betrothal the woman was the responsibility of her father. Note the initial statements about the role of the Holy Spirit (vv. 18, 20).

The word translated "came together," i.e., became sexually intimate (v.18), may also have the sense of "set up house together." It indicates that no sexual relations had yet occurred between Joseph and Mary. It is Mary's pregnancy in this period prior to sexual relations with Joseph that creates the problem. Because he respected the Law of Moses, Joseph considered divorce to be the necessary and 'right' (*dikaios* δίκαιος) action. Joseph could do this in a very public way, using methods of public trial to accuse Mary and seek redress through divorce. This would make Mary an 'example' (*deigmatizai* δειγματίζωι)²⁸. Or, it seems he could write the bill of divorce himself, have it signed by two or three witnesses (*lathrai* λάθρα = quietly). After²⁹ he had reflected (*enthymēthentos* ἐνθυμηθέντος)³⁰ on these options, an angel of the Lord appears to him. Given other uses in Matthew's Gospel (9:4; 12:25) there may be the sense that Joseph's thoughts were leading him in a wrong direction and so God sends the heavenly messenger to get Joseph moving in the right direction.

Mary is described (v. 18b) as "being pregnant from Holy Spirit." This language is repeated in the quotation from Isaiah in v. 23. Whether Joseph knew about the role of the Spirit in this process is unclear from the narrative, but it is a reasonable presumption that Mary, as the pregnancy is discovered, would be called upon to give explanation. Regardless, Matthew wants his readers to be well aware of this reality. Matthew does not go into details about the role of the Spirit in this process. For God to be involved in a miraculous birth is well known from the OT (cf. Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac). But in those cases the normal processes of human procreation are employed. Here, the role of the Spirit seems to suggest an abnormal process, with no other human agent involved. [Cf. the role of the Spirit in world creation as described in Genesis 1:2]

Joseph is identified as a Davidid by the angel – Joseph, son of David. This is what the genealogy has just revealed. The angel's message acknowledges the 'fear' Joseph was experiencing at the prospect of consummating the betrothal to Mary. He tells Joseph "to take Mary home," i.e., complete the marriage

²⁸ A rare word only occurring here in the Synoptics and elsewhere in the NT only at Colossians 2:15. Basic sense is to bring to public notice.

²⁹ Matthew uses an aorist passive genitive absolute construction here, as he does only elsewhere in 2:1, 13, 19. This serves to link these stories together. These are good examples by which to discern how the action of the aorist participle is related to the main verb. Note how NIV renders each by a temporal clause "After...."

³⁰ This term is unique to Matthew. The compound *dienthymeomai* διενθυμέομαι occurs in Acts 10:19 – Peter ponders the vision on the rooftop. In LXX it refers to God pondering destruction (Gen. 6:6, 7; Isaiah 10:7; Lam. 2:17) or human beings entertaining wicked thoughts (Joshua 7:21; Isaiah 37:29; Wisdom 3:14). It signifies that a person is processing information by thinking carefully about it. Cf. Matthew 9:4:12:25 where Jesus challenges religious leaders who are thinking evil thoughts.

arrangements, and he does in v. 24, confirming his obedience. This same verb (*paralambanein* παραλαμβάνειν) occurs also at 1:24; 2:13, 14, 20, 21 (as well as many other times in Matthew). Again it serves to link these stories together. The angel affirms that Mary’s pregnancy is a divine act – “that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.”³¹ Again the Holy Spirit is named as source of this conception and since the participle is passive but no agent is made explicit, perhaps again we have a divine passive structure (cf. v. 18). The angel also reveals the gender of the child, what name Joseph will give to the child, and why this child is so special (v. 21). I think the angel’s message to Joseph includes vv. 20b -23, i.e., the quotation from Isaiah. If this is the case, then not all of the OT texts cited as fulfillment texts originate with the writer of this Gospel.

God often in Scripture assigns names to people, that have some etymological significance.³² This example is unique in that the meaning of the name relates to the future action of this person.³³ The name Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua. It is related to Hebrew words meaning salvation or save. This relates then directly to the child’s prophesied role – “he will save his people from their sins” (v.21).³⁴ Right from the beginning Matthew makes clear that the deliverance Jesus Messiah brings is a spiritual deliverance (reference to sins), not a political or military deliverance. At the last Passover meal Jesus says that his blood is “poured out for the forgiveness of sins.” How Jews in the first century understood the nature of divine forgiveness is not clear. God could forgive and did, but on what basis, other than general covenant relationship, is not specified. Forgiveness of sins is a key part of John the Baptist’s message to Israel. The only reference³⁵ in specifically pre-Christian literature where forgiveness of sins is a Messianic activity occurs in 11QMelch. 2:6-8 (a document among the Dead Sea Scrolls):

He will proclaim liberty for them, to free them from [the debt] of all their iniquities. And this will [happen] in the first week of the jubilee which follows the ni[ne] jubilees. And the day [of atonem]ent is the end of the tenth jubilee in which atonement will be made for all the sons of {God} and for the men of the lot of Melchizedek.

The salvation or deliverance Jesus will bring applies to “his people,” i.e., Jewish people, among whom he finds his identity and purpose, but we cannot ignore the fact that the outcome of his mission will affect all nations (28:19-20). Perhaps this expression “his people” carries within it a double element, one of which relates to the inclusion of non-Jewish people within his activities as “his people.”

³¹ Compare similar angelic messages in Genesis 16:11 “you are pregnant and you will bear a son and you will call his Ismael, because....” σὺ ἐν γαστρὶ ἔχεις καὶ τέξῃ υἱὸν καὶ καλέσεις τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Ἰσμαήλ, ὅτι... . Compare also Genesis 17:19; Isaiah 7:14.

³² God’s statement re the servant in Isaiah 43:1 “I have called you by name, you are mine.”

³³ Of course, birth oracles will often define that future role, but not the assigned name per se.

³⁴ Forgiveness of sins in Matthew’s Gospel – 9:6,8; 18:12-35; 26:28.

³⁵ It is also mentioned in the Targum to Isaiah 53:4, 6-7, but the date of this material is quite uncertain.

The first formula quotation is unexpectedly placed prior to its literal fulfillment.³⁶ The previous directives from the angel, when completed, will fulfill this prophecy. The simple reading of the text would lead us to assume that this statement of fulfillment and the prophecy that follows were part of the angel's message to Joseph, although not all would agree. Only here and in 2:15 does the phrase "by the Lord" modify "that which was spoken." Perhaps this emphasizes the coherence between the message given by the angel of the Lord and the prophecy spoken to Isaiah "by the Lord" centuries earlier. The Septuagint (Greek) text of Isaiah 7:14 is:

Behold, the virgin shall conceive and shall bear a son and you (singular) will call his name Emmanuel. (my translation)

ἰδοὺ ἡ παρθένος ἐν γαστρὶ ἔξει καὶ τέξεται υἱόν, καὶ καλέσεις [Matt. καλέσουσιν] τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Ἐμμανουήλ

The primary change is in the verb "you shall call" to "they shall call." Perhaps Matthew alters the text in order to remove any contradiction regarding the previous naming instruction and also to remove the naming function from Mary, which the singular would require her to do. Or, perhaps Matthew anticipates that the nations will recognize in Jesus their "Emmanuel." The wording of this oracle indicates that the virgin "will be pregnant" while a virgin. The Greek word *parthenos* παρθένος normally would signify a young woman who is still a virgin, i.e., never engaged in sexual activity (BDAG).³⁷ The corresponding Hebrew word *'almâ* does not necessarily imply a woman who is a virgin, but it can be applied to a woman who was a virgin. This is the only context in the LXX where this Greek noun translates this Hebrew noun. So παρθένος is part of the Isaiah text and not a term chosen by Matthew for his narrative.

The oracle as given in Isaiah 7 relates to Ahaz and the birth of a son to him and heir to the throne (a Davidid). There is no evidence from Jewish sources prior to Jesus that this text was ever given a messianic interpretation. How it became connected with Jesus and the events surrounding his birth remains a mystery. My opinion would be that Joseph and Mary shared their experiences of heavenly visions and these became known to the early Christian community. Jesus himself may also have reinforced this understanding among his followers (cf. Luke 24:45-49).

The interpretation of "Emmanuel" as "God with us"³⁸ comes from Isaiah 8:8, 10. Matthew will pick up this concept several times through his narrative, particularly in 18:20 and 28:20 (cf. 17:17). What are we to make of this name and its implications for our understanding of Jesus? Does Matthew want us to equate Jesus with Yahweh? We can perhaps substantiate this as we consider the God-like actions of

³⁶ Usually in Matthew's narrative such fulfillment statements come at the end of the narrative section as an editorial comment. Here it is part of the angel's message and so has to occur within the scope of his message. This also occurs at 21:4-5 where it is linked with a statement by Jesus in the discourse.

³⁷ Bauer, Danker, Arndt and Gingrich (BDAG), *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 777.

³⁸ Basic motif in the historical books of the OT – God with us is a covenant formulation.

Jesus in the narrative, the worship that is attributed to him, and statements such as 18:20, which imply a spiritual presence that supersedes any mere physical reality. Matthew twice has indicated that Jesus' birth comes through the action of the Holy Spirit. Whose 'son' is born (v. 23)? Is it Yahweh's, who is mentioned in v. 22? However, some suggest that such a powerful Christological statement at the beginning of the narrative is unwarranted. Matthew has a high Christology, but it is cumulative, it is proposed. So some would argue for a more general sense such as "God is with us," indicating an eschatological promise being fulfilled in Jesus. However, in just a few chapters, at Jesus' baptism, God speaks and identifies Jesus as "my son, the beloved one" (3:17) and who is the 'Lord' whose way John prepares (3:3)? We must remember that Matthew is writing in the mid-60's of the first century and we have already had the early Church making profound claims for Jesus as evident in Paul's writings (i.e., Phil. 2:5-11). Regardless of your final decision about this question, Matthew by using this material is asserting that everything about Jesus comes from God and is entirely in accord with God's character and plan. Matthew is quite clear that the idea for the Messiah's virgin birth is God's. Probably it is related to the issue of fallen humanity – the need to distinguish between the first and second Adam, as Paul argues in Romans 5.

Matthew (vv. 24-25) emphasizes Joseph's obedience to the angel's commands and his commitment to understanding God's purposes for his son and his significance. The verb "having arisen" (ἐγερθεῖς) describes Joseph's obedient actions also in 2:13-14, 20-21, both times in response to the angel's command. That Joseph had no sexual relations with Mary until the child was born is stated clearly. However, from other indications in the Gospel narrative, Mary later had other children with Joseph (cf. 13:55) – at least four brothers and additional sisters (not named). At the risk of sounding blunt, in my view there is no basis in Matthew, Mark or Luke's narrative for the concept of Mary's perpetual virginity.

The Magi and Herod (2:1-12)

Herod is Herod the Great, the one who rebuilt the temple and who died in 4 B.C. after ruling Israel as a Roman client king for 33 years (37-4 BC). As Nolland summarizes:

He was a figure of heroic proportions, whose rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple represented a major feat of ancient architecture, but whose rule was tyrannical, ruthless and cruel.³⁹

This means that Jesus' birth happened before 4 B.C. If Herod killed infants two years of age and younger in an attempt to murder the baby Jesus, and if the Magi had to travel to Jerusalem for some time 'from the

³⁹ John Nolland, 108.

east', then Jesus was perhaps born around 6 B.C. At this point Herod's rebuilding of the temple precinct would have been in full swing, with the new temple precinct itself probably dedicated five to ten years previously.

How does Matthew characterize Herod? He calls him 'the king' several times (vv. 1, 3, 9). It is only implied that he is king of the Jews because he is resident in Jerusalem (v. 3). We get a sense of his ruthlessness as he schemes to kill the infant Jesus, first through the Magi and then, when God prevents that from happening, through the slaughter of young babies in and around Bethlehem. Matthew also implies that Herod has some awareness about the messianic expectations within Judaism. He knows about prophecies related to this figure and realizes that they are found within the Jewish scriptures. If Herod knows that Jesus has messianic claims, then why does he seek to kill him? Is this merely a political act, the removal of someone who according to Jewish prophesy would sit upon the throne of David, the one that Herod thought he possessed? Had Herod attempted to appropriate to himself the messianic mantle by rebuilding the temple, i.e., acting like a new Solomon? Is it part of his political scheme to position himself as the new David? Herod the king died, but there was no resurrection for him.

The Magi originate in the "East" (ἀπὸ ἀνατολῶν v. 1), a very general geographical indicator which could be Arabia, Babylon or Persia. While the term μάγοι has various connotations in antiquity, including a member of the priestly caste of the Medes and Persians (Zoroastrians) who were known for their ability to interpret dreams, magician, deceiver, astrologer, or oriental sage. In Matthew's story, given their connection with the star and its interpretation, they probably are astrologers. Presumably, they are Gentiles, but we do have some instances of Jews who are named Magi in the NT (Acts 8:9-24: Simon; Acts 13:6-11; Elymas; Josephus *Antiquities* 20.142: Atomus). If they are Gentile, then Matthew may be emphasizing that the best spiritual leadership among the Gentiles comes and does homage to the newborn Messiah, even though Jewish leadership rejects him (i.e., Herod). Non-Jewish diviners recognize that God is doing something special at that time. Jewish tradition held Balaam to be a Magos (Philo. Moses 1.276), a prophet for the Gentiles who also gave the prophecy about the star and the scepter (Numbers 23:7; Balaam was ἐξ ὀρέων ἀπ' ἀνατολῶν LXX). In Numbers 24:7 Balaam prophecies that "a star will come forth (ἀνατελεῖ ἄστρον) out of Israel."⁴⁰ They come to Jerusalem⁴¹ because they have seen the star of "the king of the Jews/Judeans" (v. 2)⁴² and Jerusalem was the throne city of the Jewish king. The occurrence

⁴⁰ Perhaps the appearance of the Magi is in itself a fulfillment of prophecy as given in Isaiah 60:3-6 – "those from Sheba who will come, who will bring to Jerusalem the wealth of the nations, gold and silver, as the glory of the Lord rises upon her" (cf. Psalm 72:10-11).

⁴¹ The verb *paraginomai* παραγίνομαι occurs here and at 3:1 where John the Baptist is introduced and 3:13 where Jesus is introduced.

⁴² In the NT the title "King of the Jews" only occurs on the lips of Gentiles. Jews use the expression "King of Israel." Cf. the Passion narrative. In Josephus Herod the Great is called the King of the Jews (*Antiquities* 15.373; 16:311).

of celestial phenomenon coincident with the birth of a king is known in the Greco-Roman world. Tacitus, the Roman historian, says that “when a brilliant comet now appeared...people speculated on Nero’s successor as though Nero were already dethroned” (*Ann.* 14.22). In the Roman world there was expectation of a world-ruler who would come from Judea (Tacitus *Hist.* 5.13⁴³; Suetonius *Vespasian* 4⁴⁴).

We could translate the first part of v. 2 in two different ways:

“where is the newborn king of the Jews”

“where is the one who has been born as king of the Jews”

Given the position of the participle before the phrase “king of the Jews,” I think the first is more probably Matthew’s intent, with the participle functioning as an adjective. The use of the verb *tektein* τέκτειν links this statement back to the prophecy about Mary’s giving birth (v. 21)

The Magi say they have seen “his star at its rising.” Points of the compass normally do not have the article (as in v. 1).⁴⁵ So presumably the sense is more linked to the rising of the star. Perhaps this language reflects that used in Numbers 24:17 of a star rising out of Jacob. In Balaam’s prophecy the star is the ruler; it does not signal the ruler. However, this might be a splitting of hairs. Qumran documents indicate that Numbers 24:17 was understood to be a reference to a priestly Messiah (CD 7:18-26).⁴⁶ As well there is a similar interpretation in Testament of Levi 18.3.⁴⁷ This text in Numbers was certainly at the center of a lot of speculation at the turn of the era.

The intent of the Magi in locating the “newborn King of the Jews” is to “do obeisance.” The verb προσκυνεῖν in Matthew can mean show reverence towards (4:9,10) and seems to suggest worship when used with Jesus (14:33; 28:9,17). Whether it has this sense here is uncertain. In Matthew’s Gospel it means generally to show respect towards by genuflecting. Perhaps there is some ambiguity in its usage here.

How Herod hears about the Magi’s arrival is not stated, but we know from Josephus that he had his spies. Because he interprets the Magi’s quest as having Messianic significance and potential threat to his position, he requires the Jewish experts in the Scriptures – the chief priests and scribes of the people – to tell him where these Scriptures said that the Messiah would be born. They do not hesitate to identify

⁴³ “There was a firm persuasion that in the ancient records of their priests was contained a prediction of how at this very time the East was to grow powerful, and rulers, coming from Judaea, were to acquire universal empire. These mysterious prophecies had pointed to Vespasian and Titus.”

⁴⁴ “There had spread over all the Orient an old and established belief that it was fated at that time for men coming from Judaea to rule the world. This prediction, referring to the Emperor of Rome, as afterwards appeared from the event, the people of Judaea took to themselves.”

⁴⁵ Blass-Debrunner-Funk, *Grammar of New Testament Greek*, §253.5, but there are some exceptions to this.

⁴⁶ “And the star is the Interpreter of the law who will come to Damascus as is written: *Num 24:13* ‘A star moves out of Jacob, and a scepter arises out of Israel’. The scepter is the prince of the whole congregation and when he rises he will destroy all the sons of Seth.”

⁴⁷ The Jewish messianic revolutionary Bar Kosiva changed his name to Bar Kochba, ‘son of the star’.

Bethlehem, based upon Micah 5:2. However, the text that Matthew uses is not equivalent to the LXX or the Hebrew text. There seems to be some material inserted from 2 Samuel 5:2, particularly the last clause about the one “who will shepherd my people Israel.” So we seem to have a conflation of two texts from Micah 5 and 2 Samuel 5. Composite or merged quotations are said “to be few and far between in rabbinic sources,”⁴⁸ but they are frequent in Mark's Gospel. Matthew perhaps interprets the OT materials here rather than quotes. However, he does not take advantage of the additional information in Micah 5:2ff that would strengthen his case. Perhaps he thought readers or listeners would take time to reflect upon the larger context of Micah 5 and 2 Samuel 5 because of his citation of portions from these texts. The terminology of leadership and shepherding links well with the prior statements that the infant Jesus will save his people from their sins. While claiming 2 Samuel as a prophetic source sounds odd to us today, within the Jewish scriptures the books from Joshua to 2 Kings are called the “Former Prophets.”

Herod summons the Magi ‘secretly’, intending to learn accurately the time when the star appeared. Why is Herod so concerned about an accurate determination of time? He sent them to Bethlehem, based upon the information he received from the chief priests and scribes. The location of the child at a specific home in Bethlehem is what Herod wants to learn. He professes a desire to do obeisance (as the Magi subsequently do), but the continuation of the story puts a very different slant on Herod’s motives. The star moves ahead and locates itself “over the place where the child was” (v. 9). It is only 6 miles from Jerusalem to Bethlehem and Herod had one of his palace fortresses about 2-3 kilometers from Bethlehem. The Magi, seeing the star’s position, were filled with great joy. Matthew uses a very emphatic form here to underline the magnitude of their joy. Could Herod see the star also?

No mention of Joseph occurs in vv. 11-12, rather Mary is the centre of attention. She and the child are “in the house” in Bethlehem, indicating that time has passed since the birth in the animal enclosure. The actions of the Magi towards the child are defined as “worship” and “make an offering, offering to him gifts.” The gifts, given their value as luxury items, reflect the dignity and status they ascribe to this child and the role for which he was born.

Vv. 13-15 are part of the Magi episode, connected by v.13 – “when they had gone away,” using the same verb from v. 12 (*anechōrēsan ἀνεχώρησαν*). God cares for the new child again through the angel of the Lord who appears to Joseph in a dream. Matthew uses the first of many historic presents (*phainetai φαίνεται*, v. 13) here. Matthew infrequently keeps these verb tense-forms found in the Markan material, but often creates his own. Another occurs in v. 19, again following a genitive absolute construction and incorporating the action of an angel. Whether these verb forms mark a new segment or rather emphasize the action is disputed.

⁴⁸ Allison and Davies, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Matthew*. Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), 242. cf. Fitzmyer, *The Semitic Background of the New Testament*, p. 60-89.

The flight to Egypt is a common motif in the OT. The best known of these cases would be Abraham and then the family of Jacob during the famine period, leading to Israel's captivity in Egypt. Jeremiah flees to Egypt after the destruction of Jerusalem. So Egypt is both a place of refuge and a place of slavery. The angel does not tell Joseph how long the period in Egypt will be, but does promise that when it is time to return, he will let Joseph know. The rationale for staying in Egypt is clearly expressed in v. 13 – Herod will seek to destroy the child. Perhaps Matthew intends this threat to be a forecasting of the threat of crucifixion that emerges towards the end of Jesus' ministry (the verb *apolusai* (ἀπολύσαι) also appears in 27:20). Just as the Magi "went away into their country" at the command of the angel, so Joseph "went away into Egypt" (v. 14; cf. v. 22 and 4:12-13). The speed of his obedience is indicated by the fact that he leaves "during night." Perhaps also there is a sense of secrecy in the action.

We encounter another quotation introduced by the fulfillment formula in v. 15. It is Herod's death that triggers the next set of events, but before this occurs, Matthew will go back and narrate the slaughter of the infants by Herod in Bethlehem. The quotation is from Hosea 11:1, but does not seem to be Septuagintal in wording. One of the key reasons for Jesus' refuge in Egypt is so that he would follow in the footsteps of Israel in a typological sense. This quotation focuses on the fact of his coming out of Egypt, not his descent into Egypt.

LXX: and out of Egypt I have called his children καὶ ἐξ Αἰγύπτου μετεκάλεσα τὰ τέκνα αὐτοῦ

Matt: out of Egypt I called my son ἐξ Αἰγύπτου ἐκάλεσα τὸν υἱόν μου

Aquila: and out of Egypt I called my son καὶ ἀπὸ Αἰγύπτου ἐκάλεσα τὸν υἱόν μου

Aquila (first century literal Greek translation of the Jewish Scriptures) and Matthew's renderings agree with the Hebrew text.⁴⁹

There is also some hint of this messianic stay in Egypt in Numbers 24:8 (LXX reads "God led him out of Egypt" (8) after "A man will come forth from his seed" (7)), which precedes the star and scepter prophecy (Num. 24:17-18). Now Matthew must have known that the Hosea prophecy related in basic form to Israel. He could read. So we must understand the prophetic note about the Messiah in this text in relation to the Messiah's typological repetition of Israel's experience and that in some sense the Messiah incorporates within himself all that Israel represents (i.e., corporate son of man figure in Daniel 7).

Also, this quotation provides us with the first occasion when Matthew affirms that the child is "God's son" (i.e., my son). Given that Matthew does not quote the LXX version, which does not have this

⁴⁹ What this agreement between Matthew's text and Aquila's translation means is debated. Unfortunately the manuscript from Wadi Muraba'at of the Twelve Minor Prophets does not contain any materials from Hosea. However, we might speculate that the writer of Matthew (or his community) had a scroll of the Twelve that shared characteristics with this revised text, that seems to adapt the LXX text more closely to the emerging MT's Hebrew textual tradition.

text, it would seem that he is being deliberate in his connection of this terminology “my son” with Jesus. Of course, although the Old Greek translation of Hos 11:1 has τὰ τέκνα αὐτοῦ “his offspring,” referring to the people of Israel, we do know that in the Old Greek translation of Exodus, Yahweh calls Israel “my firstborn son.” So there may be some intertextual influences occurring as the writer seeks to bring the OT texts into a more explicit relationship with Jesus and his role in Israel. In chapters 3-4 Jesus’ role as son of God will be emphasized even more. Here we see Matthew’s Christology emerging. The singular form in the Hebrew text suits Matthew’s purposes, as does the term υἱός.

V. 16 picks up the Magi’s action in v. 12, as they ignore Herod’s request. Herod is angered because he considers he has been duped or deceived (*empaizō ἐμπαίζω* – mocked – cf. 27:3, 24 when Jesus is mocked; cf. Jeremiah 10:15). Herod’s response was to become “very angry” (*thumoō θυμώω* – frequent in LXX but only found here in NT). Herod’s fury is documented by Josephus and often it resulted in the death of specific people. He used indiscriminate killing to remove threats to his kingly power. Estimates of the population of Bethlehem at that time would suggest that probably no more than twenty children were involved. However horrific this is, it was certainly within the range of what we know about Herod’s ruthlessness. Rachel’s tomb was in the region around Bethlehem and this prepares us for the formula quotation that comes in v. 17. The decision to kill infants two years and under is related back to 2:7 and the accurate information given about the star by the Magi.

In vv. 17-18, because the prophecy is fulfilled by someone who has no intent that his actions are done to fulfill scripture (i.e., Herod; consider also Judas (26:14-16, 47-50; 27:2-10)), Matthew introduces the quotation with τότε= then, rather than ἵνα = in order that or ὅπως = so that, as he normally does. He also names the prophet he is quoting – Jeremiah. The quotation is from Jeremiah 31(38Hebrew):15. Only Matthew in the NT mentions Jeremiah by name (2:17; 16:14; 27:9). The Jeremiah text laments the exile and captivity of Israelites, even as it anticipates the return and the establishment of a new covenant (31:31). Perhaps Matthew is regarding the time in Egypt similarly as an exile for Jesus. The death of infants would similarly reflect the tragic circumstances of the first exile. The text seems to be closer to the Hebrew text we have, than to the LXX.

Matthew concludes his narrative about Jesus’ birth and infancy (2:19-23) by describing Joseph’s return from Egypt with his family and their decision to settle in Nazareth. The reference to the death of Herod in v. 15 is picked up, indicating that the time in Egypt is ending. The angelic messenger returns in a dream to Joseph, just as he had promised (v. 13). The use once again of the genitive absolute with *idou* (ἰδοῦ)⁵⁰ follows the pattern we have seen in 1:20; 2:1, and 13, indicating something surprising. As well, at 1:20 and 2:13 it is used in conjunction with the angel’s appearance in a dream. Matthew also uses the

⁵⁰ The adverbial interjection occurs frequently in Matthew, but specifically in 1:20, 23; 2:1, 9, 13, 19, and usually is associated with a divine revelation. Perhaps we might render it “astonishingly, you won’t believe this but.”

historic present *phainetai* (φαίνεται) in v. 19 as he had in v.13, perhaps adding a sense of drama. Further repetition occurs in the angel's words as the same expressions used in v. 13 recur. However, this time the journey is "to the land of Israel." The plural "those seeking" is surprising since Herod is the only one who specifically had this motive. However, Matthew may be including the ones who carried out Herod's command. There may also be an echo here of the language God uses to tell Moses to return from Midian to Egypt (Exodus 4:19-20) where we read "all those who were seeking your life are dead." Joseph's obedience mirrors the angel's instructions almost word-for-word (v. 21).

When Herod died, his kingdom was divided into several sections. Archelaus, one of Herod's sons, was assigned to be Tetrarch of Judea, Samaria and Idumea. Josephus says that he began his rule by slaughtering 3,000 people, in an attempt to quell a disturbance at Passover in the Temple precinct.⁵¹ Joseph had good reason to fear that Archelaus would react just as his father had done.⁵² Philip was Tetrarch of Trachonitis and Herod Antipas was Tetrarch of Galilee and Perea. If Judea was ruled out, then where in Palestine should Joseph settle? Again God intervenes to solve the problem and directs him to "the regions of Galilee." He settles "in a city called Nazareth." The language of v. 22b parallels that used in v. 12. It seems from the verbal phrase ἐκεῖ ἀπελθεῖν (to return/go back there) that Joseph heard about the actions of Archelaus before he left Egypt. His fear then kept him from entering Judea at all. After receiving the angel's instruction, he journeyed to Nazareth, avoiding Judea. Although Matthew calls Nazareth a πόλις, we should not think he was confused or mistaken because in popular language the words πόλις and κώμη (village, town) were often loosely applied. Archeological remains would suggest that Nazareth had a population of about 500 at this time.⁵³

Matthew ends this segment with another formula quotation. The introduction to the quotation is different from the previous examples in that the word 'prophet' is plural and there is no participle 'saying', but rather the conjunction ὅτι (that). This might suggest that Matthew is being a little less definitive as to source. In fact he may not be quoting but making a general summary that this idea was expressed in the prophets, but not specifically stated in any one.

It is difficult to discern what is being claimed here. Some argue that Matthew is suggesting Jesus was a Nazarite, as Samuel or Samson, both of whose births occurred in unusual situations. Allison and Davis seek to connect this idea with the claim that Jesus is ἅγιος τοῦ θεοῦ. In the double Greek tradition of Judges, when the A text reads Ναζαραῖος θεοῦ, the B text reads ἅγιος τοῦ θεοῦ. They point to a text

⁵¹ Josephus, *Antiquities* 17.213-217

⁵² Eventually things got so bad that the Jewish leaders complained to Caesar and Archelaus was exiled to Gaul in 6.CE Josephus *Antiquities* 17.342-44. The Romans appointed their own governor at that point.

⁵³ The proper name of this town occurs in Matthew in three different forms: Ναζαρέτ (2:23); Ναζαρά (4:13); Ναζαρέθ (21:11). However there are textual variations in each context. The adjectival form Ναζαρηνός occurs in Mark and Luke; Ναζωραῖος occurs in Matthew, Luke-Acts and John.

such as Mark 1:24 where again these two ideas occur together, but in relation to Jesus. They also link this with Isaiah 4:3 “He will be called holy”, suggesting that “Nazirite” = holy, following the description of the “Branch of the Lord” in Isaiah 4:2. Nolland suggests that this is a ‘tortuous journey’ of exegesis. We should note that Matthew does not seem to make any use of the category of Nazirite in application to Jesus in his narrative. Nor does he alone among the four gospels ever call Jesus “the holy one of God” (he has no equivalent to Mark 1:24).

An alternative is to see reference to the Hebrew word *nsr* meaning branch or sprout and sometimes applied to the messiah. If this is the case, then Isaiah 11:1 might be the reference – “There will come forth from the stump of Jesse and from his roots a sprout (*neser*) will blossom.” This is a messianic text and one that would support Matthew’s previous references to Jesus’ Messianic role. Perhaps we should see some integration between Isaiah 4:2-3 and Isaiah 11:1 as providing the background to Matthew’s citation.

In each of the formula quotations in Matthew 2 we have place references: Bethlehem, city of David; Egypt, place of bondage; Ramah, linked with the exile. This might encourage us to see a reference to Nazareth in the final reference. These places bring forward key events in Israel’s history and link Jesus in another subtle way with the whole sweep of Jewish history.

What does Matthew then emphasize in this inaugural section of his narrative?

1. Jesus is the Messiah and God takes care to look after him – son of God ontologically and obediently.
2. The Messiah’s life follows the pattern of Israel’s history – Jesus/Israel typology.
3. Human and Israelite history are about to enter their final stage, which precedes the second coming of this Messiah.
4. God has a program he is following and human sin cannot destroy it.
5. God revealed the essence of his program in the Old Testament and the birth and nativity of Jesus can be associated with specific prophecies found in those sacred writings. None of God’s covenant promises will fail.
6. The opposition to the Messiah and his mission emerges at his birth.

John the Baptist and Jesus' Call (Matthew 3-4)

Matthew says nothing about the childhood or adolescence of Jesus, once he returns from Egypt.

In 13:53-58 Matthew divulges some information about Jesus' family:

- Joseph his father is a τέκτων (builder, carpenter)
- Mary is his mother and she has additional children
- He has four brothers – James, Joseph, Simon, Judas – but is the oldest son
- He has sisters
- He was resident in Nazareth for these years.

We jump from the time when Jesus was 2-3 years old (2:23; c. 2-4 B.C.E.), to the time of John the Baptist's ministry (Jesus is about 30 years old). Luke dates John's ministry to "the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar" (Luke 3:1). Tiberius became Caesar in 14 CE and so this would mean John began his ministry around 29 CE. Luke also says that Jesus was himself "about thirty years old when he began his ministry." (3:23). If this data is correct and we have no reason to doubt it, then about thirty years have passed between the end of Matthew 2 and the beginning of Matthew 3. Matthew's general time reference "in those days" smoothed over this gap in chronology. We are sometime 26-29 CE.

We find four major stories in this segment:

John's ministry and message	3:1-12
Jesus' Baptism by John	3:13-17
Jesus' Temptation by Satan	4:1-12
Jesus Begins his Ministry in Galilee	4:13-25

Matthew introduces John the Baptist as a new witness to the significance of Jesus. Stories of John are found at the beginning of each Gospel narrative. Peter (Acts 10:37ff) and Paul (Acts 13:24-25) mention John in their preaching. Josephus also mentions John the Baptist and his information parallels that of the Gospels very closely.⁵⁴ Josephus' description of John's teaching is particularly significant:

[He] exhorted the Jews to lead righteous lives, to practice justice towards their fellows and piety towards God, and so doing to join in baptism (βαπτισμῶ). In his view this was a necessary preliminary if baptism (βάπτισις] was to be acceptable to God. They must not employ it to gain pardon for whatever sins they committed, but as a consecration of the body implying that the soul was already thoroughly cleansed by right behaviour.⁵⁵

But who is he and why does he introduce us to Jesus in this way?

⁵⁴ Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.116-119

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 117.

Matthew 3:1-12

Matthew tells us five essential things about John. Each of these is foundational to understanding the significance of Jesus. We also need to discern that John foreshadows in his own ministry many aspects of Jesus' ministry. Jesus defines the significance of John in Matthew 11. A similar comparison occurs in Mark's Gospel:

- John and Jesus say similar things – 3:2 and 4:17
- They are introduced in a similar fashion – 3:1 and 3:13
- They are opposed by Jewish religious leaders – 3:7-10 and 12:34; 23:33
- They appeal for repentance (11:16-19)
- They act on the same authority, a heavenly authority (21:23-32)
- They are considered prophets by the people – 11:9; 14:5; 21:11, 26, 46)
- They are rejected and executed as criminals through the initiative of Jewish leaders – 14:1-12; 26-27)
- They are buried by their own disciples – (14:12; 27:57-61)
- Luke – miraculous birth for both and somehow related by family.

1. He comes as the herald of God, proclaimer (as defined in the quotation from Isaiah 40:3). The place of his ministry, the wilderness, is also important. Because of Israel's history, the wilderness was viewed in Jewish tradition as the place of eschatological renewal (Hosea 2:14-25; Ezekiel 20:33-38). This is probably why the Qumran community lived in the wilderness (CD. 8:12-15; 1QS 9:20 "This is the time for making ready the path to the desert and he will teach them about all that has been discovered so that they can carry it out in this moment and so they will be detached from anyone who has not withdrawn his path from all wickedness"). John summons the people to join him in the wilderness, an unusual direction for a prophet to take. Usually the prophet goes to the people. Various messianic pretenders in the first century gathered Jewish people in wilderness⁵⁶ areas in preparation for assault on Roman positions.

2. In vv. 1-3 John comes in fulfillment of the prophecy given in Isaiah 40:3. His message is distinct and provocative; "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has drawn near." Matthew's emphasis is slightly different from Mark 1:4 and Luke 3:3, but is not contradictory to these reports. He wants to emphasize the identity between John and Jesus in terms of their message. We will seek to understand John's message when we discuss 4:17. Matthew states explicitly that John is "this person who was spoken of by Isaiah the prophet." This is a very direct statement of interpretation by Matthew. It is not, however, a formula quotation because there is no verb of fulfillment present. Isaiah's prophecy speaks of God's

⁵⁶ Some hypothesize that John may have had contact with the Essene community at Qumran, that was also located in the Judean desert just south of Jericho, at the north end of the Dead Sea.

coming from the wilderness and the imperative for the people to prepare a perfect pathway for him. John interprets this preparation as a required personal spiritual and moral readiness, which, if neglected, puts the person in jeopardy of judgment.⁵⁷

Mark begins his Gospel narrative with a composite quotation that includes reference to Isaiah 40:3. However, Matthew and Luke both use only Isaiah 40:3 in reference to John. Later in Matthew 11:10 and Luke 7:27 they use the composite version (Mal. 3:1/Ex. 23:20 and Isa. 40:3). The one change that Matthew makes is to alter “the paths of our God” (Isa. 40:3) to “his paths,” perhaps to make clear the connection with Jesus. Who is the “Lord” in Isaiah 40:3 and who is the “Lord” in Matthew 3:3? How does John prepare the way? Perhaps as Jesus reveals later in Matthew, it is because John is the prophesied Elijah (11:14; 17:11-13; cf. Mal. 3:1f) who calls for repentance and renewal. Matthew reverses the order in Mark, placing information about John and his message before the prophetic reference.

3. Matthew refers to John with the intensive pronoun (3:4) – αὐτὸς δὲ ὁ Ἰωάννης – John himself, making the application of the prophetic reference specific. V. 4 describes the dress and diet of John. Although Matthew does not use periphrastic imperfects as Mark does (Matthew avoids this construction for some reason), he nevertheless has imperfect forms of the main verbs – “Now John himself used to have his clothing from camel’s hair...and his diet was locust...” In this he mirrors Elijah (1 Kings 1:8), using rough, simple clothing and having a very basic diet. Jesus comments on John’s diet at 11:18, suggesting that his diet was deliberate. It may also reflect his dependence upon God as a true disciple (6:25-34; cf. 10:9-10).

Perhaps we should consider vv. 3-4 as a parenthetical explanation marked by the conjunction γάρ (for), with τότε (then) in v. 5 picking up the discourse from the end of v. 2. The response to John’s message is quite extraordinary. Matthew puts “Jerusalem” first, in contrast with Mark, and uses the name of the city, rather than referring to the inhabitants. He continues the imperfects in vv. 5-6. The description of the response to Jesus, 4:24-25 includes these regions, but also incorporates Galilee, the Decapolis and the people of Syria, a much greater region. Whatever Matthew may describe about later Jewish response to Jesus, at least in the early stages of his ministry, many Jewish people responded favorably to both of them.

4. Matthew categorizes John as ὁ βαπτιστής (the one who baptizes (‘dips, plunges’) and the ending on this noun normally defines an agent -- the one who baptizes (3:1). What was John’s baptism? Was it the same as the washings of purification that the Essenes practiced daily? Was it the same as the washings of purification that the Pharisees observed regularly? Was it essentially cultic in its focus?

⁵⁷ Isaiah 40:3 was used by contemporary Jewish groups and interpreted in an eschatological manner: 1QS 8:12-16; Sir. 48:24; Bar 5:7.

Davies and Allison⁵⁸ note the following aspects that differentiate John's Baptism from other Jewish ablutions:

- It is something the entire nation is urged to receive
- It is administered once and for all, not repeated
- It is for Jews only (inferred from the reference to 'stones')
- It has an eschatological referent
- It marks a spiritual commitment, preparing people for what God is about to do.

In Matthew's perspective baptism,⁵⁹ i.e., immersion, plunging – for ritual purification, primarily demonstrates repentance and preparation for God's imminent action. Matthew does not mention forgiveness explicitly in the context of John's baptism, as Mark does. It is Jesus who provides forgiveness. But "confessing their sins" probably implies this. In what other context did Jewish people confess their sins and for what purpose? This is not usual OT language. Presumably it is linked with John's call for people to repent (v. 1). There are some contexts in the OT where sin and guilt are linked to calls for self-washing (Isaiah 1:16-17; Jer. 4:14). God sometimes metaphorically washes his people (Ps. 51:7-9; Ezek. 36:25-26; Jer. 33:8). What John specifically thought his baptism was doing remains somewhat difficult to discern. However, the connection with repentance would suggest purification was central, with a view to preparation for God's imminent plans, participation in his service, and avoidance of imminent judgment.⁶⁰ If ritual washing was an act normally required and completed before entering the temple to worship God, this would indicate additional significance to this act. Jesus does not focus on baptism in his ministry, perhaps because the majority of those following him already had responded to John's call for baptism. His inclusion of baptism in the Great Commission was necessary because of the universal call to respond to God. Is the "purification" aspect of John's baptism still an important element in meaning of the Christian act of baptism? How does "forgiveness of sins" relate to the experience of Christian baptism?

5. Up to this point in this chapter Matthew has followed essentially the Markan outline. In vv. 7-12, however, Matthew incorporates other material, as does Luke (3:7-18). Materials that Matthew and Luke have in common are usually referred to by the letter "Q" (abbreviation for the German word *Quelle* = source). What their source was, whether oral or written, remains unknown. The Q material seems

⁵⁸ W.D. Davies and Dale Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew Vol. 1*, 299.

⁵⁹ The Greek term βάπτισμα is transliterated into English as "baptism." This is not a translation. The Greek term means "immersion, plunging, dipping" (BDAG, 165). The many pools and *miqvoth* in Jerusalem indicate that this often was a complete body experience and a well-known ritual practice in Judaism at that time.

⁶⁰ Some continue to suggest that the model of proselyte baptism by which converts were accepted into the Jewish community contributed to John's use of baptism. However, we have difficulty in finding evidence that such proselyte baptism was indeed practiced at that time.

essentially to be teachings of Jesus. What the writer of the Matthew narrative may have done is take a sayings source (perhaps originally written in Aramaic or Hebrew as tradition suggests) and integrated it with the Markan narrative. It is quite possible that Matthew the apostle may have written the original sayings source and then subsequently, with the publication of Mark's account, written the Gospel of Matthew as we know it, integrating the two different elements.

The Jewish religious establishment “comes to his baptism.” The Pharisees, who are very prominent in all three Synoptic Gospels, constitute the primary opposition in Matthew's Gospel to John and Jesus, aided and abetted by the Sadducees. Josephus tells us that the Pharisees accepted the Jewish canon, believed in resurrection, sought to live out the priestly requirements of the Torah in daily life, and followed an oral tradition of Torah interpretation. They were politically more nationalistic than the Sadducees. Josephus says they believed in divine sovereignty, but also human responsibility. Conversely the Sadducees controlled the temple cultus, including the priestly functions. They did not believe in resurrection and tended to be more open to accommodation with Hellenistic ideas, supporting Herod the Great's political agenda. They placed much more emphasis upon human responsibility, according to Josephus. They do not seem to have been particularly excited about eschatological ideas. Matthew (3:7; 16:1, 6, 11, 12; 22:23, 34) pays much more attention to the Sadducees in comparison with Mark (12:18) and Luke (20:27; Acts 4:1; 5:17; 23:6, 7, 8), who engages them in the post-Pentecost context.⁶¹ Why do these religious leaders come to John?⁶² Their interest suggests the tremendous influence that John was having among the Jewish people and their need to control this. Presumably their motive is judgmental, given the response John makes. He attacks their unwillingness to repent and truly be willing to support God's new action. He accuses them of not wanting spiritual change. Their failure to respond to God's initiative in the ministry of John and Jesus will result in divine judgment. God will pass them by and accomplish His plans through others.

The theme of divine judgment is prominent in Matthew's Gospel. However, 3:7 is the only context where the noun describing God's wrath (*ἀπὸ τῆς μελλούσης ὀργῆς* *orgēs*) is used. The cognate verb occurs in 5:22 (human wrath); 18:34; 22:7 -- divine wrath is portrayed in parables. John says it is coming or imminent. What does this refer to? Does Matthew see it as forecasting the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, that occurs 30 to 40 years later? If this judgment is coming, what triggers it? The only way to escape its consequences is by repentance, i.e., responding to Jesus the Messiah. This requires a fundamental change of heart that results in new behaviour – “fruit worthy of repentance (*ἄξιον τῆς μετανοίας* *metanoias*)” – including baptism. A refusal to be baptized demonstrates a refusal to repent.

⁶¹ Sadducees are not mentioned in John's Gospel. The term γραμματεὺς (scribes) occurs frequently in all three Synoptics, with one occurrence in John 8:13.

⁶² Where are the Essenes in this? Are they unaffected by or unaware of John's ministry? Did any from that Jewish sect respond?

John's image of "the axe already lying at the root of the tree" emphasizes that Yahweh will soon act.⁶³ Time is of the essence. Jesus also uses the analogy of good and bad fruit/trees in his call for people to enter the kingdom (7:15-20). Note the use of the adverb "already" (ἤδη) and the present tense verb forms – God has already initiated this assessment and judging activity. These people stand at the precipice of God's new, sovereign action. A correct response is an urgent, spiritual necessity. It sounds similar to the situation of the Ninevites at the start of Jonah's proclamation to them.

John also attacks the supposition that ethnic linkage with Abraham and thereby inclusion in the covenant promises were sufficient reasons for people to escape God's judgment. Salvation was not guaranteed through descent from Abraham.⁶⁴ Note the possible play on words in Aramaic between stones (ebenim) and sons (banim). If covenantal nomism⁶⁵ was the dominant understanding of God's relationship with Jewish people, it was not John's understanding of what God expected. He challenges here this fundamental, Jewish orthodoxy, as Jesus will do and Paul after him. He denies that all ethnic Israel will have a place in the world to come. It is God who defines who is a child of Abraham and this definition will now include repentance and response to his Messiah, Jesus. Paul takes this up in Galatians 3-4 and argues that non-Jewish Christians are now 'sons of Abraham' because of their faith response to Jesus and the gift of the Holy Spirit. We have to remember that Matthew probably is writing after Paul's letters are in circulation.

The fire motif in relation to judgment in Matthew is emphasized (3:11-12; 5:22; 7:19; 13:40, 42, 50; 18:8, 9; 25:41). All of these contexts (except for 18:8, 9) are unique to Matthew.

Vv. 11-12 express John's understanding of what God is about to do and why repentance is so critical. "One is coming after me", he claims (Psalm 118(117):26; Mark 11:9-11). John knows he is not the Messiah, but only sets in motion events that culminate in the Messiah's presence. While various theories are proposed as to John's reference, the messianic reference is the most likely. The concept of strength (*ischuros* ισχυρός) is associated with the Messiah in Isaiah 11:1-2 and 53:12. This is echoed in Jesus' parable (Matthew 12:29) where the strong man is bound. In what ways is Jesus "more powerful" than John? How does this concept of strength relate to the concept of the "Kingdom of God?" How does Jesus' resurrection present the final statement of Jesus' "strength?" Somehow this is related to his gifting of the Spirit and his ability to bring judgment, as John continues to declare in his prophecy. To baptize in Spirit would suggest purification and empowerment and to baptize in fire would suggest judgment. These

⁶³ Consider the parable in Luke 13:6-9 of the unfruitful fig tree.

⁶⁴ Isaiah 51:1-2 may be the OT background to this image – "Look to the rock from whence you were hewn and to the quarry from whence you were digged. Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you." If God could create the miracle child Isaac, as Abraham's son, he can create new children in equally miraculous actions.

⁶⁵ For an understanding of what this phrase refers to, see Seyoon Kim, *Paul and the New Perspective* (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Eerdmans, 2002), 1-84.

verses are still addressed to the religious leaders and become then a declaration of God's intent, a prophecy that they must consider and not reject. Matthew's wording in v. 11 is different from Mark's and may suggest the image, not so much of loosing sandals, as carrying sandals (*bastasai βαστάσαι*).

There is no apparent tradition in Judaism that the Messiah will dispense the Spirit. He will certainly be endued with and empowered by the Spirit (Isaiah 11:2; 42:1; 61:1). In what way is John's prophecy about Jesus and the Spirit fulfilled during Jesus' ministry, i.e., through his teaching, healings, and exorcisms – the evidence of the Spirit's presence? Or is it only appropriately defined by what happens at Pentecost and afterwards?

A new image is introduced in v. 12. The winnowing fan is the instrument used to toss the grain and chaff in the air so that the wind can separate the chaff and grain. It is "in his hand" and so this process is about to begin. To cleanse⁶⁶ the threshing floor means to clear away all of the chaff so that only the grain remains. The farmer gathers the grain and stores it, and burns the chaff with "inextinguishable fire," an image that emphasizes finality and completeness. According to John, who is doing the gathering? How does this relate to Matthew 16:18?

John's message sets up for Matthew the prophetic dynamic that Israel must face. He is calling Israel to repent and respond to God's imminent Messianic initiative. The current Jewish orthodoxy will not bring salvation to Jewish people. One of the more recent hypotheses about early Christianity and Judaism is that proposed by N.T. Wright.

Jesus was announcing that the Jewish exile was ending and that he himself was the agent of Israel's peculiar return from exile (JVG 126-127). Wright uses the parable of the prodigal son to argue that Jesus was presenting the story of Israel in terms of exile and restoration. In Jesus' day many, if not most, Jews regarded the exile as still continuing. The people had returned in a geographical sense, but the great prophecies of restoration had not yet come true. The real return from exile, including the real resurrection from the dead, is taking place in an extremely paradoxical fashion, in Jesus' own ministry. Those who oppose place themselves in the role of the Samaritans, those who oppose the rebuilding of the temple, those who wish the covenant God were dead.⁶⁷

Is John's message agreeing with this perspective? He did announce that God was re-constituting Israel based upon repentance, baptism and the acceptance of God's new work in "the coming one." He rejects the ability of current Jewish orthodoxy to accomplish what God wants to do. He acts in the wilderness and he announces imminent, eschatological activity, particularly judgment – the kingdom of heaven has come near. Matthew interprets his work in the light of Isaiah 40:3, a prophecy describing Israel's return

⁶⁶ Matthew uses *diakatharizō* διακαθαρίζω, a verb not found previously in Greek literature, but Luke also uses *diakathairō* διακαθαίρω (3:17).

⁶⁷ Materials are taken from Carey Newman (ed.), *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel* and N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 126-130.

from exile. Whether John was “collecting people in the Jordan wilderness”⁶⁸ might be disputed. He plainly was offering a remedy for sin that was outside of the normal temple practices. However, return from exile motifs do not seem to figure significantly in John’s message, even though the quotation from Isaiah 40:3 includes some of these motifs (i.e., road in the wilderness). Rather than return from exile there is prophecy about judgment, which seems rather odd if exilic return is the motif. In the Old Testament the exile **was** part of God’s judgment against Israel.

Matthew 3:13-17

Matthew marks the beginning of Jesus’ ministry by his interaction with John, the forerunner. He uses the same verb (*paraginetai παραγίνεται*, historic present) as he did to introduce the Magi (2:1) and John the Baptist (3:1). Jesus comes from Galilee for the purpose of being baptized by John. There is specific intentionality in his journey. Why did Jesus desire this? I think it is linked with his response to God’s calling.⁶⁹ Further, he is affirming the message of John and embracing its truthfulness for Israel. Jesus wants to be ready for his role in God’s kingdom initiative. Finally, it is the beginning of his role to “fulfill all righteousness,” (i.e., to bring to fulfillment all of God’s covenant promises and demonstrate that God keeps covenant and is righteous) so that God’s people can live in right relationship with God. Jesus has a sense of divine necessity that requires specific action. Matthew uses the imperfect tense to describe John’s repeated attempts to dissuade Jesus (*diekōluen διεκώλυεν*).

We should note the frequent use by Matthew of the adverb “then” (*tote τότε*) to introduce new sections or new events (over 90x). This is double Mark’s use of his favourite term “right away, then” (*euthus εὐθύς*). His use of this adverb emphasizes the linear, progressive plot line in the Gospel narrative.

How John recognized that Jesus was the designated one, the coming one, is not explained by Matthew (nor by Mark). Yet, John does, even though later in Matthew 11 he seems to question whether Jesus is indeed the one. Here John declares his need to receive Jesus’ baptism, i.e., in the Holy Spirit and in fire (note the repeated preposition *en* (ἐν) in contrast with Mark’s syntax, as well as the different ordering of these statements in 3:11 (as in Luke 3:16-17) relative to Mark 1:7-8). He wants to participate in God’s kingdom activity as it is inaugurated by Jesus. John recognizes that he is paving the way and he wants to share in what God will do. He obeys the moral obligation to fulfill God’s will as reflected in the OT Scriptures.

⁶⁸ Wright, p. 160.

⁶⁹ In Matthew 20:22ff the writer does not include the reference to baptism as a metaphor of suffering as Mark does, in Jesus’ response to James and John.

Jesus' first words (v. 15)⁷⁰ speak to the way their respective missions will enable God's ways to be fulfilled. John may not fully appreciate how God's calling will be carried out in Jesus. His reticence at baptizing Jesus may reflect a view of messianic propriety that also generates future doubt (Matthew 11; cf. Peter's reticence in Matthew 16:20ff). Jesus refuses to be constrained by any Jewish messianic preconceptions, even those held by John. His struggles to accept how Jesus will fulfill all righteousness are precisely the same as those experienced by Jesus' disciples. He assures John that this action is fully within God's will – it is fitting for us and carries forward the covenant promises God made to Israel, i.e., enables God to be faithful to his promises.

John agrees. Just as Joseph obeys the angel's revelation, so John obeys Jesus' revelation.

The actual baptism is described in vv. 16-17. Matthew emphasizes that Jesus "immediately climbs up out of the water" after his baptism. Is there a note of urgency here? As he is on the shore, he has a vision directly into heaven, the throne room of God. We are not sure what text Matthew wrote here. Some texts read "were opened to him," indicating that Jesus is the primary, if not sole recipient of this vision. The opening of the heavens occurs in texts describing judgment (Job 14:12; Isaiah 64:1), but it also describes the reception of a revelation by seers (Ezekiel 1:1; Acts 7:56; Rev. 11:19) and this is probably its significance here. Jesus saw "the Spirit of God descending as a dove and coming upon him." Davies and Allison⁷¹ suggest an analogy to creation language (Genesis 1:1-2), with the Spirit, the water, and the bird imagery being shared. If this is the intent, then God's actions here may emphasize the new thing that he is doing and the Messiah's role as the provider of the new creation. The Spirit was already present with Jesus at his birth and so his baptism is not the point at which the Spirit comes. Rather, this signals God's affirmation of his calling and status and his empowerment for the ministry he is about to engage, as servant of the Lord. Perhaps it also is another sign that a new period in salvation-history is beginning. It also indicates that the boundary between "heaven and earth" is getting very thin at this point as God intervenes directly in human affairs.

Finally, God speaks directly and affirms his special relationship with Jesus and his approval of all that he says and does. The voice comes from heaven and so represents God's announcement within heaven itself, but beyond. The language incorporates material from Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1.

Matthew 3:17 οὗτος ἐστὶν ὁ υἱός μου ὁ ἀγαπητός ἐν ᾧ εὐδόκησα (this is my son, the beloved, in whom I take great delight)

Psalm 2:7 υἱός μου εἶ σύ, ἐγὼ σήμερον γεγέννηκά σε (you are my son, I today have begotten you) (Greek translation of the OT)

⁷⁰ Ignatius in his letter to the Church at Smyrna, section I, composed before 115 AD says that Jesus was born of a virgin and was baptized by John in order "that all righteousness might be fulfilled in him." This is our earliest evidence for the Matthean narrative.

⁷¹ Davies and Allison, p. 334.

Isaiah 42:1 Ἰακώβ ὁ παῖς μου ἀντιλήμψομαι αὐτοῦ. Ἰσραὴλ ὁ ἐκλεκτός μου προεδέξατο αὐτὸν ἢ ψυχὴ μου (Jacob is my servant; I will lay hold of him. Israel is my chosen; my soul has accepted him) (Greek translation of the OT)

Isaiah 42:1 as quoted in Matthew 12:18

ἰδοὺ ὁ παῖς μου ὃν ἠρέτισα, ὁ ἀγαπητός μου εἰς ὃν εὐδόκησεν ἡ ψυχὴ μου.
(Behold my servant whom I chose, my beloved in whom my soul will take delight)

How and in what ways this collocation of texts occurred remains conjecture. That God could do it himself should not surprise. The wording of Isaiah 42:1 in Matthew 12:18 would indicate that Matthew intends his readers to hear God's words in 3:17 as fulfillment of or at least related to Isaiah 42:1 and the servant song incorporated within it. However, the wording of the first part seems to reflect Psalm 2:7, which would emphasize the divine son of God role, with kingship connotations. That Matthew puts this into third person format makes the announcement a more formal and public statement of identification. This is also the format of God's address on the Mount of Transfiguration 17:5. By making this affirmation, God declares all who oppose Jesus to be His enemies. I would suggest that since the speaker is indicated as divine and the words in Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1 are also attributed to the divine, there is no problem for God to re-use his previous words to express in paraphrase these key ideas.

“Son of God” is a major Christological definition in Matthew (11:27; 16:16; 17:5; 26:63; 28:19), to which other Christological titles give further explanation (Messiah, Son of David, Son of Man, Servant, Lord). The Jesus/Israel typology discerned in chapters 1-2 also places special significance on this title. In the OT Israel is God's “firstborn son.” In the Davidic covenant context (e.g., 2 Sam. 7) the king is characterized as “son of God.”

Within the event of Jesus' baptism we see the Trinitarian God at work – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is commonly the case in baptismal texts elsewhere in the NT (Matt. 28:16-20; Jn. 1:33-34; Acts 2:38-39; 10:38; 1 Cor. 6:11; Tit. 3:4-6; 1 Peter 1:2). The pattern expressed in Jesus' own baptism becomes the pattern that defines Christian baptism. We as believers have our sonship affirmed in our baptism. We sense the first elements of an *imitatio Christi*.

I think the aspect that emerges most significantly in the first half of Matthew 3 is the strong division between those who repent and those who do not. John says that Israel no longer possesses any privileged status. Privilege has shifted to those who are baptized and who give loyal obedience to the one who is coming. Matthew will emphasize this throughout his Gospel, particularly through the parables that Jesus taught. In so doing Matthew is not creating a new theme in Jesus' teaching, but is affirming what Jesus himself taught and marking its fulfillment in the division that is occurring between the Messianic

assembly (which includes Jews and non-Jews) and those who adhere to a form of Judaism or Hellenistic religion that rejects Jesus as Messiah.

Matthew 4:1-11 – Temptation

Mark expresses in two verses what Matthew now narrates in eleven. For Matthew this event carries more weight and significance, as it does for Luke. First, we note that it is Satan himself, described as “the tempter” (v.3) and as “the slanderer” (διάβολος v. 1), who leads this temptation, not merely a demon. Second, the Spirit deliberately “led Jesus up into the wilderness to be tempted/tested.” The wilderness is the place of danger, where evil forces lurk. Both God and Satan are involved in this activity. The verb *peirasthēnai* (πειρασθῆναι) signifies testing⁷², if God is the primary agent, or tempting, if Satan is the primary agent. We face the same problem in the last part of the Lord’s Prayer – “lead us not into temptation/testing.” Third, the Israel/Jesus typology is emphasized by the reference to testing in the wilderness, the forty days, and the fasting motif (in Deuteronomy particularly this testing motif is identified and emphasized). As well, we know from the OT that Israel sometimes is defined as “God’s Son,” just as Jesus is. Fourthly, each testing attacks Jesus’ role and status as Son of God. The way Satan expresses himself assumes that he agrees that Jesus really is Son of God. This is what God has just declared in 3:17. But what kind of Son will Jesus prove to be? Fifth, Jesus refers to texts from Deuteronomy 6-8 in order to rebuff Satan each time. Moses gives Israel the Shema in Deut. 6, urges them to worship no other gods, promises prosperity if they will be loyal to Yahweh, reminds them of their testing by God through hunger so that they would acknowledge their dependence upon God, and concludes by warning them never to forget the Lord their God.

4:4 = Deut. 8:3

4:7 = Deut. 6:16

4:10 = Deut. 6:13.

The first temptation is built on the conditions of the forty day fast Jesus has completed and his extreme hunger. Surely the Son of God has privileges that can be used for personal benefit, the slanderer urges. Turn the stones into bread! Satan assumes that the status of Son of God carries with it the divine power to perform such a miracle. The temptation would have no force if this assumption was not fundamentally true. Jesus never denies he has this power, but responds that its use in this way would be inappropriate. God knows what his Son needs and will provide it at the appropriate time. The Son’s role is to be obedient. He is in the wilderness at the Spirit’s initiative and fasting is assumed to be appropriate. God will provide food when it is necessary. He must submit his power to the purposes of God. Perhaps

⁷² In three places in Matthew’s Gospel the religious leaders ‘test’ Jesus – 16:1; 19:3; 22: 34-5. Jesus responds in each case by quoting or alluding to Scripture.

Satan is attacking the very nature of the incarnation and God's way of making himself "visible" in this world, concealed and with deliberate, voluntary limitation of his powers.⁷³

The second temptation moves from the wilderness, to the exalted pinnacle of the Jerusalem temple.⁷⁴ In so doing Satan shows something of his power. He has access to the very center of Jewish holiness – the temple, located in the "holy city" (v. 5).⁷⁵ Satan explains the nature of the temptation by quoting from Psalm 90(91):11-12. That Satan knew the Scriptures is another extraordinary insight. God had demonstrated his ability to protect and preserve his Son in Matthew 1-2. Now Satan calls on Jesus, as God's Son, deliberately to place himself in a vulnerable situation that requires God to act for his preservation, to demand that God preserve him from harm. According to the Devil's theology, there should be no martyrs. However, God does not promise this. And as Matthew's narrative unfolds, we discover that God in fact does not preserve his own Son from execution (cf. Matt. 26:53-54). Jesus quotes from Deut. 6:16 where Moses urges Israel to respond to God's future testings in a better way than they did at Massah (Exod. 17:3, 7). It is not our place to dictate to God how he should keep his covenant commitments. By leaping from the temple pinnacle, Jesus would be acting in a proud and selfish manner. "Jesus does not need to challenge God, to make God demonstrate his fidelity."⁷⁶

Satan takes Jesus to the highest mountain in Palestine, for the third temptation. He offers him "all the kingdoms of the world and their glory" (v. 8). What are the implications of this claim regarding Satan's power and influence? For Jesus to capitulate would mean abandoning his role as Son of God and swearing allegiance to Satan. This would be idolatry. That Satan could make such an offer reveals again the extent of his power and his influence in the world's affairs of state. Satan offers an alternative way for Jesus to be Messiah, but he would be a false messiah, a political one (cf. 2 Thessalonians 2:5-12 and the figure described as "the man of lawlessness"). In fact, I would suggest, that Satan here gives expression to current Jewish modes of thinking in regards to what the messiah would bring to Israel – world domination and the glory of the nations (cf. Jesus rejection of such ideas also in Matt. 16:21-23). Jesus rejects this as contrary to God's design for his Son. He could "gain the whole world and lose his own soul!" He will not have his authority derive from Satan, nor will he adopt a Messianic agenda different from the one God has laid out for him. He quotes Deut. 6:13 in response and rejection. Satan is sent packing, as he is also in Matthew 16:23. When Satan leaves, God sends his own messengers "to serve" Jesus, i.e., to provide for

⁷³ Phil. 2:5-8. Is the focus on food in the first temptation also a reflection of the temptation that Eve and Adam encountered in Genesis 3 – eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil?

⁷⁴ Matthew uses an historic present to emphasize this action – *paralambanei παραλαμβάνει* (v.5), as he does also in v.8, using the same verb.

⁷⁵ Is this indicating that the Temple itself is somehow now part of Satan's domain? If so, it is a devastating critique of the very centre of Judaism.

⁷⁶ Davies and Allison, p 369.

all his needs. God responds to Jesus' needs in his time and according to his plans, not in response to the demands of Satan.

Some commentators say that Matthew really does not focus on Satan in this passage, but rather on Jesus' response to the temptations. However, I would suggest that the temptations have no reality apart from the power that Satan possesses. Further, as we work through Matthew's narrative, we will see many places where Jesus attacks Satan, limits his authority, and challenges his right to destroy the lives of people. If sin is the result of Satan's interference in human beings within a fallen creation, and Jesus offers forgiveness from sin and a new heart, then Jesus is attacking Satan directly and giving him significant attention in his teaching and actions. Jesus commands demons because he is the Son of God and has vanquished Satan himself.

If the messianic perspective expressed in Satan's provocations is a parody of contemporary Jewish expectations which Jesus considers a "temptation" and thus a denial of God's messianic program, then what does this say about these Jewish understandings of eschatology? Are they in Matthew's perspective a Satanic delusion and thus a misunderstanding of their own Scriptures?

I think one of our spiritual challenges today revolves around the reality of Satan. Do we accept him and his interference in human beings as a key part of our worldview? If we do not, what are the consequences?

We should also consider the question of the order of the temptations in Luke's Gospel. He has the final temptation located in Jerusalem. Which order is historical and why does either Luke or Matthew alter that order? Or is it even relevant given that these temptations occur in the spiritual realm. Thus the chronological sequence may not be significant.

Matthew 4:12-25 – Beginning of Jesus' Ministry

The events in Matthew 2- 4:12 move from Nazareth in Galilee (2:21-23), to the Jordan valley (3:13), into the Judean wilderness (4:1) and then back to Nazareth in Galilee (4:12) and finally Capernaum (4:12). Jesus' return to Galilee occurs when he hears that John was arrested. While he visits Nazareth occasionally (perhaps this is the context in which Jesus makes his inaugural statement in the Nazareth synagogue as reported in Luke 4), he makes his residence at Capernaum. Jesus moves into public action, as John's mission comes to conclusion, although there seems to be some temporal overlap between their ministries.

It is important for Matthew that Jesus' ministry be located in this region because of the prophecy of Isaiah 9:1-2. The traditional tribal boundaries would place Nazareth in Zebulun and Capernaum in Naphthali. As well, Capernaum is "by the sea," located on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. Perhaps as many as 12,000 people lived in this region, with an economy based on fishing, agriculture and trade. There was a Roman garrison there, as well as a customs station (Matthew 8:5-13; 9:9-10; 17:24),

because it was very close to the trade route between Damascus and Ptolemais (Acco). It was located in the territory of Herod Antipas, about two miles from where the Jordan River flows into the sea of Galilee. It served as an important centre for Jesus’ ministry.⁷⁷

The quotation from Isaiah 9:1-2 essentially follows the LXX, but has some differences.

Isaiah 9:1-2	Matthew 4:15-16
<p>χώρα Ζαβουλων, ἡ γῆ Νεφθαλιμ [ὁδὸν θαλάσσης] καὶ οἱ λοιποὶ οἱ τὴν παραλίαν κατοικοῦντες καὶ πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου Γαλιλαία τῶν ἐθνῶν τὰ μέρη τῆς Ἰουδαίας. ὁ λαὸς ὁ πορευόμενος ἐν σκότει ἴδετε φῶς μέγα οἱ καταικοῦντες ἐν χώρᾳ καὶ σκιᾷ θανάτου φῶς λάμπει ἐφ’ ὑμᾶς.</p> <p>O country of Zaboulon, the land of Nephtholim, [by way of the sea], and the rest who inhabit the seashore and beyond Jordan, Galilee of the nations, the parts of Judea. O you people who walk in darkness, see a great light. O you who live in the country and in the shadow of death, light will shine on you. (NETS)</p>	<p>γῆ Ζαβουλῶν καὶ γῆ Νεφθαλίμ ὁδὸν θαλάσσης, πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου Γαλιλαία τῶν ἐθνῶν ὁ λαὸς ὁ καθημέμος ἐν σκότει φῶς εἶδεν μέγα καὶ τοῖς καθημένοις ἐν χώρᾳ καὶ σκιᾷ θανάτου φῶς ἀνέτειλεν αὐτοῖς</p> <p>O land of Zaboulon and land of Nephtholim, by way of the sea, beyond Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who reside in darkness have seen a great light And for those who reside in the country and shadow of death a light has dawned (<i>aneteilen</i> ἀνέτειλεν)⁷⁸ for them.</p>

The emphasis in Matthew is upon Galilee as the place of the Messiah’s ministry in fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy. The contrast of darkness and light, death and life, signals the significance of Jesus’ ministry. While originally the darkness referred to the deportation of these tribes by the Assyrians, Matthew would define the darkness in moral terms – people held captive by sin. Finally, Matthew makes full use of “Galilee of the Gentiles” to indicate the ultimate goal of Jesus’ mission – the nations of the earth (i.e., Matthew 28:16-20). The final phrase “a light has dawned for them” may also resonant with the light associated with the birth of Jesus and seen by the Magi (2:1-2). Does Matthew in his narrative make use of this theme of “light” in relation to the ministry of the Messiah? Isaiah 9 continues to describe the Messiah as the son given, who will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom. Jesus’ move into Galilee marks the beginning of the fulfillment of all these wonderful things that “the zeal of the Lord

⁷⁷ Significant archeological remains exist at Capernaum. Some think that the location of Peter’s house can be determined. The remains of a third century CE synagogue are present and it may rest on the foundations of an earlier synagogue structure. Close by are the remains of the first century synagogue foundations at Magdala.

⁷⁸ The cognate noun is used in 2:9 (*anatolē* ἀνατολή). See also Balaam’s oracle in Num. 24:17 “a star shall dawn out of Iakob” (*ἀνατελεῖ ἄστρον ἐκ Ιακωβ*).

Almighty will accomplish.” Turner emphasizes that Jerusalem tended to despise the Galilean region as spiritually deficient, but it is precisely in this place that Jesus chooses to minister. Its close association with non-Jewish populations (e.g., the Decapolis region) perhaps prepares the reader for the final words of Jesus in 28:19-20. Note that in Matthew’s quotation the verbs are in past tense, whereas in the LXX the tenses are imperative and future. He contextualizes the quotation to his purpose.

V. 17 marks the shift to the next section. These same words (17a) occur at 16:21 and 26:2. With the section 4:17 – 16:21, Matthew describes Jesus’ ministry in Galilee which focuses on Israel (4:17-11:1) and Israel’s rejection of Jesus’ message (11:2 – 16:20). Three major discourses occur in this section:

- 5-7 Sermon on the Mount
- 10 Discipleship
- 13 Parables

At 16:21 Jesus announces his intention to go to Jerusalem.

V. 17b also incorporates the essential message of Jesus, given in the same words used by John (3:2). Matthew seeks to say that Jesus’ message is consistent with John’s, but will include much more, as the remainder of his narrative will soon disclose.

A key phrase in Jesus’ message relates to the “Kingdom of Heaven.” This expression is distinctive to Matthew.

Kingdom of Heaven	3:2; 4:17; 5:3,10,19,20; 7:21; 8:11; 10:7; 11:11,12; 13:11,24, 31,33,44,45,47,52; 16:19; 18:1,3,4,23; 19:12,14; 20:1; 22:2; 23:13; 25:1
Kingdom of God	12:28; 19:24; 21:31,43
Kingdom	4:23; 8:12; 9:35; 13:19,38; 24:14; 25:34
Kingdom of my Father	26:29
Kingdom of their Father	13:43
My (other pronouns) Kingdom	6:10(your),33(his); 20:21(your=Jesus); 13:41(his=Son of Man);16:28(his=Son of Man)

There does not appear to be any distinction in meaning (cf. particularly how 19:23-24 works) between Kingdom of Heaven and Kingdom of God.⁷⁹ Parallel passages occur where one Gospel has Kingdom of Heaven and another has Kingdom of God. Matthew prefers a more Jewish expression. Such language seems to speak of God being king or ruling. It depends primarily on material in passages such as Isaiah 24:23 and 52:7 where God says he will intervene to establish his rule and this brings salvation and

⁷⁹ In the Testament of Jacob the two expressions occur at 2:25; 7:11, 19, 20, 23, 27; 8:3.

judgment into the human context. Kingdom language is also associated with a “son of man” figure in Daniel 7: 22, 26-27. Jesus serves as God’s agent to initiate and express his rule. Pennington⁸⁰ argues that plural forms of “heaven” refer to the divine realm, whereas the singular (never used with Father or Kingdom) refers to the visible, earthly realm (sky). He concludes that Matthew employs “kingdom of heaven(s)” to “emphasize that God’s kingdom is not like earthly kingdoms, it stands over against them, and it will eschatologically replace them on earth.”⁸¹ It is both a critique of Jewish expectations which excluded the nations and a critique of Roman political ideology, affirming God’s sovereignty in its superior and universal nature and thereby giving encouragement to the people of God.

Matthew (4:17), as does Mark, says that this kingdom “has drawn near.” Does this mean it has arrived? At this point in Matthew’s Gospel the writer has narrated the actions God has taken to send his Son, the Messiah. All that he has shared would lead us to think that the Kingdom is about to be expressed in Jesus’ teaching and ministry. Yet, the future component remains undiminished. The analogy of the fresh dawn in 4:16 illuminates the issue of nearness. Jesus’ healings and exorcisms, as well as teachings demonstrate the initial stages of its presence. Passages such as Math. 11:4-5; 12:28; 13:16-17; 15:31 would all support this contention. It is the reality of Kingdom presence *in the person of Jesus* that increases the urgency for human repentance. The last phase of salvation-history has started, but “not yet reached its climax.”⁸² Notice how Matthew’s ordering of Jesus’ initial proclamation is different from Mark 1:15. Matthew places the command “repent” first, for emphasis, and then offers a reason for this.

The act of proclamation (often translated as “preaching” in English texts, but this is an anachronistic rendering) should not be overlooked. It is a prophetic activity, as illustrated first by John (3:1) and now by Jesus (4:17).

Jesus immediately begins to gather his own emergent community. Two sets of brothers, fishermen from Capernaum, Simon (also called “Peter”) and Andrew, James and John, are the first recruits. Both Simon and John are given some prominence in the Gospel narrative. Why they choose to follow Jesus so swiftly and unconditionally is not explained. Perhaps it is the unconditional nature of Jesus’ demand that captures their attention. Jesus does promise to train and develop them to “fish for human beings”, i.e., to draft people into the Kingdom of Heaven. Perhaps it was the proclamation about the Kingdom of Heaven, as well as John’s testimony, that led them to respond and signal their repentance.

For Jesus to call (*ekalesen ἐκάλεισεν*) people in such a fashion reflects God’s calling (same term is used) of people to specific roles in the Old Testament. This includes prophets (Isaiah 6, Jeremiah 1) and kings (Samuel anoints David at God’s direction) or leaders (Moses in Exodus 3-4). Jesus’ authority is the

⁸⁰ Jonathan Pennington, *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Baker, 2007), 149.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 341.

⁸² Davies and Allison, p. 390.

same as God's. For these men to respond and abandon their way of livelihood is also significant. They must have anticipated that if the Kingdom of Heaven is "drawing near," this was a very literal expression. We will have to discern whether all *disciples* are *apostles* in Matthew or whether the apostles form a subgroup within the larger sphere of Jesus' disciples. The significance of forming a band of disciples in regard to Jesus' self-conscious intention about his mission should not be overlooked. The term "disciple" means "a learner." This co-relates to Jesus' role as "teacher." Note the connection of teaching, scribal training, and making disciples in 13:52; 28:19-20.

4:23-25 presents a summary of the kind of ministry pattern that Jesus follows. Teaching, proclaiming and healing are the primary functions. Synagogues form the primary locations for "teaching." He "proclaims the good news of the Kingdom" in many public forums⁸³ and demonstrates its reality by the healings. No disease can withstand his authority. Note the repetition of similar language in 9:35 "The whole of Galilee" receives his attention. The results are incredible:

- All Syria learns of his reputation – perhaps this is a reference to the Roman province and points to the non-Judean portion of this province.
- People who are sick, demon-possessed, mentally ill (and/or epileptic), paralyzed – all seek his help and are not disappointed.
- Crowds of people from all over the region follow him.

Such activities could not be ignored by either the political or the religious leaders.

Matthew does not emphasize the term 'gospel' (*euaggelion* εὐαγγέλιον) to the degree that Mark does. The seven occurrences in Mark are reduced to four in Matthew (4:23; 9:5; 24:14; 26:13). Nor should we make much distinction between the content of Jesus' teaching and of his proclamation (compare 3:14-15 with 6:30), but its form and location do seem to differ. Yet at times teaching and proclaiming seem to describe the same activity. What Jesus does proclaim is the gospel, the good news, about the Kingdom. What makes this message "good news" for Israel? In Matthew 11:5 Jesus uses the words of Isaiah 61:1 to define his message as "the poor have the gospel proclaimed (*euaggelizontai* εὐαγγελίζονται) to them." In Isaiah God's promises to act for the salvation of his people are described as "good news" (Isaiah 40:1ff). They are royal announcements about the heavenly king's actions to deliver his people, just as he did by rescuing them from Egypt. So this term carries with it the elements of:

- i. royal action – the gospel is the formal announcement of God's salvation
- ii. royal decree – God declares his intentions and nothing will stop him
- iii. royal commission – God appoints human agents to carry his message
- iv. royal celebration – we rejoice to hear that God is acting to complete his plans.

⁸³ The verb κηρύσσειν is not associated with synagogues, but more public venues. It means "proclaim, publicly declare," rather than "preach."

Yet Jesus' teaching/proclamation and his healing are the concrete means by which he releases people from "the shadow of death" and gives them light. Throughout, the repetition of terms like "all, whole, every," points to the comprehensive nature of Jesus' ministry. What is lacking is any specific reference to Samaria.

We conclude by considering the role of the crowds in Matthew's narrative. Jesus is the primary character in Matthew's narrative, but he is somewhat defined by the varying response of the other characters. The crowd functions as a collective character. In 4:25 Matthew says that "huge crowds followed him," presumably because of the healings he accomplished. The people primarily would be Jewish, but since Matthew mentions the Decapolis, it is quite possible that some in the crowd, as well as some of those healed, were non-Jewish. Davies and Allison⁸⁴ propose that the crowd has several functions in Matthew's narrative:

- Because the crowds follow Jesus everywhere, they demonstrate that he is a charismatic figure.
- They are a receptive audience, being amazed, astonished and reverentially fearful at the actions and teachings of Jesus. He is a prophet.
- Jesus condemns the religious leaders, but has compassion on the crowds.
- The crowd is distinguished from Jesus' disciples. It does not represent the church.
- The crowd is implicated in Jesus' death.

The crowds are not neutral. They usually are supportive and responsive to Jesus. They are "the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

⁸⁴ Davies and Allison, 419.

First Discourse – Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1-12)

All expositors of Matthew’s Gospel note the discrete compilations of Jesus’ teaching that mark significant points in his narrative.⁸⁵ We call them discourses (5-7, 10, 13, 18, (23)24-25).⁸⁶ Matthew marks the conclusion of this series of discourses with these words:

26:1 Καὶ ἐγένετο ὅτε ἐτέλεσεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς πάντας τοὺς λόγους
“When Jesus had finished saying all these things...⁸⁷

This stereotyped refrain seems to be a transition marker. However, at 26:1 Matthew writes “all these sayings,” which some have interpreted as indicating the conclusion to Jesus’ teaching. We find similar wording in the OT (Moses -- Numbers 16:31 and Deut. 31:1). Of course, there are other clusters of Jesus’ teaching (i.e., Matthew 23), but Matthew does not mark the transitions from these materials to the next segment of narrative in this way.

The fact that Matthew marks this transition from discourse to other segments of narrative indicates he wants his readers to note their particularity. Conversely, we should observe that defining the beginning of these discourses is not always clear (for example the discourse on discipleship (Matthew 10) and the eschatological discourse (Matthew 24-25)). Further, Matthew incorporates considerable discourse material within the action sections and also includes some narrative in the discourse segments, so that he is minimizing to some degree the distinction between the discourses and other segments of his narrative. Many note that Matthew’s five discourses parallel the five books of the Torah or the five books of the Psalms and suggest that this may be one of the ways that Matthew indicates a Moses-Jesus or a David-Jesus parallelism. However, the discourse material in Matthew 23 seems to fall outside of this fivefold structure raising questions about the degree to which Matthew as author was tracking with a Pentateuchal pattern.

⁸⁵ We speculated in earlier lectures that this discourse material may have been included in the so-called earlier Aramaic edition of the Gospel, which subsequently was integrated in a fresh composition with the Markan material to form our Gospel of Matthew.

⁸⁶ This English term suggests a spoken, public presentation that possesses coherence around specific, related ideas, but is not as tightly organized or reasoned for example as a lecture might be. There obviously were times when Jesus made extended teaching presentations to his followers. John 13-16, the so-called Upper Room discourse, would be an additional example to those we discover in Matthew’s Gospel.

⁸⁷ 26:1a. This wording, minus the term “all,” occurs at 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1. However, the clauses following this expression vary considerably, usually reflecting the context.

What does Matthew intend by this general rhythm of action and teaching in Jesus' ministry? Given the summary in 4:23 that emphasizes Jesus' "teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom and healing every disease..." I would presume that Matthew wants his readers to see these discourses as samples of the kind of teaching/proclaiming that Jesus provided to various groups – the crowds, the disciples, and perhaps his opponents (Matthew 23, while spoken to the crowds and his disciples in the temple precinct, seems to be expressed in the presence of the Pharisees (22:41)). They are not speeches as you normally find in Greco-Roman literature – tightly argued pieces that argue a case and move people persuasively to action. Rather, they parallel the prophetic homilies given by Amos, Jeremiah or Ezekiel. There is a theme, but it is developed through illustration, declarative statement, oracle, and instruction. Jesus teaches and proclaims simultaneously. It is a passage such as 4:23 and the following discourse that makes it problematic to differentiate between kerygma (proclamation, "preaching") and teaching (didache) in the New Testament. The kerygma of Jesus is teaching and his teaching is kerygmatic. The same inter-relationship, I would suggest, occurs within other NT writings (consider 1 Peter).

Matthew sets the scene for this initial discourse on one of the mountains in Galilee. While he uses the article with the singular noun 'mountain', we cannot discern if he is referring to a specific mountain (i.e., the one onto which Satan took him 4:8) or to generic, mountainous terrain that occurs in the region in contrast to more flat terrain.⁸⁸ Moses went up onto Mt. Sinai to receive the law from God and some see Jesus' action as parallel with Moses' action. (Matthew makes no explicit connection.) However, Jesus is not receiving a revelation, he is giving it. Additionally, his retreat to "the mountain" seems to be driven by the large crowds that gathered to him because of his teaching and healings, not because of a required meeting with the transcendent Yahweh. Yet, as 7:28-29 reveals, the crowds followed and were part of the audience for this discourse. However, the wording of 5:1 indicates that Jesus' disciples ("he was teaching them") form the primary focus of his address. "They came to him."⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Similar usage occurs at Matthew 14:23; 15:29. If Jesus makes Capernaum his centre, what "mountain" would be close by? The traditional scene for this event is a gently sloping hill overlooking the Sea of Galilee, about 200 feet above the level of the lake. Certainly not a "mountain" as normally the English term would describe.

⁸⁹ This expression occurs seven times in Matthew (5:1; 13:36; 14:15; 18:1; 24:1,3; 26:17). Three of these are at the beginning of discourses (5:1; 18:1; 24:3). 13:36 occurs in the middle of a discourse.

Matthew uses the word “disciple” frequently.⁹⁰ The cognate verb is found three times and only in Matthew,⁹¹ apart from Acts 14:21. Occasionally he has the phrase “the twelve disciples” (10:1; 20:17; 26:20). This refers to the ‘apostles’ that Jesus sends out (10:2).⁹² The usage of this terminology in 9:37 (“then he says to his disciples”), 10:1 (“calling his twelve disciples”), and 10:2 (“the names of the twelve apostles are these”) focuses on the apostles. Wilkens concludes that “Matthew generally identifies the disciples with the Twelve, but he does not exclude the existence of other disciples.”⁹³ Alternatively, the term disciple seems to have larger scope in contexts such as 8:21 (“another of his disciples said”) and 27:57 where Joseph of Arimathea is said to be a disciple (ἀντὸς ἐμαθητεύθη (verb *emathēteuthē*) τῷ Ἰησοῦ). And we cannot forget the women who followed him and who are described using discipleship terminology. Although this terminology occurs frequently in the Gospels/Acts, it is not found in the Epistles (cf. Eph. 4:20-21)

But what did discipleship mean in first century Judaism? In the literature of that era we discern philosophical disciples (Philo, *Sacrifices* 7.4; 64:10; 79:10); technical disciples (rabbinical scribes; *Aboth* 1.1; *Shabbat* 31a); sectarian disciples⁹⁴, i.e. members of a particular Jewish religious sect (Pharisees in Josephus, *Antiquities* 13.289; 15.3,370⁹⁵), and revolutionary disciples,⁹⁶ adherents of a movement (zealot-like nationalists). The nature of discipleship is a function of the social/ideological reality of the particular group. In the Gospels we meet disciples of John and disciples of the Pharisees (Matthew 22:15-16⁹⁷), as well as disciples of Jesus.⁹⁸ Discipleship was defined by the kind of leader or master the person followed.

Jesus used a common phenomenon – discipleship, and created a distinctive pattern. Jesus’ call to discipleship was “not for study, but for service – to help him carry out his mission.” As M.

⁹⁰ About 75x. He refers to the disciples of John (9:14; 11:2; 14:12) and the disciples of the Pharisees (22:16).

⁹¹ 13:52; 27:57; 28:19.

⁹² The word ‘apostle’ only occurs here in Matthew’s Gospel (cf. Mark 6:30).

⁹³ Michael Wilkins, *Following the Master. A Biblical Theology of Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Zondervans, 1992):179. This is a popularized edition of his publication *The Concept of Disciple in Matthew’s Gospel: As Reflected in the Use of the Term μαθητής*, *NovTSup* 59 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988).

⁹⁴ The Hebrew or Aramaic terms for disciple do not occur in the Qumran literature.

⁹⁵ Within Pharisaism some leaders had specific disciples who collaborated with them in certain projects. The Pharisee Pollion had a disciple named Samias who worked together in a scheme with Herod.

⁹⁶ John’s disciples might be clustered in this category (Matthew 9:14; 11:2-3; 14:12; Acts 18:24-25; 19:1-3).

⁹⁷ Perhaps a disciple of the Pharisees was an adherent, a person in training to become a Pharisee, learning the law and the oral traditions surrounding it that were specific to Pharisaism.

⁹⁸ John’s Gospel refers to “disciples of Moses” (9:28), i.e., Pharisees. They claim to follow the revelation that God gave to Moses in the Torah. Discipleship in this instance means following a certain type of teaching based upon close study of its contents.

Hengel indicates, “the conscious goal after which the disciples who ‘followed’ Jesus strove was simply not, as with the rabbis, to carry on the tradition or to create a new tradition, but *to prepare for the service of the approaching rule of God*,”⁹⁹ i.e., it was missional in focus. However, people could only prepare for this as they became “learners” or students of Jesus’ teaching (cf. Matthew 28:19-20). This is what was particular about Jesus’ concept of discipleship, that did not fit in with current concepts of discipleship.¹⁰⁰ His followers could only teach what previously they had learned (Matthew 28:19-20; cf. Matthew 13:52 – disciples as “scribes of the kingdom”). Jesus’ call to discipleship has genuine analogy only with the call of the OT prophets by God himself. This is **an eschatological activity**, linked to the dawning rule of God. While this is an important new element, it does not negate the importance of Jesus’ followers “learning the Messiah” as Paul articulates.

If Jesus has disciples, what category does this place Jesus in? The most common designation we find for Jesus in Matthew is ‘teacher’ (διδάσκαλος, 12x). His action of teaching is also described frequently (10x). Gerhardsson says “It is an incontrovertible fact that the Gospel tradition, even in its ‘primitive’ form, represents Jesus as behaving in a manner remarkably similar to that of a Jewish teacher....there are Jewish parallels for practically every style of teaching used by Jesus.”¹⁰¹

We should also consider this discourse in the light of Matthew’s reference to Isaiah 9:1-2 in 4:15-16. The light has dawned and the teaching of Jesus is this light (5:14-16), like a city set on a hill. This is the one who will bring peace and righteousness and establish the “throne of David.” Jesus tells his followers and the crowds who are listening the terms on which this new rule will be founded.

Although Jesus may be targeting his ‘disciples’ with his teaching in Matthew 5-7, the crowds certainly listened in. This declamation was not a private affair. Matthew says (7:28) that “the crowds were astonished at his teaching.” However, there seems to be an inner circle and an

⁹⁹ Martin Hengel, *The Charismatic leader and His Followers* (1968; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, transl. 1981):81. He denies expressly that “Jesus’ relationship to his disciples [can]...be derived from the analogy of the teacher-pupil relationship such as we find among the later rabbis.” He cites H. Conzelmann who emphasized that “What is specific about Jesus’ self-consciousness is documented in his relationship with his disciples.” (p.87). Jesus dared to act in God’s place. Where Hengel is misguided, I think, is in his construal that Jesus saw the Kingdom so near as to obviate the necessity for his teaching to be learned. Consider Jesus’ instruction in Matthew 11:29 “learn from me.”

¹⁰⁰ C.G. Montefiore, *Rabbinic Literature and Gospel Teachings* (1939):218.

¹⁰¹ Berger Gerhardsson, “Tradition and Transmission in Early Christianity,” published in *Memory and Manuscript. Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity*, combined edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998): 24, 27.

outer circle that are related to Jesus in different ways. If a significant number of these people came from the Decapolis (4:25) and the “Region East of Jordan,” what language would Jesus have to use in teaching to be understood by the majority? Was this sermon first delivered in Greek or in Aramaic? Does it make any difference? Some Aramaic expressions do occur (i.e. *raca* 5:22 and *mammon* 6:24), but these are transliterated forms in Matthew and could well have been transliterated Greek forms, part of the Greek idiolect used in Galilee in the first century, a kind of local idiom. There are places in which we find word-plays in Greek which cannot easily be replicated in Aramaic.

Within this discourse we must observe some structural elements:

1. Although it begins with the third person section of Beatitudes (5:3-10), it shifts into and continues to the end in second person exhortation (5:11 – 7:27). If the Sermon on the Mount is intended to be commentary on Jesus’ initial statement: “Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven has drawn near” (4:17), then 5:3-10 might be the definition of what this Kingdom reality promises and 5:11 – 7:27 describes how one responds to and lives within God’s Kingdom rule. Vv. 11-12 form a summary and transition between the Beatitudes and the rest of the discourse.

2. If the Kingdom promises life as described in vv. 3-10, those who embrace it must also be willing to endure opposition from those who do not embrace it (vv. 11-12). We have a commission statement here that becomes explicit as to purpose in vv. 13-16.

3. The remainder (5:17 – 7:12) forms the body of the discourse. Betz indicates it is formed as a ‘ring composition’ because it begins with reference to the Law and the Prophets (5:17) and ends with reference to them in 7:12. Several subsections can be identified within:

- a. Hermeneutical principles for understanding the Law and the Prophets are given in 5:17-20, and 7:12.
- b. We find a series of antitheses that examine and illustrate how the Torah is to be understood (5:21-48). These consider God, righteousness, Torah, Scripture, ethics and eschatology.
- c. Jesus defines his understanding of cultic rituals (almsgiving, prayer and fasting) in the context of Kingdom reality (6:1-18).
- d. He then deals with matters that pertain to daily life (6:19-7:12) – gathering treasures, vision, serving two masters, anxiety, judging, profaning the holy, giving and receiving, the Golden rule, all in the context of Kingdom reality.

4. 7:13-23 contains three eschatological warnings. God's justice requires the enforcement of his standards.

5. 7:24-27 forms the conclusion and comes in the form of the parable of the two builders. It reiterates the crucial nature of hearing and doing, specifically in relation to Jesus' teaching, placing these activities within the continuum of wisdom and foolishness.¹⁰²

Interpretation of the SM Discourse

The major commentary by Hans Betz on the Sermon on the Mount seeks to interpret it as a work that is independent of its Matthean context. I would suggest that this approach is problematic for several reasons. While this teaching is found here in Matthew and in various places within Luke, we only know it from these contexts. Whatever existence it may have had independent of these Gospel settings is a matter of conjecture and we cannot base interpretation on such a presumed, but unknown context. So we have to use the Matthean and Lukan settings as primary indicators of original context and therefore the author's intended meaning. Since we are focused upon Matthew's Gospel at this time, this will be our primary point of reference for interpretation.

Betz suggests that Luke's 'Sermon on the Plain' represents how this teaching of Jesus was presented in non-Jewish Christianity. Some evidence for this exists, for example, in the way the final parable is expressed. However, all that this might demonstrate, in my view, is that Jesus' teachings were known and used in all segments of early Christianity, hardly a surprising fact. However, before we accede to Betz' hypothesis too quickly, we should consider the possibility, perhaps probability, that Jesus repeated his teachings in different contexts and that he shaped his teaching somewhat so that it was appropriate to each context. If he taught these ideas in the Decapolis or some other substantially Hellenistic situation (Tyre, Bethshe'an (Scythopolis), Caesarea Philippi), then he may himself have altered the expression and these adjustments have been preserved in these diverse traditions.

The *Didache*, a Christian writing generally dated to the end of the first century and often associated with Syrian Christianity, has material within it that is similar to the Sermon on the Mount (and/or Luke's version).

But how are we to understand Jesus' teaching within this discourse?

¹⁰² Much of this analysis is dependent upon Hans Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount. Hermeneia* (Minn.: Fortress Press, 1995), 50-66.

1. Is the Sermon a kind of manifesto for humanity, that is, wise teaching for living as a good human being, a kind of utopian vision?

2. Is it primarily Jewish theology, but adapted thinly into a Christian setting?

3. Should we construe it as Christian living for the spiritual elite, but beyond the ability or expectation of the average Jesus' follower?

4. Or is this Jesus' statement of an 'interim ethic', that is, a description of radical living that is required during the short period between his death and the very soon to be established Kingdom of God, that marks the end of the age?

5. Or is it the new law for the Messianic community, replacing the Torah of Moses, a kind of "Moses on steroids"? Luther for example regarded the Sermon as "God's impossible moral demands" designed to demonstrate our moral ineptitude and drive us to repentance.¹⁰³ Nietzsche calls the Sermon a "slave morality."

6. Some suggest that the teaching in this Sermon has nothing to do with contemporary Christianity. Rather it is the ethic that will pertain in the coming, millennial Kingdom.

7. Or perhaps we should construe it as Martin Lloyd-Jones does, namely "a perfect picture of the life of the Kingdom of God....the great purpose of this Sermon is to give an exposition of the kingdom as something which is essentially spiritual....Because you are Christian live like this."¹⁰⁴ Augustine calls it "the perfect measure of the Christian life."¹⁰⁵ Anabaptists would tend to agree with Augustine. He viewed it as the way that every Christian should live.

8. Others regard the Sermon as filled with ethical hyperbole, with much that cannot be taken literally.

Personally, I would agree with Blomberg's description of "inaugurated eschatology" that "recognizes an 'already/not yet' tension in which the sermon's ethic remains the ideal or goal for all Christians in every age but which will never be fully realized until the consummation of the kingdom at Christ's return."¹⁰⁶ We have to consider the implications of Jesus' teaching here in the light of the full justification that Jesus provides for the believer in the Cross and the Spirit's

¹⁰³ Cf. Blomberg's characterization in his commentary on Matthew, page 94.

¹⁰⁴ Martin Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount. Combined Volumes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977): 16-17.

¹⁰⁵ Augustine, *The Lord's Sermon on the Mount*, I.1.1. He is probably the first to refer to this discourse as "The Sermon on the Mount".

¹⁰⁶ Blomberg, *Matthew*, page 95.

presence and enabling in the life of the believer, subsequent to the Cross. It is not the imposition of a new legalism, but it does present “the commands/instructions of the Messiah.”

I think Robert Guelich, in the introduction to his work *The Sermon on the Mount. A Foundation for Understanding* presents an excellent and defensible perspective that coheres with Matthew’s purpose.¹⁰⁷ He discerns the sense of the Sermon within the interplay of Christology, Ecclesiology and Eschatology.

1. *Christology*: Matthew has introduced Jesus explicitly as the Messiah (1-4). God identifies him as his Son and witnesses in many ways to this reality. The Beatitudes define in different expression the key ideas found in Isaiah 61:1-3, designed to be fulfilled by the Messiah and expressed in the consequent Kingdom reality. Matthew 5:17-18 indicates that Jesus comes “to fulfill (bring to perfect expression) the Law and the Prophets” so that everything within them is demonstrated to be true. By his own authority he requires all human beings to follow him if they desire to participate in the kingdom. This “fulfillment Christology” conforms to what we discern elsewhere in Matthew.

In terms of the Law, Jesus fulfills it in that he lives out these principles sinlessly, demonstrating its full expression in his life. He both interprets God’s intent in the Law, Yahweh’s covenant with Israel, and he obeys it completely. Conversely, Jesus indicates that kingdom life surpasses the righteousness defined in the Law. Jesus introduces a new standard, intimated in the Law of Moses, but which surpasses it (cf. Moses’ warnings to Israel in Deuteronomy 31 about their ultimate failure to live obediently). The prophetic critique of Israel’s failure to live the Law achieves a new comprehensiveness in Jesus’ discourse. No relationship with God can be established on a human being’s attempt to obey Moses’ law. Another basis for righteousness must be introduced.

Jesus identifies God as ‘Father’ within this discourse. God is his father first, and then by dint of a relationship with Jesus, people, including Jews, gain the privilege of calling God Father. This has to be considered also in terms of OT categories. If Israel is described in the OT as God’s son, then God is Israel’s father. Now, however, Jesus is redefining the people who can rightfully and confidently claim God as their Father (cf. the emphasis in 1 Peter).

¹⁰⁷ Robert Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount. A Foundation for Understanding* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1982): 27-33.

2. *Ecclesiology*: Jesus intended to establish his Messianic, Kingdom community. Those who placed faith in him and followed him would form this new people of God. The Beatitudes define the formation of this community as based upon God's grace. Only those who recognize their utter failure, their complete lack of rightness, and who seek God's mercy and forgiveness as offered through Jesus, the Messiah, can be the "salt of the earth." What God promised Israel is now promised to the Messiah's community – to be a city set on a hill, i.e., the New Jerusalem.

Those who accept in faith God's forgiveness also accept the obligation to do "the Father's will." The kingdom's ethics become the pattern for Christian living. This is not a new legalism, but an empowered life filled with the Holy Spirit. Such discipleship will produce "good fruit," as Jesus' followers "hunger and thirst for righteousness" and "seek first the Kingdom of God." This becomes the way of wisdom. God promises his blessing to those who seek him by following Jesus, the Messiah. A life built on the foundation of Jesus' words will never be destroyed. All other worldviews end up being destructive for those who embrace them. We might say that Jesus here explains the terms of his new covenant.

So the demands or imperatives of the Sermon cause one to realize his or her spiritual bankruptcy, that his/her life is founded on sand. Conversely, the invitation of the Sermon is to seek God who will give in mercy all that a person needs for salvation that is now found in Jesus. However, accepting God's gift requires that we honour him by obeying and adhering to Kingdom principles.

3. *Eschatology*: the new relationship that Jesus promises in the Beatitudes for this present life, is also preparing a person to participate in the coming Kingdom reality. There is a future judgment in which God will evaluate the spiritual condition of every person. The future orientation of the Beatitudes casts our eyes forward to the promised inheritance. There is more to come and our present relationship with Jesus determines how that future will unfold. One has to enter the Kingdom now, in order to participate in the future blessings of the Kingdom. So there is a tension between the present and the future, the now and the not yet, this present evil age and the future blessing. The Lord's Prayer expresses this tension quite eloquently.

In an appendix to his short commentary on the Sermon on the Mount Don Carson sketches in concise terms what he regards as “the most significant...theological interpretations.”¹⁰⁸ To summarize some of his conclusions:

- The Sermon on the Mount (SM) does drive people to sober recognition of sin and their need for grace.
- The SM demands conformity to kingdom conduct now – there is an ethical urgency.
- The SM is for all believers and shows how Kingdom commitment invades and penetrates all of life. There is no sacred-secular divide in the life of the Kingdom person.
- There are many aspects of the Kingdom that are yet to come.

As we have been noting all along, one can scarcely touch the content of the SM without coming to terms with Jesus’ concept of the Kingdom. So we need to take some time to reflect on what Jesus meant by this term. This phrase is not easy to define, even though Jesus used it repeatedly. It occurs only infrequently in Qumran writings. Other Jewish writings have it, but they are difficult to date relative to the time of Jesus’ ministry. Stanton concludes that “no other first century prophet or teacher spoke so frequently or in such diverse ways about God’s kingdom.”¹⁰⁹ It seems that in most of the passages where it occurs in Jesus’ teaching, he is referring to “God’s strength or power.”¹¹⁰ Stanton suggests the following working definition:

The kingdom of God is God’s kingly rule, the time and place where God’s power and will hold sway.¹¹¹

Perhaps what we need to discern from the phrase would be:

1. Jesus emphasizes the reality of God. He is ruling and this rule is universal. Jesus himself will become the one through whom God’s rule is mediated (28:18-20), because he will have “all authority in heaven and on earth.” Consider Pennington's conclusions regarding Matthew's use of the language of heaven.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Don Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount. An Evangelical Exposition of Matthew 5-7* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978): 151-157.

¹⁰⁹ Graham Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus* (Oxford, University Press, 1991): 200.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 195.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 196.

¹¹² Jonathan T. Pennington. *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), 331-48.

2. Jesus distinguished between the universal rule of God and a subset within it. Jesus calls upon people to “enter the kingdom,” language which indicates that the Kingdom of Heaven is not wholly contiguous with God’s universal rule. Carson states that “the Kingdom of Heaven in this narrower sense is that exercise of God’s sovereignty which bears directly on his saving purposes. All who are in the kingdom have life; all who are not in the kingdom do not have life.”¹¹³ We term this the sphere of God’s redemptive rule. Perhaps Matthew 8:10-12, in which the Jewish people are characterized as the “subjects of the kingdom,” is an example where Kingdom is used in a more universal sense. These subjects are excluded from the blessings of God’s saving or redemptive rule, whereas others, namely Gentiles, are included.
3. The kingdom as God’s saving power is both present and future, here and not yet. Because Jesus casts out demons by the Spirit of God, then the Kingdom of God has come (12:28). The ones who inherit the kingdom already live in the context of God’s saving power, but the consummation of this reality will only occur as Jesus returns. The presence of Jesus marks the presence of the Kingdom and in our era the gift of the Spirit continues to mark the presence of the Kingdom. Connected with this is the sense that this Kingdom is God's response to the covenant promises made to Abraham.
4. Inclusion in the Kingdom of Heaven, i.e. the realm of God’s redemptive rule, requires submission to and full allegiance to the authority of Jesus. The warning of 7:21-23 becomes particularly pertinent here. Being in the kingdom always carries with it ethical implications (i.e. repentance) – Jesus gives commands that must be obeyed.
5. We cannot separate the proclamation of the Kingdom from the reality of the Messiah who proclaims it. The purpose for which God exercises his saving power through the Messiah is the realization of a new community – perhaps a new Israel, operating under the Messianic King’s universal authority. Conversely, this Kingdom is set in opposition to Satan’s domain. The Messiah comes to “plunder the house of the strong man” and to assault and destroy the gates of Hades.

¹¹³ Don Carson, *op.cit.*, 12-13.

6. As N.T. Wright and J. Bright before him emphasize, “Jesus’ announcement of the kingdom was...the articulation of a new variant upon Israel’s basic worldview.”¹¹⁴

He aimed to bring about a radical shift within, not an abandonment of, the worldview of his hearers. They thought of themselves as Israel, as expecting the fulfillment of YHWH’s promises, particularly concerning the great redemption, the restoration, the return from exile, the ‘forgiveness of sins.’ Jesus offered exactly that; but as his own stories made clear, what he offered did not look like what they had been expecting...He aimed, then, to reconstitute Israel around himself, as the true returned-from-exile people; to achieve the victory of Israel’s god over the evil that had enslaved his people; and somehow, to bring about the greatest hope of all, the victorious return of YHWH to Zion.¹¹⁵

7. The Kingdom of God concept is also related directly to the work of the Holy Spirit expressed in divine power and wisdom (Beelzebul controversy – Matthew 12; John the Baptist’s prophecy).

The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus’ call to his followers to embrace his subversive definition of God’s saving power directed towards the re-formation of His people.

Blomberg points out that what Matthew presents in chapters 5-7 could have been spoken in the space of perhaps 15 to 20 minutes. However, given the way that Matthew characterizes the setting of this discourse (5:1-2), it seems to have occurred over a lengthy period of time (several hours?). If this is a true assumption, then what Matthew has preserved would be an epitome of this longer discourse.

We do not have time to examine every detail of the Sermon. We will spend some time on the initial section, and the commission statement (5:13-16) and hermeneutical principles (5:17-20). We then make selective comments on the antitheses (5:21-48), comments on religious activity (6:1-18) and Kingdom ethics (6:19-7:12). We will pause a little longer over the conclusion (7:13-29).

The Beatitudes and Transition (5:3-12)

The rhythmic formalism of the Beatitudes along with their startling content captures our attention. Jesus immediately associates the Kingdom with the reality of God’s favour and approval, introducing into people’s lives grace, mercy and hope. Because God has acted in this way and these people are responding, they experience happiness – blessedness. In a sense this is

¹¹⁴ N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minn.: Fortress Press, 1996), 200.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 473-474.

the language of congratulation, proclaiming the good fortune of a specific group of people because of God's provisions. It is also the language of covenant within which God expresses the basis of his relationship with people.

The beatitude 'form' occurs frequently in previous Jewish literature (cf. Psalm 1:1). However, it is much rarer to find an extended list of beatitudes. Examples can be found in Tobit 13:14 (3); 2 Enoch 42:7-14(9); 4Q525 (5). Betz points out several examples of 'beatitudes' or statements of blessing in Greek literature. For example the Greek Philosopher Empedocles pronounces:

Blessed is he who has acquired a wealth of the divine wisdom, but miserable he in whom there rests a dim opinion concerning the gods.¹¹⁶

He also makes the observation that often beatitudes are used as introductory principles that form the foundation of a following discussion or exposition (cf. Psalm 1:1-2). He also notes the writing by Pseudo-Phocylides that introduces a set of Jewish ethical principles with a beatitude. He then concludes that "placing a beatitude at the head of a collection of ethical maxims was almost a literary convention." In his opinion, this positions the Sermon on the Mount within the context of Jewish wisdom literature.¹¹⁷ While we have one or two examples of this, Betz probably presses the evidence when he claims this is a "literary convention."

Jesus proclaims eight beatitudes in the third person (vv. 3-10) and concludes with one in the second person (v. 11), that transitions into a command to rejoice (v.12). The beatitudes in vv. 3 and 10 are expressed in the present tense ("for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"), using the same formulation. The intervening beatitudes are cast as future experiences ("they shall be comforted, they shall inherit, they shall be satisfied, they shall experience mercy, they shall see God, they shall be called..."). We can discern in this concentric structure the present-future tension existent for those who are members of this Kingdom. When will these declarations become a reality? Perhaps Betz is correct that the beatitudes represent "anticipated eschatological verdicts."¹¹⁸ I think there is definitely an eschatological focus for these declarations, but I would also suggest that some aspects of the promises can already be experienced in this age (i.e.,

¹¹⁶ Betz, *op.cit.*, 103.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 105.

¹¹⁸ Betz., *op.cit.*, 94.

comfort, satisfaction, mercy, status as sons of God, and possession of the Kingdom). However, these experiences and blessings depend entirely upon a relationship with Jesus.

The structure of each beatitude is interesting. A proclamation is made in the form of a nominal sentence and then it is followed by a second clause explaining why the initial proclamation is true (“blessed is...because...”). In other words, Jesus tells his audience why God’s approval belongs to people who experience the condition expressed in the beatitude. Promise is inherent in the blessing and gives the blessing an open-ended scope. However, Jesus is careful, I think, to avoid the suggestion that people in this situations have ‘earned’ the promise. As well, we should note the element of reversal that occurs between the condition and the promise. In some way God’s intervention to create this reversal generates and guarantees his commendation. Finally, in vv.4, 6, 7, 9 the verb in the causal clause is passive. We have to ask who is the agent presumed responsible for the stated action? I think it is God who comforts, satisfies, shows mercy, and declares our sonship. The inheritance promised in v. 5 presumes an owner who designates an heir and God, who created the earth, fills this role. And v. 8 indicates that the “pure in heart...shall see God.” Who can enable this to occur, if not God himself, for no one can see God and live, unless God makes special provision. I would suggest that a covenantal relationship is the foundation for each of these beatitudes.

While it may not be apparent in the English translations, the alliteration and rhyming elements in the beatitudes are noteworthy. There is a sonority within them that gives weight and dignity to their content. This is apparent within the Greek rendering. It is difficult to assess whether it would be present in the same way in a reconstructed Aramaic version.

In Luke’s account (6:20-26) there are only four beatitudes, followed by a summary and then four woes, absent from Matthew’s account. Blomberg suggests that Jesus’ original discourse contained all of this material which each Gospel writer, for various reasons, has used selectively. To try and determine whether Matthew or Luke is more original, i.e., representing what Jesus actually said and how he said it, is in my view incapable of demonstration and does not take into account other ways of explaining the diversity.¹¹⁹ Perhaps in Matthew’s Gospel the Beatitudes in 5:1-12 are balanced by the woes in chapter 23 – sort of the beginning and end of Jesus’ ministry.

¹¹⁹ Cf. Blomberg, *op. cit.*, page 98. We know from Deuteronomy that blessings and curses are often joined together. 2 Enoch 52:11-12 shows this same pattern.

The human categories in the beatitudes that Jesus describes seem to have both spiritual and ethical points of reference. He mentions purity, justness, mercy, and peace-making. If this is the dominant perspective, then perhaps the other terms, i.e., meekness, mourning, and poverty, should be understood also within this frame of reference.

To be ‘poor in spirit’ means poor with reference to one’s spirit and probably then signifies a recognition of spiritual need and bankruptcy before God, for which a person can provide no remedy. Psalm 33(34):19 (referred to in 1 Peter 5:6-7) says that God “will deliver the humbled/downhearted in spirit.” This would be the closest OT analogy. The Qumran documents several times identify the pious as “humbled of spirit” (*’nwy rwh*). John Nolland comments that “the members of the Qumran community identified themselves as the poor to whom the eschatological promises apply (1QH 18.12-15).”¹²⁰ He suggests that the sense of affliction experienced in the exile continued to the time of Jesus. The Qumran covenanters see themselves as patiently bearing “the affliction and poverty of the exile period, the period of God’s wrath” until the day of the final battle.¹²¹ As Blomberg warns, we must not spiritualize or secularize this text. Whoever sustains severe affliction (whatever their economic status) such that their spirits are crushed, and sense that their affliction reflects their disjointed relation with God, fits this category. Jesus encourages such to believe that they can participate in the Kingdom of God in this age, if they will follow him. They are blessed to have this hope. Jesus blends spiritual and social concerns in a balanced way. However, we have to be careful not to assume that poverty of spirit is an automatic indicator that they have God’s approval. Response in faith to Jesus is still necessary for the blessing to be experienced.

“Those who mourn” describes people who have sustained serious loss and thus experience grief. Matthew does not define the causes that generate this mourning. Paul can use this word in 1 Cor. 5:2 in reference to grief over sin. BDAG declare regarding Matt. 5:4 that the people “mourn not for their own sins, but because of the power of the wicked, who oppress the righteous.”¹²² I am not sure how the authors of this lexicon can be so dogmatic. I would suggest that the truth lies in the sinful and oppressive matrix created by personal, external, and systemic sin humans experience in this fallen world. We do not need to only focus on one category of sin

¹²⁰ John Nolland, *Luke*, I (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, Publishers, 1989):282-283.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 282.

¹²² BAGD, p. 795.

as the cause for such mourning. Jesus promises that people grieving because of sinful oppression can have hope of divine comfort, if they show repentance. This will come in the form of joy and elimination of that which oppresses.

When Jesus refers to “the meek” (v.5), we should probably discern its significance in the light of Psalm 36(37):11:

οἱ δὲ πραεῖς κληρονομήσουσιν γῆν but the meek shall inherit the land (earth) (NETS [New English Translation of the Septuagint]).

In such contexts (cf. also Psalm 24(25):9 (2x); 33(34):2; 75(76):9; 146(147):6; 149:4) the term describes people “unable to forward their own cause and in every case are dependent upon God for rescue.”¹²³ In addition, if Moses was “meek” and Jesus is described by this term in Matt. 11:29; 21:5, then I suggest it speaks of individuals who are submissive to God and his plans. In the case of Jesus, meekness defines his voluntary dependence upon God and submission to his will, unwilling to do anything that God does not initiate.

To these meek, humbly dependent people, Jesus promises the earth! In Matthew 16:26 Jesus will warn his followers that if they seek to possess the ‘cosmos’, rather than God, they will ‘lose their souls’. But here Jesus promises those who know full well their impoverishment, grief, and inability to rescue themselves, i.e., their submissive dependence upon God and his direction, that they have the opportunity in the Kingdom to “inherit the earth/land.” Of course, this language echoes God’s covenant promise to Israel – they would possess the land of Palestine. Jesus takes this promise and completely alters it. Those in the Kingdom will rule with the Messiah – in the new heavens and new earth revealed to John (Revelation 20-22). Jesus in this promise re-shapes the covenant promise related to land in an entirely new way.

We must pause here and note that the categories of people Jesus describes in the first three beatitudes form the subject of Isaiah’s prophecy in 61:1-7 – the poor, the mourning, and those shattered in heart – captives and the blind. While Luke uses Isaiah 61 to introduce and frame the meaning of Jesus’ ministry at the very start of his mission, Matthew seems to incorporate these same ideas in the beatitudes. Isaiah’s vision provides the framework for Jesus’ Kingdom reality (cf. also Jesus’ response to John the Baptist in Matthew 11). This is another way in which Matthew demonstrates Jesus’ fulfillment of the OT promises.

¹²³ John Nolland, *Matthew*, 201.

Jesus recognizes that some in the crowd long for God to act and restore justice – they hunger and thirst for it. Jesus echoes this in 6:33-34. There is a desperate focus to their desire, an active determination to see God’s will done on earth. These people see the chaotic moral and social disorder and yearn for God to step in and make all things new. Jesus promises that full satisfaction will be possible.

Mercy, purity and peace-making suggest a more positive spiritual activity. These people seek through their living to inaugurate God’s rule within their sphere of influence. In the OT *eleēmōn* (ἐλεήμων) often translates רַחֲמִים ¹²⁴ which signifies “the active kindness appropriate to a committed personal relationship.”¹²⁵ A spirit of generosity becomes evident. (Cf. Proverbs 17:5 – He that has compassion shall receive mercy.) Perhaps this concept is related to Jesus’ teaching that those who are unwilling to forgive will not receive forgiveness from God (6:12, 14-15). “Purity in Heart” reflects the ethos of Psalm 24:3-4 – only those who have clean hands and pure hearts should enter into God’s presence. If this is the background, then Jesus here would be defining a standard of integrity that rejects deviousness. When oppressed or deprived, the commitment to purity may waiver. People who pursue God’s will with this degree of intensity demonstrate their desire to be with God and Jesus promises there is that potential. I am not sure there is any connection by Matthew here with the Emmanuel concept, i.e., God with us. Finally, Jesus comments on “peace-makers.”¹²⁶ We have no context to determine what the threat is – whether social or political, but Jesus congratulates those who take the initiative to restore and maintain peace. Consider Psalm 34:14 (cf. 1 Peter 3:10-12) – “seek peace and pursue it.”¹²⁷ Isaiah 9:6-7 promises that God will generate peace through the Davidic progeny. Since God seeks to establish peace, those people who genuinely and seriously “make peace” show their solidarity and spiritual genetic linkage with God. The Hebrew concept of peace, *shalom*, is more inclusive than the Greek idea, defining the harmony and wholeness of all life.¹²⁸

¹²⁴ Mercy is one of God’s most fundamental characteristics (Exodus 34:6). Cf. Micah 6:8.

¹²⁵ John Nolland, *Matthew*, 203.

¹²⁶ The Roman emperor is named “peacemaker of the world” (Dio Cass. History, 72.15.5). Some argue for a connection here, by linking these ideas with Isaiah 45:7, where the LXX speaks of ὁ ποιῶν εἰρήνην, “the one who makes peace.”

¹²⁷ Perhaps Matthew writes with knowledge of what is happening in the Jewish-Roman war and the rejection of peace-making by those who have taken over the Jewish leadership of Jerusalem and the Temple. Josephus describes these events from this perspective.

¹²⁸ Paul defines the believer’s ministry as “the ministry of reconciliation” in 2 Corinthians 5.

Within the Christian tradition “seeing God” has come to mark the highest state of blessedness any human could attain. The book of Revelation is remarkable for the insights it provides into the visible qualities of God. John’s Gospel affirms that Jesus reveals God to such an extent that Jesus says “He who has seen me, has seen the Father” (1:18; 14:9).

Jesus concludes this section of third person beatitudes (v.10) by acknowledging “those who stand hunted/persecuted for the sake of righteousness.” Perhaps this situation is the kind of context that generates poverty of spirit, mourning, and humble dependence. Alternatively, as Blomberg, notes (as also 1 Peter (3:14; 4:14-15) affirms), people who live according to the description of the beatitudes generate opposition from a hostile world. Is this an ethical presumption – something that cannot be avoided? Peter’s use of this material in his first letter raises some interesting questions about his linkage with Jesus’ teaching and his possible awareness of Matthew’s Gospel. Within first century Judaism there emerges a significant literature about the righteous sufferer. 3rd and 4th Maccabees particularly give voice to this notion, even suggesting that the death of the righteous is in some sense able to atone for the sins of Israel (cf. 4th Maccabees 10:20;16:19; 17:9-10 “they vindicated their nation, looking to God and enduring torture even to death”). Jesus will refer to the persecution of the prophets within Judaism (Matthew 23; 2 Chronicles 34:16; Jeremiah’s story). Perhaps the ultimate declaration of one’s loyalty to God and thirst for righteousness is demonstrated by steadfastness in suffering for righteousness’ sake.

The transitional verses 11-12 shift to the second person and Jesus moves from general principles, to specific commands that his followers will be expected to obey. Loyalty to Jesus becomes the basis, the kind of righteousness necessary (v.10) for a person to participate in the Kingdom (“for my sake”). His followers must realize that their allegiance to him will generate verbal abuse¹²⁹, persecution¹³⁰ and defamation¹³¹ (the same categories Peter mentions in his letter). Despite this experience, Jesus declares them fortunate, because “your reward is great in heaven.” This should generate joy and gladness (the same words are used in 1 Peter 1:6-8; 4:12-

¹²⁹ Jesus experiences this in 27:44.

¹³⁰ Matthew uses it in the discipleship discourse (10:23) and the woes discourse (23:34) to indicate hostile action. It relates specifically in these contexts to intra-Judaic opposition. There is a triple use of this verb in vv. 10-12. Such concentration suggests this kind of opposition was particularly concerning to Matthew and his audience. They are lambs among wolves. They are labourers in the harvest (10:2). And precisely because they carry out Jesus’ commission, as his advocates and delegates, they are maligned (10:23-24).

¹³¹ The Pharisees defame Jesus in 12:24, 34.

16 in contexts of testing). The theme of rewards occurs at 6:1 and 6:19-21, but the term used here is ‘treasure’. As Paul expresses, our light and temporary suffering works for us an eternal glory, a reward that God has already prepared, a crown of righteousness.¹³²

Finally, Jesus connects the righteous suffering his followers will experience with that experienced by the Israelite prophets.¹³³ Just as the writer of Hebrews 11 reminds his audience about the heroes of faith and their participation in the “great cloud of witnesses” (12:1), so Jesus places his followers directly in the frontlines of God’s people, a heritage stretching back to Abraham. This is their spiritual genealogy. As people pursue his mission, they pursue God’s mission, even though many Jewish people have rejected Jesus as the Messiah. The persecution of the Messianic community is a sign of their inclusion in the Kingdom and so should generate confidence and gladness (cf. 1 Peter 4:15-16). Perhaps Jesus is also comparing the role of his followers with that of the former prophets – witnesses for God (28:16-20). Can we say that disciples have a prophetic role as they fulfill the Great Commandment?

First Discourse Sermon on the Mount. Part II (Matthew 5:13-7:35)

Jesus’ First Commission (5:13-16)

We have several texts in Matthew where Jesus spells out what his followers will do. The first occurs in 5:13-16 in which Jesus defines their mission in terms of salt and light. A second commission occurs in the discourse on Discipleship (10), where he sends them “to the lost sheep of the tribe of Israel” (10:6). Finally, there is the post-resurrection commandment that Jesus gives to define their mission into the future (28:16-20) – to make disciples of all nations.

In this first commission or set of instructions Jesus defines their critical role among humanity, to preserve and illuminate. Their eschatologically conditioned way of living, defined in the prior Beatitudes, makes a prophetic statement, challenging the status quo of the surrounding culture. Salt primarily functioned in antiquity as a preservative. Because Jesus’ followers possess the Kingdom message and incarnate Kingdom community, they provide a context in which people can be preserved by God and for

¹³² Promise of rewards in 10:40-42.

¹³³ Consider Jesus’ reference to the prophets in 13:16-17. His followers are ‘more than prophets’ (11:11). In 10:41a they are accepted “in the name of a prophet”, i.e. they are construed as prophets. Consider Peter’s citation of Joel 3 in the Pentecost Sermon (Acts 2) and his description of how common Israelites will prophecy as the Spirit comes.

God. The “salt of the earth” perhaps implies a universal influence. Perhaps because Jesus’ followers live their Kingdom values, not only are they ‘blessed’, but they become a source of blessing to others as agents of redemption and reconciliation. What is Jesus’ emphasis here? Does he anticipate that his followers will season their entire culture and make it Kingdom-like? Or does he anticipate that they will form communities in which Kingdom values dominate, providing places of refuge and restoration for all people who care to enter? Or should we consider both to be his priorities?

Jesus uses a strange expression in v.13 as he warns his disciples --“If the salt should become foolish/mad/stupid.” Betz suggests “dull”¹³⁴ as the translation of the verb. Perhaps Jesus echoes here the final parable of the sermon, where he warns his followers about the foolish builder, dull to the point of being useless. If they fail to preserve their kingdom identity, they become just like the dirt in the street, making no difference, in fact being regarded as worthless and scorned by others. Being trampled by other human beings for this cause must be differentiated from the persecution for the sake of righteousness and the Messiah that Jesus has just mentioned. Being trampled signals that others regard them as worthless. There is some slight evidence that this verb when applied to food has the sense of losing taste. Therefore many English translations render it as “insipid” or “tasteless.” Further, if this salt loses its savour, there is no other source for saltiness that humanity can access, nor is there any way for this de-natured salt to be restored to its former saltiness. Perhaps in a sense Jesus is warning his followers not to follow the pattern that ethnic Israel had taken.

The second part of the commission uses the metaphor of lamps, light and city to express the impact Jesus expects his followers will have. In the OT God assigned to Israel the function of being “a light to the nations” (Isaiah 42:6; 49:6; 60:3; cf. Matthew 4:14-17 and its quotation from Isaiah 9:1-2). While Jesus’ words are not an exact equivalent the sense is similar. In Roman literature the city of Rome was considered “a light to the whole world.”¹³⁵ Some have argued that there is a reference here to Jerusalem as “the city set on a hill.” However, the language is general, not specific, and any city could fill this role. To be the light “of the world” (κόσμος) implies a universal mission and a position of religious illumination that is unique. None can fill this role, other than Jesus’ followers. This gives the messianic community a stature that surpasses any other human institution. How can you hide a city that purposely occupies the heights precisely to declare its presence! Notice that Jesus does not restrict this witness to the city of Jerusalem as the religious, cultic centre for his new movement. Wherever his followers live, they function as light.

¹³⁴ Betz. *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 159-160.

¹³⁵ Cicero, *Catalina*. 4:6. Is Jesus then providing a not so subtle critique of the Roman political ideology and challenging its fundamental assumptions?

Verse 15 follows this up with a second metaphor. The function of a burning lamp is to provide light, so a person places it where it will provide the best illumination. It is not put under a basket, which would deny its purpose and prevent it from illuminating all those in the household.

So through both metaphors Jesus stresses that his followers must be visible and cannot hide themselves away, if they are to fulfill his mission for them. As a result, the light they have received from the Messiah and which now burns within them, the Kingdom truth and commitment, must affect their visible behaviour. Can the Beatitudes become a reality in a person's life without significant "illumination" occurring? They must let others see their way of living, their good deeds, so that these people will be attracted to and recognize the work of "your Father in heaven." This is the first of several places in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus identifies his father as the father of his followers.¹³⁶ What kind of evangelistic process is being defined here?

Why does Jesus in the first part of Matthew 6 forbid his followers to pray or give alms or fast in such a way as to bring attention to their piety? Are these not 'good deeds'? Do these not demonstrate a person's Kingdom connection and loyalty to God? What is the distinction between "seeing" these deeds and seeing the "works" that might attract people to God? Perhaps the distinction hinges on the one who receives the glory.

Hermeneutical Principles for Understanding the Law and the Prophets 5:17-20

Jesus has made very radical statements, positioning himself and his followers as the new centre of divine activity in this world. How then do these claims relate to what the Jewish canon expressed – the Law and the Prophets? First, using a negative statement ("do not begin to think..."; aorist subjunctive prohibition), Jesus denies the validity of a false claim being circulated about him. The false claim is this: "He has come to abolish the Law and the Prophets." Such a claim would be tantamount to the accusation that he seeks to destroy Judaism and is in fact atheistic and will cause people to stumble, i.e. defect from proper loyalty to the covenant and its expression (-- stumble -- *skandalizomai* (σκανδαλίζομαι)). Moses warned Israel to destroy any prophet whose message urges them "to follow other gods" (Deuteronomy 13:1-5).¹³⁷ Betz notes that this was the accusation leveled against Socrates. To abolish the traditions and foundations upon which society is based is the worst kind of criminal behaviour. This serious accusation probably was being used by the Jewish opponents of the Jewish Christian community to deny their validity and undermine their connection with anything Jewish (cf. Paul's assertion in Galatians 2:18).

¹³⁶ Peter expresses a very similar idea in 1 Peter 2:13-14.

¹³⁷ The intention "to destroy the law" describes what pagan leaders such as Antiochus Epiphanes tried to do (4 Maccabees) or some Jewish leaders were accused of doing in promoting Hellenization in Jerusalem (2 Maccabees 2, 4). This verb is used in 2 Macc. 2:22; 4:11 to describe the actions of these Antiochean leaders to introduce "the Greek way of life" and eliminate the Jewish way of life.

Jesus strongly rejects this accusation with the prohibition “do not consider...” The use of “I have come” (*ēlthon ἦλθον*) should be noted. It asserts something fundamental about Jesus’ mission. Although Jesus does not “destroy” (*katalusai καταλῦσαι 5:17*) the law, because the Jewish people reject him, the temple and Jerusalem “shall be destroyed” (*kataluthēsetai καταλυθήσεται 24:2*).

Instead of abolition, Jesus’ mission is to bring to the fullest expression, i.e., fulfill, the revealed will of God (i.e., righteousness), expressed in the Torah and applied through the Prophets. Jesus claims that in him the full meaning of the entire Jewish canon comes to a head. No wonder the Jewish religious leaders questioned his authority. Blomberg comments on the significance of this statement: “Every OT text must be viewed in light of Jesus’ person and ministry and the changes introduced by the new covenant inaugurated.”¹³⁸ Only in Jesus can this revelation be properly understood and interpreted. How then this fulfillment finds expression becomes the point of controversy. The early Christian leaders had to work hard to help Jesus followers learn this new hermeneutic.

After the double negation of v. 17, we have the first of 31 instances in Matthew where Jesus introduces a teaching with the expression *ἀμὴν γὰρ λέγω ὑμῖν/σοί* “[for], amen, I say to you.” *Amen* is a Hebrew/Aramaic term, cognate with the noun for truth. It is a strong affirmation of the truthfulness of what will be stated. We only find it four times in Greek, Second Temple Judaism documents (Tob 8:8; 14:15; 3 Macc. 7:23; 4 Macc. 18:23 (these last two documents are roughly contemporary with Matthew’s Gospel). Apart from the *Testament of Abraham* A 8:7; 20:2 (where God and Death are speakers), this formula is only found in the speech of Jesus. This is strong evidence that in such statements we hear the *ipsissima vox* of Jesus. Does this mean he spoke Aramaic? Not necessarily since both 3rd and 4th Macc. were written in Greek, although Hebrew and Aramaic fragments of Tobit were found in the fourth Qumran cave.

Jesus affirms in the strongest terms the divine authority of the Law and the Prophets. Its significance, as now seen in Jesus, stands throughout time. As some parts of the NT demonstrate, Jesus’ mission brings to an end some aspects of the practices associated with the old covenant (e.g., circumcision, dietary prescriptions), but affirms the continued and enhanced application of other aspects (loving God and neighbour) until he returns – heaven and earth pass away. His wording refers to the *iota* (ἰῶτα – a Greek letter), and the *keraiā* (κεραία – ‘the horns’), the accents or diacritical marks.¹³⁹ It makes sense with reference to Greek writings. However, it more normally is taken as reference to the Hebrew letter *yodh* and the ornamentations on letters that one finds in the Hebrew square script. In either case

¹³⁸ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 104.

¹³⁹ Did Jesus make this statement using the Greek alphabet as the point of reference or has Matthew or an earlier tradent adjusted a statement originally referencing the Hebrew alphabet and contextualized it to the Hellenistic context?

Jesus accepts and affirms the inspired status, I think, of the entire Jewish canon – the Law and the Prophets. Of course, while this is a significant principle, we still have to determine what the Law and the Prophets contained. I think the content of the Torah is clear – the five books of Moses. We get a sense of the Prophets from the texts that Matthew quotes as demonstration that Jesus fulfills them (e.g., Micah, Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, etc.). The inclusiveness of Jesus’ final statement in v. 18 is breath-taking. The Law stands until its various prescriptions for God’s will are fully completed – “until all things have happened.” If the initial genealogy suggests that much of what God had revealed already was completed, then the final stage, i.e., that inaugurated by Jesus, is what remains to be accomplished. The initial *heōs* (ἕως until) clause in 18a may be construed as synonymous with the second *heōs* (ἕως) clause in 18b, or as referring to a different aspect, i.e., prophetic fulfillment.

Jesus now turns his attention (vs. 19-20) to two different kinds of responses to the Law – those who set aside (*luein* (λύειν) is a play on the previous word *kataluein* (καταλύειν destroy) in v.17. Those who set aspects of the Law aside in terms of personal behaviour do not stop there, but actually seek to persuade others to do the same. What are the commandments? Does Jesus limit his statement to the Ten Commandments? Whatever is decided in this matter, Jesus seems to suggest that to contravene the very least command (the shortest, the most apparently insignificant piece) relegates one to being least in the kingdom. So to set aside more than that would be to exclude oneself from the Kingdom.

Jesus insists on respect for all precepts, as understood through his mission. If Jesus is in fact, as his opponents claim, “setting aside the law,” then he has no status in God’s kingdom. But Jesus, to the contrary, is affirmed by God as being his son, the one whom God loves and takes great pleasure in. So we might suggest that Jesus emphasizes how important it is to come to the Jewish Scriptures with the right hermeneutic, i.e., the Jesus hermeneutic, so that, even with the best of intentions, one does not end up setting aside the meaning God intended his word to have – the importance of authorial intent at the divine level of the text-message.

The connection between doing and teaching occurs negatively at 23:2, 15, 16. Jesus calls for consistency of confession and action. No hypocrisy! Jesus requires complete commitment to the expressed will of God. What does this entail? Jesus turns his attention to the Pharisees, probably viewed within first century Judaism as paradigms of righteousness. He does not deny their efforts to live righteously, but states clearly that this is not sufficient in and of itself to bring entrance into the Kingdom. He requires a greater righteousness. Jesus does not stop at this point to define how one acquires that level of righteousness. Rather, he will immediately offer six examples of what this greater righteousness looks like in comparison to the standards being expressed by his contemporaries, based on their understanding of the Law. By his actions Jesus is saying that their interpretations are not sufficient and so they are in fact setting aside the intent of God’s Law. So far was Jesus from abolishing the Law that he demanded

and taught a righteousness that exceeded anything required by those in Jewish society considered to be paragons of lawful living. Jesus puts himself into an exclusive category and demands that his followers join him there. Note again the severe negative that Jesus employs in 20b – “shall never (οὐ μὴ) enter into the kingdom of heaven.”

*Antitheses*¹⁴⁰ – 5:22-48

Jesus provides six examples of how his hermeneutic applies. He deals with critical, debated, ethical, social and political issues, along with controversies about religious ritual and sinful attitudes, adultery, divorce, oaths, retaliation, and relations with enemies. We must remember that Rome was the primary power in the first century and even though it permitted client kings with Jewish ethnic connections to manage these regions, Roman military and other clear signs of their power were always present. Further, we know that fierce debates raged among various Jewish religious groups as to the appropriate way to interpret and apply the instructions found in the Torah. This became particularly difficult when ethical issues not specifically addressed in the Torah needed to be adjudicated. The question of what constituted a violation of the Law was hotly contested. Second Temple had a hard time knowing how to respond appropriately to the challenges of Hellenistic culture.

Things have not changed and several of the issues that Jesus addresses continue to generate controversy within the Christianity. What constitutes adultery and on what grounds can a Christian remarry? Can a Christian swear an oath and if so under what circumstances? And what about the piece on retaliation? Even within the Believers' Church tradition we have different understandings of how this applies. Almost all agree that Jesus was presenting a more radical understanding of these issues and seeking to emphasize that attitudes were as significant as actions when it comes to the definition of sin.

Making an offering to God, while harbouring hatred in your heart for “your brother,” violated the essence of the offering. Better not to make the offering until reconciliation was attempted. Adultery is not restricted to a physical act, but incorporates the thought that leads to the deed. If you have to swear oaths constantly in order to make people believe you are telling the truth, then something is wrong with your integrity. Jesus rejects the law of retaliation and replaces it with the command “not to resist the evil person.” Of course, we still debate what “not to resist” actually entails. Finally, he requires his followers to love their enemies. These represent astounding reversals of common religious and ethical assumptions within Judaism, responses that were sanctioned by the religious establishment in many cases. In so doing Jesus presents a portrait of Kingdom living just as remarkable as that expressed in the Beatitudes. We might conclude that in the antitheses Jesus applies the principles articulated in the Beatitudes. It is a

¹⁴⁰ Betz (op.cit., 200) notes that this term seems first to be used by Marcion and reflects a rhetorical device in which opposing views are stated in juxtaposed sentences. Theologically, however, Marcion saw Jesus' words as Gospel replacing the Mosaic requirements.

righteousness that exceeds that of the Pharisees and a fulfillment of the Law to a degree never before heard. But again the question arises – what kind of person has the power and ability to live like this?

If such disputes form a significant element within the Gospel narrative, then perhaps they are in fact a kind of hermeneutical handbook, enabling listeners and readers to evaluate the competing claims to hermeneutical orthodoxy. We might also assume with some probability that these kinds of issues were still disputed within the emerging churches of the first century.

Structurally, Matthew seems to divide the antitheses into two sets of three.¹⁴¹ The full introductory formula occurs with the first and the fourth (vv. 21, 33, mentioning “the ancients”) and the fourth also has the resumptive adverb “again.” The most detailed antitheses are the first and the last ones. Each of them relate to commands made in the Torah:

Commands about murder and adultery (Exodus 20:13-14; Deut. 5:17-18)

Command about divorce (Deut. 24:1)

Commands about swearing falsely and love of neighbour (Leviticus 19)

Command about retaliation (Leviticus 24:20).

In several cases Jesus revokes an OT command and replaces it with something more in tune with his new covenant. I think this is the case in the matters dealing with adultery, divorce, and oath-taking. The way he articulates them precludes human ability to obey them fully and consistently, exposing the essential sinfulness that characterizes human existence.

Another aspect to this that we must keep in mind is what Jesus’ teaching says about his authority and status. In the OT God gave the Law to Moses. Now Jesus dares to revoke some elements of this Law and replace them with new formulations. Further, he has the authority to apply these standards to his followers. The continued refrain “but I say to you” hammers in the ears of his disciples and the crowd. No wonder the crowd at the conclusion is astounded at his teaching and the authority expressed within it (7:28-29). While one might argue, as Betz does, that there is nothing specifically messianic about Jesus’ articulation, others disagree. As Betz himself notes, there is nothing quite like the antitheses in other early Christian or first century Jewish literature. The first person language is unprecedented, in my view, in Jewish documents related to the establishment of religious principles.

Is there a foundational theme or perspective that ties these remarks together or are they a haphazard collection of comments? Betz proposes that the key theme is *agape* (ἀγάπη) and that each antithesis deals with some kind of broken human relationship and how actions that are the opposite of ἀγάπη run contrary to Kingdom reality. This fits well with the second great command to “love our neighbour.” In his view the sixth antithesis summarizes this in its requirement of neighbour love, even

¹⁴¹ Turner, *Matthew*, 164-65. The chart is helpful.

for enemies, if one is to be ‘perfect’. Perhaps Paul’s comments on the love command in Romans 13:8-10 and his premise that fulfilling this command enables one to fulfill the whole law iterates Jesus’ perspective as expressed in the antitheses.

What in fact does Jesus argue in these antitheses? It seems that Jesus is not refuting what God said, but what Jewish religious leaders or tradition alleged that God said or the meaning inferred from God’s statements. He is rejecting erroneous interpretations and/or applications of what literally was said or written. He rejects all previous interpretations and traditions and speaks his own. In this he is challenging particularly the Pharisees and their embrace of the oral tradition of the Torah. Further he challenges conservative Sadducean interpretations of Moses’ instructions. There is a logic to his presentation, but it is a Kingdom logic, that builds upon the priority of the Love Command and the eschatological reality of God’s actions in sending Jesus. Perhaps we see other “antitheses” in Jesus’ comments about Sabbath practice or washing before meals.

Antithesis # 1 (21-26) – reinterpretation of the command “do not murder.” Jesus states that anger is also a serious sin and should generate the same condemnation as murder (22). However, there also is a “righteous indignation” that is justified on occasion (21:12-17; 22:7). He applies this proscription of anger to the closest relationship within a religious community – brother to brother. If it is inappropriate here, then it is inappropriate in any relationship. Jesus refutes the chain of tradition that seeks to justify such anger. Sacrifice would be considered a usual way to escape judgment, but Jesus says that without personal reconciliation, the sacrifice will not achieve its intended result (Romans 12:18; Matthew 18:21-34).

Consider *Didache 14.2*. Deal with the matter quickly so that judgment will be removed. God will demand payment in full. The *Didache* in reiterating this statement explicitly connects anger with murder (3.2).

Antithesis # 2 (27-30) – reinterpretation of the command “do not commit adultery.” Jesus addresses the problem and power of erotic love – moving from the sight, to the desire, to committing of adultery “in the heart” (v.28). The eye and the hand are the means by which such acts of adultery would be committed and so their removal in order to save the whole body would be justified in the light of the eschatological risk involved. “Gehenna” is the “valley of Hinnom” just outside Jerusalem that served as the garbage dump for the city. It was constantly burning and smouldering and became a byword for a place of utter loss and destruction. Some suggest that the word “woman” (v.28) should be interpreted as a married woman, in accord with ancient definitions of adultery. However, Jesus does not seem to restrict its sense and we should then interpret his words as forbidding a married man to be unfaithful to his wife by desiring or having sexual relations with another woman. The pornography plague today runs completely counter to this Kingdom ethic. We also need to note carefully that Jesus condemns a look that intends lust, not just any look.

Antithesis # 3 (31-32) – Jesus’ statement about divorce continues to generate immense discussion, particularly because legal grounds for divorce in Western societies have become very broad. Jesus does two radical things:

- a. he limits divorce by a husband to discovering “a matter of *porneia* (πορνεία)”;¹⁴²
- b. he extends the definition of adultery to include the man who marries a divorced woman.

Whether we are to read this last injunction in the light of the first or whether it is a separate and independent principle is debated.

Jesus seems to limit divorce on the grounds that it results in adultery, i.e., through the remarriage of the divorced woman and by the man who marries her. While Moses allows for divorce, Jesus restricts it severely.

What is included in *porneia* (πορνεία) and why did Jesus not say adultery? It seems that *πορνεία* is more inclusive, referring to “marital unfaithfulness”¹⁴² of any kind. Blomberg notes that this word was used more commonly “to describe female rather than male infidelity.”¹⁴³ Jesus seems to be broadening the scope of the prohibition through this term. Further, he says that if a man divorces his wife apart from this reason, “he makes her commit adultery.” Jesus does not define why this is case. We should be careful not to assume that a woman who marries after such a divorce is living in a “permanently adulterous” situation. That Jesus’ word was not viewed as totally restrictive is confirmed by Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians 7:15 providing one other ground for divorce. Jesus’ statements are given in the context of serious debate within Judaism as to the appropriate basis for divorce (Shammai and Hillel). Jesus never requires divorce. He will have more to say about this topic in Matthew 19. It seems that the hard-heartedness of humanity that led to Moses’ earlier allowance, still must be recognized in the action of the Messianic community (i.e., for marital unfaithfulness, 1 Cor. 7:15).

Antithesis # 4 (33-37) – the command not to make oaths. We are not sure what OT text Jesus is quoting here, but Leviticus 19:12 is usually cited. Jesus rejects oath-taking. Josephus says that the Essenes avoid swearing “regarding it as worse than perjury.”¹⁴⁴ There may be a sense that it violates the command of taking the “name of the Lord in vain,” as well as assuming no trust exists between people and the need to verify one’s integrity by reference to some external authority. We must be careful not to involve God in our sin. However it is understood, the examples Jesus refers to define human limitation – people have no control over these matters and so how can they be incorporated meaningfully into any oath. Similar prohibitions occur in Greco-Romans sources. Perhaps as Betz suggests, v. 37 prohibits any use of magical

¹⁴² Nolland, *Matthew*, 240 renders this word as “sexual impurity,” i.e., serious moral failure of a sexual kind. He also adopts several other different renderings, i.e., “causes her to have adultery committed against her,” “marries a woman who has gained a divorce [for herself].”

¹⁴³ Blomberg, *op.cit.*, 111.

¹⁴⁴ Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.135.

formula. Rather, the purity of one's heart should be demonstrated through the simplicity and trustworthiness of one's speech.

The struggle we have taking this antithesis in an absolute sense is that Paul (Romans 1:9; 2 Cor. 1:23; Phil. 1:8; 1 Thes. 2:5) in various letters seems to "call God to witness" as to the truthfulness of his statements. Is this a kind of oath-making? Perhaps he merely considered it to be an affirmation of his calling as apostle, the representative of God. 2 Cor. 1:17-20 seems to echo Jesus' words. Is it permissible for a believer under any circumstances to take an oath in order to substantiate his or her statements (i.e., court testimony)? Matthew 26:63 might suggest that Jesus himself was willing to be placed under oath. Antithesis # 5 (38-42) – Jesus rejects the *lex talionis* – eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth. Can we doubt that Jesus is deliberately ending an OT command? All would agree that Jesus is requiring Kingdom people to take action to break the spiral of violence by being willing to pay the price. He is requiring a generosity of spirit and action in the face of legal demands or insulting behaviour. What stretches us is Jesus' statement that we must respond with positive goodness to such hurtful and demeaning actions. And what does it mean "do not resist the evil one?" and who is "the evil one" – a human or Satan? Jesus desires his followers to "overcome evil with good" (cf. Romans 13; 1 Peter 3-4).

Antithesis # 6 (43-48) – the command to love our enemies. There is no command in the OT to hate our enemies, although some might infer it from passages such as Deuteronomy 23:3-6; 25:17-19. It seems to be a traditionally accepted perspective, however, and Jesus opposes it. Loving those who love you places a person on the same level as any other human being. In the Kingdom reality, Jesus requires his followers to love those they naturally would hate. This means to do them good and this would involve praying for one's enemies, as Jesus himself did (Luke 23:34). There is a second rationale, namely that this is how God operates. He loves his enemies, as demonstrated by his gifts of food, water, sunlight, etc. for those who despise him or do not know him. So the question of distinctiveness enters into the picture.

Carson notes that the Essene covenanters required their members to love one another and to hate their enemies (1QS 1:4,10; 2:4-9).

The initial particle of v. 48 "therefore" may be seen as concluding the entire series of antitheses. It contains the imperative to be "perfect", i.e., mature, whole, or perhaps blameless. Maybe Jesus is interpreting the statement "You shall be holy because I am holy" (Lev. 19:2). Jesus requires his disciples to demonstrate radical godliness, even while knowing that perfection is not attainable. Jesus has not set forward a complete set of norms, but has demonstrated some of the essential features of godliness that his followers should embrace, if they are hungering and thirsting after righteousness. Jesus expects his followers to demonstrate an 'intelligent love', adapting its essence to each situation so that godliness results. Such an ethic results from the new heart that God creates in his people under the new covenant and resourced by the Holy Spirit (Jer. 31:31-34; Gal. 5).

“To return evil for good is devilish; to return good for good is human; to return good for evil is divine” (Plummer)

Jesus’ Understanding of Cultic Rituals (6:1-18)

Within Jewish piety of the first century almsgiving, prayers and fasting ranked as significant religious expressions. Tobit 12:8-10 “Prayer with fasting is good, but better than both is almsgiving with righteousness....For almsgiving saves from death and purges away every sin. Those who give alms will enjoy a full life,...” Some Jewish circles believed that almsgiving had atoning power. Jesus comments about the appropriate way to give alms (i.e., show mercy), pray, and fast such that we gain God’s approval (as expressed in the Beatitudes).

Jesus emphasizes several contrasts and issues in these three discussions.

1. The importance of adding to God’s reputation – emphasis on his role as Father -- in contrast to human reputation.
2. God’s approval in contrast to human approval.
 - a. Divine rewards
 - b. Guarding our religious conduct (i.e., “acts of righteousness” or “attempts to do God’s will”) so that wrong motives do not gain control
 - c. The problem of hypocrisy
 - i. Are we doing an act of mercy or are we seeking to enhance our image?
 - ii. Are we wanting to converse with God in prayer and do his will or are we seeking to gain the approval of people as a pious person or are we seeking to coerce God to do our bidding?
 - iii. Are we fasting in order to appear to be pious or because we truly are lamenting and mourning in God’s presence?

Ultimately, I think Jesus challenges our human perception of what true religion is all about. Yes, we love our neighbour, but we cannot do it in ways that prevent us from loving God. Conversely, we do not seek to love God in ways that cause us to abuse our neighbourly relations. In Kingdom culture there is essential consistency between the two great commands.

There is a place for public piety, as we love our enemies, as we speak always with integrity, as we do not hate others, as we forgive others, as we act generously towards those in need, but there is also a place for private piety where we express and deepen our relationship with God in prayer and fasting. There are ways we add to God’s fame through our public behaviour and ways we add to God’s fame by our private devotion. In neither case, Jesus says, should we seek to enhance our own reputation at God’s expense. Just as the six antitheses interpreted God’s standards as matters of heart and relationship, not just

public act, so too specifically religious conduct must keep motive and deed thoroughly consistent. Just because we act religiously does not mean we have done a religious act.

To underscore his point Jesus introduces the term *hypokritēs* (ὑποκριτής). Normally a Greek word defining an actor,¹⁴⁵ it comes to reflect any kind of falseness in pious practice.¹⁴⁶ As Betz notes, Jesus here presents hypocrites as character types, with their behaviour mocked by several satirical vignettes (6:2, 5, 16). Probably there is some degree of caricature here, but Jesus uses it to critique inner-Jewish religious practices. In his comments on prayer in 6:7-15 he turns his attention to the Gentiles, who form another general character type whose piety is critiqued and found wanting.

Stories in Greek literature occur about what kind of piety the gods prefer. These highlight the tension between ritual performance and ethical action. Appropriate worship requires an adequate knowledge of the deity thus served. Betz notes that in antiquity three rituals tend to gather most comment in this regard – sacrificial offering (including almsgiving), prayer and its relation to magic, and forms of abstinence (food or sexual relations). Jesus responds to each of these categories. Similar discussions are found in pre-Christian Jewish literature such as Ben Sirach 34:13 – 36:17, where proper sacrifices, prayer and general religious activity are climaxed by the offering of a model prayer. We have already drawn attention to Tobit 12:6-10.

6:1 is a summary statement introducing this section. The general principle is that people who follow Jesus must pay attention¹⁴⁷ to their religious activity, lest they conduct it illegitimately. I regard “acts of righteousness” as religious activity. Jesus incorporates normal Jewish acts of piety into his Kingdom reality – almsgiving, prayer and fasting – but requires them to be done solely with a view to God’s glory, not human approval.

There is a translation issue here. Is the noun “righteousness” defining the first verb (accusative of reference) or is it the object of the following infinitive (to do or perform)? As you note, NIV takes the second option – to do your acts of righteousness before men. However, Betz argues that it should be translated as “Be on guard concerning your righteousness, not to act before the people for the purpose of being seen by them.”¹⁴⁸ He suggests that this comports more normally with Jewish concepts, whereas the translation given by the NIV moralizes the idea. If righteousness has to do with worship, then who is the audience? Make sure you are performing with an eye solely directed towards God, not towards any human audience, seeking their approval. This would turn our acts of worship into public spectacle and

¹⁴⁵ Matthew 6:2,5,16; 7:5; 15:7; 22:18; 23:13,14,15; 25:51. Only once in Mark (7:6) and three times in Luke (6:42; 12:5; 13:15). The cognate noun *hypokrisis* (ὑπόκρισις) is used at Matt. 23:28; Mark 12:15; Luke 12:1; Gal. 2:13; 1 Tim. 4:2; 1 Peter 2:1. Luke uses the verb *hypokrinomai* (ὑποκρίνομαι) once (20:20).

¹⁴⁶ Psalms of Solomon 4:1-7 has an extended discussion about hypocrisy, but it relates to out-of-sight evil deeds.

¹⁴⁷ Jesus uses the same verb at 7:15, but there it is a warning about false prophets.

¹⁴⁸ Betz, p. 352. Nolland, p.273 disagrees saying that this creates strained Greek because it leaves *poiein* (ποιεῖν to do) without an object. Yet, perhaps the awkwardness is part of the emphasis.

they lose any qualification of “righteousness”, in fact becoming “unrighteous.” See Isaiah 1 for a similar prophetic critique of Jewish religious practices.

What is the problem with our righteous deeds being “performed before others in order to be seen”? What is the virtue of secrecy? What is the vice inherent in ostentation? Somehow it affects the way God evaluates the deed and the opportunity to receive a reward or payment from the deity. That those addressed are concerned about how their “Father in heaven,” defines their relationship to him. Nothing remains hidden from God. He knows what his people do in secret, whether it is good or evil. In v. 4 is the phrase “in secret” to be taken with the verbal adjective “see” or with the main verb “reward”? Nolland suggests that the parallelism with the first instance should be maintained (i.e., you act in secret and God rewards in secret).¹⁴⁹

6:2 begins with the particle “therefore, so then,” indicating that what follows in some sense is the application of the initial principle in v. 1. Matthew uses the term *misthos* (μισθός wages, recompense, reward) more than any other Gospel writer.¹⁵⁰ Why is Matthew so concerned about God’s reward? Is this related to the concept of judgment that is so prominent or does it have to do with the focus on being the people of God and the eschatological promise this contains (i.e. Beatitudes)?

Jesus does not command that his followers give alms. He just seems to expect showing compassion for those in need will be a natural part of their religious activity (see comments at the end of Matthew 25). However, when they do it and in whatever form they choose to do it, their motive should be the glory of God, without calculation of human praise. How would we apply this today? What aspects of financial giving within Christian communities do not comply with Jesus’ teaching?

In terms of prayer, Jesus expects that his followers will pray. If, however, our desire in prayer is to deepen our relationship with our heavenly Father, then we will engage in this primarily in private spaces. We do not do it to impress people with our piety. What is the *to tameion sou* (τὸ ταμεῖόν σου)? Some kind of room, perhaps for storing stuff and that has a door. Perhaps the force of Jesus’ statement arises from the fact that most would regard this as an unusual place to pray. Is Jesus suggesting that God is not ostentatious (but he is hidden or secret) and so those who communicate with him should do so in ways that comport with his character? What about the Jewish practice of going to the temple to pray? Is Jesus proscribing any public piety? Perhaps as Nolland suggests, he rather is saying that when you do acts of piety in public, make sure your motivation is the same as when you do them privately.

¹⁴⁹ Nolland, p. 276. NIV translates *para tōi patri* (παρὰ τῷ πατρὶ) as “from your father,” but the dative would suggest rather the sense “in the presence of your father” or “with your father,” perhaps with a sense of evaluation or assessment.

¹⁵⁰ Matthew 5:12,46; 6:1,2,5,16; 10:41(2x),42; 20:8 (cognate verb in 20:1,7). Mark used it once (9:41) and Luke at 6:23,35; 10:7 (cf. Acts 1:18 with reference to Judas). John 4:36. Perhaps this is linked with the metaphor Jesus uses at the end of chapter 9 when he encourages his disciples that God would send out labourers into the harvest.

In 6:7-8 Jesus comments on the prayer habits of the Gentiles. The meaning of *battalogein* (βατταλόγειν) is uncertain. Most take it as signifying “babbling,” such as you find in magical incantations that seek to coerce the gods and force them to attend to human desires. It may also be related to a term that describes stuttering. Perhaps there is criticism of complex, repeated formulas that characterized pagan prayers. Such processes are not needed in God’s Kingdom because he is already aware of our needs and our prayers become opportunities for him to respond. Consider 7:7-11. Keep them simple and direct because God does not respond to flattery, nor will he be badgered into saying yes.

The literature on the Lord’s Prayer is immense (6:9-13).¹⁵¹ Jesus provides an example of a simple, direct prayer that is a model for participants in his kingdom. Compare Ben Sirach’s prayer in Sirach 36:1-22. How does this model prayer differ from Jewish or Gentile prayers? Both attitude and content are exemplified. The form of this prayer suggests a division into two parts:

Vv. 9b – 10 set forward the presuppositions for this prayer and they all relate to the reality of God. Vv. 11-13 give examples of several needs we have as humans and how to express these needs before God. Whether we should consider these to be a sufficient and complete list is debated. In the *Didache* (VIII.2) there is a version of this prayer also.

Our Father, who art in Heaven,
Hallowed be thy Name,
Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done,
As in Heaven so also upon earth;
Give us today our daily bread,
And forgive us our *debt* (τὴν ὀφειλήν) as we *forgive* (ἀφίεμεν) our debtors,
And lead us not into trial, but deliver us from the Evil One,
For thine is the power and the glory for ever.”

According to the *Didache* this was to be prayed “three times a day.”

Some features to be noted:

- i. use of “Father” as a way to address God in prayer is very rare in Jewish writings before Jesus (4Q372.1:16; Sir.23:1,4 (Greek only), Wisd. 14:3; 3 Macc. 6:3,8; 1 Chr. 29:10 (Greek text)). The ancient Hebrew prayer, Qaddish,¹⁵² spoken after the sermon in the

¹⁵¹ There is an immense literature about the different form that the Lord’s Prayer has in Matthew in comparison to its form in Luke. I think it is rather fruitless to try and discern which form is “original.” We do not know and all attempts to resolve this are speculative. I presume that Jesus prayed with his disciples numerous times over a three year period. It would be surprising if the form and content of his prayers did not reflect some difference, as well as similarity.

¹⁵² Exalted and hallowed by His great Name
In the world which He created
According to His will.
May He establish His kingdom
In your lifetime and in your days
And in your lifetime of the whole household of Israel,
Speedily and at a near time.

synagogue begins “May his (God’s) great name be sanctified; May he establish his kingdom in your lifetime,” but how early in this period this prayer actually occurs remains uncertain.

- ii. Is the mention of Kingdom to be considered a future hope or a present implication? Blomberg¹⁵³ considers that it expresses a desire that God’s will be implemented now. Nolland acknowledges the eschatological sense, but does not rule out some present implications. The third petition in his view holds the first and second together in appropriate tension. Hagner, similarly says that “the disciples are encouraged to pray that what has begun in the ministry of Jesus, what they have now begun to participate in, may be experienced in all fullness.”¹⁵⁴ How do the elements in this prayer relate back to the principles in the Beatitudes?
- iii. “To sanctify God’s name” is to honour him by acting obediently with respect to his will – 5:16. God’s name and God’s person are indistinguishable.
- iv. Should the words “as in heaven so on earth” be taken as an independent expression related to the previous three expressions or as modifying only the third? I am not sure. The mention of heaven in the first line and third lines suggests to me that in the third line the prayer is for God’s will to be expressed on earth, and then the comparison is made to its heavenly expression, where God dwells, as line one indicates.
- v. The second set of three petitions deals with important realities of human life – food, forgiveness, and moral failure. In the first of these the meaning of τὸν ἄρτον ἡμῶν τὸν ἐπιούσιον (our daily bread) continues to be contested.¹⁵⁵ This word *ton epiousion* (τὸν ἐπιούσιον) only occurs here in Greek literature, until later occurrences are found in patristic literature. Most consider that it means “sufficient for the day,” but some take it to mean “for tomorrow” or “necessary for existence.”¹⁵⁶ Perhaps there is some relationship to the way that God provided daily Israel’s bread in the wilderness. Consider the daily rhythm for making bread that was a commonplace in ancient society.

And say, Amen. (D. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13. Word Biblical Commentary 33A* (Dallas, Tx.; Word Book Pub., 1993), 147)

¹⁵³ C. Blomberg, *Matthew*, 119.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 148.

¹⁵⁵ Nolland (p. 289-290) notes three possible ways it might be formulated:

- i. *epi* + *ousia* = our bread for subsistence
- ii. combination of *epi* and a feminine participle of the verb ‘to be’, implying the feminine noun *hemera* is implied = bread for the day that now exists
- iii. feminine participle may come from *hienai* (to come or draw near) = bread for the day that is drawing near.

¹⁵⁶ C. Hemer, “*epiousios*,” *JSNT* 22 (1984):81-94.

- vi. The ‘debts’ in v. 12 are considered ‘sins’ in the Lukan parallel (11:4). Matthew uses “trespasses or conscious transgressions” in vv. 14-15. Cancellation of debts is what was scheduled to happen in the year of Jubilee. Jesus links a person’s willingness to forgive others with the degree to which God will forgive that person (cf. the parable in Matthew 18:21ff).¹⁵⁷ While this does not tell us the whole story about God’s mercy, it does reveal a substantive truth that we struggle to grasp if we have a strong view of God’s grace. Is this, however, primarily condemnation of hypocritical behaviour? As well, as Nolland indicates, our willingness to forgive is a necessary but not sufficient condition for us to receive God’s forgiveness.¹⁵⁸
- vii. What are we praying for in the last lines? The contrast is between God’s actions to place us in dangerous situations and God’s actions to rescue us. God certainly leads his people into trial, i.e., puts them to the test. The OT is filled with examples. Even Jesus experienced this in Matthew 4. The term *peirasmon* (πειρασμόν) does not refer to a final end-time testing, because it is not definite (no article). Rather it seems to be a generic reference. While there is a sense of pressure and difficulty with this term, the focus is upon assessing and evaluating (cf. Matthew 26:41). So we pray that God will not “put us to the test,” but if this does occur in God’s wisdom, then we pray “that He will rescue us from the evil one,” or “that He will rescue us from harm (cf. 2 Tim. 4:18).”

In 6:14-15 Matthew repeats the essence of v. 12. The language of forgiveness is repeated, but now it is related to “transgression” or “a false step.”

Finally Jesus comments about fasting (6:16-18). The Pharisees fasted twice a week. The Law required Israelites to fast once a year on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 23:29, 32) and this was equated with “humbling oneself.” In the early church fasting did occur and we have mentions of it in Acts 13:2-3; 14:23, in connection with choosing godly leaders. Jesus is criticized for not requiring his followers to fast (Matt. 9:14-17).

A word play occurs in v. 16. Jesus warns his followers about those who make their faces ‘unrecognizable’ (*aphanizousin* (ἀφανίζουσιν)) in order that they be recognizable (*phainōsin*, *phanēs* (φανῶσιν, φανῆς)) to people as those fasting.¹⁵⁹ James 4:14 uses the same word play. Betz notes that a sullen (*skuthrōpoi* (σκυθρωποί)) appearance was associated with prophets and philosophers in Greco-Roman literature. In Luke 24:17 the two men on the road to Emmaus are described as gloomy because of

¹⁵⁷ Ben Sirach 28:1-4 “The vengeful will face the Lord’s vengeance,,,Forgive your neighbour the wrong he has done, and then your sin will be pardoned when you pray. Does anyone harbour anger against another, and expect healing from the Lord? If one has no mercy towards another like himself, can he then seek pardon for his own sins?”

¹⁵⁸ Nolland, 294.

¹⁵⁹ Sackcloth and ashes normally accompanied fasting. Cf. Isaiah 58.

their religious disappointment and misunderstanding. But what does a Greek word play imply about the language used for the delivery of this discourse? Is Matthew here replicating a word play in an original Aramaic text?

General Guidelines for the Conduct of Daily Life (6:19-34)

Jesus addresses a number of issues in this section which focus around setting appropriate priorities in life. We find the first contrasting statements – two kinds of treasures, two kinds of seeing, two kinds of masters – a form of speech that Jesus will use again in chapter 7. In two cases Jesus addresses the motivations of the heart. In vv. 22-23 he considers the grid through which we evaluate life – the way we see. He ends this section with an extended comment on the importance of putting God and his kingdom first in our lives. We can trust God to take care of the details. As any good father, God watches out for the welfare of his family.

Vv. 19-21 both summarize what has preceded (emphasis upon treasure in heaven/reward) and also prepares for what will follow by addressing the question of the heart's loyalty. Perhaps another linkage with what precedes occurs in the repetition of the verb *aphanizei* (ἀφανίζει (v. 16 (disfigure), 19 (destroy)). There is some contrast in form as Jesus uses prohibitions that deal with absolute choices, rather than his previous use of general cases introduced by *hotan* (ὅταν) + subjunctive – “whenever... (vv. 2, 5, 16).

The contrast in these verses is between two places for securing our ‘treasure’. Jesus does not define ‘treasure’ in these verses, but seems to be referring to spiritual treasures. Blomberg defines this as “everything that believers can take with them beyond the grave.”¹⁶⁰ If our treasures consist of human praise, then like other earthly treasures (i.e., rich tapestries or art), these eventually succumb to the ravages of moths or molds, which make them “unrecognizable, disfigured” so that they lose their value entirely, or we lose them to thieves. The only secure place is heaven, i.e., with God. Where we store our treasure will indicate the ultimate loyalty of our hearts. “One’s treasure tells the tale of one’s heart.”¹⁶¹ Wealth harbours inherent dangers that must be avoided. Jesus links current decisions and actions with future experiences beyond this space/time context.

Blomberg sees a close connection between vv. 19-21 and 22-23. They “restate the truth of the previous paragraph that the way people handle their finances affects every other part of their lives, either for good or for bad.”¹⁶² Ancients operated with the view that the eye generated light, which bounced off of objects and then returned to the eye (like a kind of radar), penetrating at that point into the person for

¹⁶⁰ Blomberg, op.cit., 123.

¹⁶¹ Davies and Allison, *Matthew* I, 632.

¹⁶² Blomberg, op.cit., 123-124.

recognition and cognition. The adjective *haplous* (ἀπλοῦς) means single or simple, perhaps when applied to sight with the sense of clear or healthy. It is contrasted with *ponēros* (πονηρός) which means evil, but in medical contexts can connote diseased.¹⁶³ The metaphor seems to mean that if the eye is diseased, the whole body is in darkness and thus in danger. It creates a distorted view of reality. A healthy eye will be one that sees where to place one's treasure appropriately and which master to serve whole-heartedly.

A third contrast comes in v. 24. Jesus rejects co-ownership of slaves. It rarely if ever works satisfactorily – either from the standpoint of the slave or the slave-owners.¹⁶⁴ The parallelism in these clauses is neatly expressed. 'Hating' and 'mocking/despising' are contrasted chiasmatically with 'loving' and 'clinging'. Jesus uses the term *mamōn* (μαμὼν) which is the Greek transliteration of an Aramaic term signifying "all the possessions that constitute a person's wealth."¹⁶⁵ In the Ten Commandments God required all of Israel's worship; none should go to any other god. We also find the language of servant and slave used to describe a person's relationship to God. People cannot have it both ways. Money/wealth enslaves many and Jesus warns his disciples that in the Kingdom God requires first place. Money/wealth is not important because God will supply all of his people's needs.¹⁶⁶

Seeking the Kingdom First 6:25-34 (Luke 12:22-34)

Jesus undoubtedly recognizes that the concern of people for wealth or treasure arises fundamentally because of anxiety over our existence – food, clothing. The term for worry (*merimnaō* (μεριμνάω)) occurs six times in this short passage (vv. 25, 27, 28, 31, 34(2x)) and Jesus consistently disputes any need for his followers to have anxiety about these matters. It is this anxiety that creates the enslavement to wealth that Jesus had critiqued previously.

V. 25 seems to provide a rationale then (for this reason) for what has preceded. If we only focus on procuring food and clothes, we may narrow the scope of God's intended purpose for our lives in destructive ways. The Kingdom lies before us and God invites us to participate in this, creating a far richer and more satisfactory life than the pursuit of wealth ever can. If God looks after the small creatures in his general creation, will he not exercise care for those who commit themselves to his Kingdom? Since God is our Creator, producing our hair and generating our physical growth, neither of which we can do, then why should we worry about that which we cannot alter? We have to trust God and not be "people of little faith" (v.30).

¹⁶³ In other contexts in the Synoptics it might connote "an evil eye," i.e., one that uses magic to cast spells (cf. Mark 7:22). Consider also Matthew 20:15.

¹⁶⁴ An example of this is found in Acts 16:16-19.

¹⁶⁵ Nolland, 304, says that its occurrence in the Synoptic Gospels (Luke 16:9,11,13) is the earliest occurrence of the term in Greek. The Hebrew equivalent occurs in Sir. 31(34);8, but not in the corresponding Greek translation. Ben Sirach warns of the destructiveness of a love for gold. Also it is found in 1QS 6.2; 1Q27.1.2,5.CD 14.20

¹⁶⁶ Note Paul's comments about the dangers of wealth in 1 Timothy 6.

The Gentiles are consumed with these anxieties and their religious activities are driven by them¹⁶⁷, such that they seek every means to coerce the gods to grant them their desires. Modern paganism is scarcely different, pursuing physical exercise and careful dieting as a means to prolonging life, but really these become manifestations of a deeper anxiety (v. 32). Since God, your Father, already knows you have need of these things, you can trust him to provide them. Jesus promises that for those who seek the Kingdom as their priority, God will “add all these things to you” (v. 33). However, we know from our contemporary reality that many believers die from hunger in our world. So what does Jesus mean?

1. Could he be suggesting that those in the Kingdom are now in a relationship with God that seamlessly extends from the now into the eternal future? So God will provide our every need, even through death into eternal life. The struggles Christians’ experience in this age may be part of the suffering that God’s people contend with as part of their faith journey, but God will still provide for all of our needs because he has given us eternal life. So the contingent exigencies should not cloud the eternal blessings.
2. Perhaps Jesus is expecting that those in the Kingdom community will use their resources to assist Kingdom people who are experiencing hunger and poverty, thus being the means by which God supplies their needs.
3. Perhaps Jesus is saying that our pursuit of Kingdom priorities and God’s will becomes the means through which he supplies our needs, i.e., adds them on to the main thing.

God’s righteousness (literally “his righteousness”) picks up the language Jesus had used in Matthew 5:6.

In the concluding piece (v. 34) Jesus draws his conclusion (‘therefore’). This is the third time he has commanded “do not worry” (vv. 25, 31). The language about day and evil reminds us of elements in the Lord’s Prayer. That prayer requests God’s daily provision. If we trust God for this, then tomorrow, the new today, and its needs, will similarly be cared for by God. There will be sufficient misfortunes to deal with that day, but God is with us through it all. If we do overcome the misfortunes of today, what will we attain tomorrow? Three proverbial pieces of wisdom seem to be included in this verse, all warning about the futility of worrying about a time we cannot influence. We may wonder whether the actions we have taken today will be sufficient to care for the needs that may arise tomorrow, but Jesus advises that God is able to manage that for us. So we care for tomorrow by trusting God’s provision for today. If we are preoccupied with tomorrow’s issues, we cannot attend to the matters of today, particularly as they represent God’s will and Kingdom advancement.

¹⁶⁷ Betz documents this obsession within pagan writings. Sirach 40:1-11 gives a long list of the things that worried people in the Hellenistic age. While we may not have an exact equivalent of the word ‘worry’ in Hebrew, the Psalmist certainly is concerned at times with his fragile state and it bothers him significantly.

Judging Others 7:1-6

The verb *krinō* (κρίνω) can mean to evaluate or assess, or to pass judgment or condemn. We are not to judge, because that is God's prerogative (vv.1-5), but we are to assess and evaluate (v. 6). So perhaps the warning is about displaying a very critical spirit. The primary sense of *krinō* (κρίνω) in Matthew refers to the eschatological judgment of God in which evil people will be condemned. Jesus warns us that by whatever standard we attempt to condemn others, God will use that same standard to condemn us. None of us is consistently in the right and completely innocent. We forfeit God's mercy if we do not act mercifully ourselves (5:7). The unusual images of vv. 3-5 raise a slightly different issue, namely our inability to judge fairly and appropriately. As 6:22-23 stated, our eye deceives us and we do not see with integrity. The two terms compare a toothpick to a construction plank. Jesus does emphasize that we are to deal first with our own sin and then possibly we might be in a position to assist another to deal with theirs.

What do the terms 'brother/sister' mean here? Is Jesus relating these ideas to people in the Kingdom family or to fellow Jews?

Jesus names such judging activity as appropriate to a hypocrite (note the play on words with *krinō* (κρίνω), even though the person may not be fully conscious of the process that is occurring.

V. 6 introduces a different problem. Jesus cautions his followers to assess carefully who should be offered "holy things," i.e., the gospel. Gentiles were often portrayed as dogs or pigs and thus from a Jewish perspective these terms are pejorative. Jesus used them here also, but extended them in general ways. Perhaps as Blomberg indicates, we must take heed when people consistently reject God's Good News and move on to those who might be more receptive. Force-feeding is not a good evangelism technique. Sometimes it results in considerable harm to those attempting to do the feeding. You feed dogs and swine what they need, not what you think they need.

Again, we should note the careful parallelisms and chiasms that are present in these verses.

God's Generosity 7:7-11 (cf. Luke 11:9-13)

Given our needs, Jesus urges us to include our heavenly Father in all we do. He has the ability and desire to respond to our prayers and meet our needs, as Jesus indicated in his model prayer and his teaching in 6:25-34. Asking, seeking and knocking may include more than just prayers, indeed the totality of being a disciple, just like the seeker after wisdom in Proverbs or the Law in Psalm 119. God invites us to seek first the Kingdom and in doing so we will need his help in many diverse ways. As Nolland suggests, "they are all images of venturing out in pursuit of something,... venturing with God."¹⁶⁸ In two of the statements passive verbs are used, begging the question of who is the agent – in giving and

¹⁶⁸ Nolland, op. cit. 325.

opening. Vv. 9-11 give the answer, as God comes into the frame clearly as the generous, heavenly parent. The contrast is drawn between human fathers who are evil and yet who respond positively to the requests for help from their children, and the heavenly father who implicitly is not evil, and who certainly will be more generous than any human father. He argues from the lesser to the greater. The questions in vv. 9-10 require negative answers. Bread and fish relate to “daily bread.” Luke replaces “good gifts” with “the Holy Spirit” (11:13).

The Golden Rule 7:12

Jesus mentioned the Law and the Prophets back in 5:17. Now he defines the essence of this revelation and how his Kingdom reality will enable people to live in accordance with God’s revealed will. We are to respond with generosity to everyone, no matter how they may have treated us. This is how God has acted. Jesus expresses this ethical principle positively, not negatively. Blomberg observes that “the positive form moves us to action on behalf of others.”¹⁶⁹ We must understand the sense of this maxim in the context of the SM. While it occurs negatively in many other religious settings, only Jesus expresses it positively. Some see no difference in meaning between the negative and positive renditions. However, the open-endedness of Jesus’ statement is a contrast with the negative. The mandate to love our neighbour never gets finished.

The use of ‘therefore, so then’ begs the question of what Jesus is summarizing? Is it just this section (vv. 7-11)? It seems to be too comprehensive just for this. If Jesus is intending it to summarize the entire SM, then it indicates that he had a logical and coherent message to give and its various elements finds coherence in this maxim.¹⁷⁰

Implementing the Sermon – Conclusions 7:13-27

As Jesus brings his discourse to an end, he offers no new commands, but urges obedient response. Significant warnings are given about the destructive results that happen to those who ignore his teaching. The wise person will heed and respond positively. The stark contrasts between two ways, two trees, two groups, two builders, keep hammering home the need to make a decision in the direction of the Kingdom. It reminds us of the scene at the end of Deuteronomy where Moses urges Israel not to choose the path that leads to God’s curse, but the path that leads to God’s blessing.¹⁷¹

Vv. 13-14 introduce two ways and two gates. The “wide gate” seems to lead to the “prosperous” way, but when you enter through it, the result eventually is destruction. The “pressured” way (cf. 5:11, 12, 44) follows upon entry through the “narrow” gate, but when you follow it, the result is life. Unfortunately many are fooled by the wide gate and “prosperous” way and few enter the narrow gate and

¹⁶⁹ Blomberg, op.cit. 131, quoting Mounce, *Matthew*, 63.

¹⁷⁰ Hillel’s comments was “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour; that is the whole Torah, while the rest is commentary thereon; go and learn it.” (*b. Sab.31a*).

¹⁷¹ Other parallels are found in 2 Esdras 7:-16. Consider also the *Didache* 1:1 – 6:7.

experience the “pressured” way (cf. 16:24-27). Perhaps the baptismal challenge by John is an example of a narrow gate. We need to remember that Jesus is speaking prior to Pentecost. The idea of two ways occurs frequently in Jewish and Greek literature. “Destruction” (*apōleia* (ἀπώλεια)) is found parallel with Hades in Tob. 13:2 and in Pss. Sol. 14:9.

Vv. 15-20 provide warning about false prophets. Jesus addresses people who claim to be authentic religious leaders and God’s representatives, but whose actions betray their loyalty to someone else. The “wolf in sheep’s clothing” image is quite threatening, because it shows the vulnerability of the flock to unscrupulous leaders. These religious leaders demonstrate hypocritical character. If vv. 21-23 build upon these verses then Jesus may outline various ways in which these religious people proved themselves false – not doing the will of “my Father who is in heaven.” Regardless of that connection, Jesus does indicate that outward behaviour may provide a clue to inward deceit. Unfortunately the guideline Jesus provides – good trees produce good fruit and bad trees produce bad fruit – may be true in the agricultural world, but human beings are more clever, more deceptive and more changeable. It is not always possible for humans to tell the false confession from a true confession. Jesus contrasts *agathos* (ἄγαθος good) with *ponēros* (πονήρος evil). He denies that a bad tree has any ability to produce good fruit. The farmer in the end cuts down the bad or rotting tree and throws it into the fire (cf. 3:10-12). It is destroyed. Who is the “farmer” in this image (v.19)? It must be God himself. False disciples will be ferreted out by God and appropriate judgment will be meted. However, from our human perspective we must admit that we can never tell for sure the spiritual disposition of some people.

Vv. 22-23 suggests that some of these “sheepish wolves” do miracles and perform exorcisms.¹⁷² Their powers are quite astonishing, yet they are deceivers. The NT contains examples of Satan’s power to do miraculous actions (Acts 19:13-16; Rev. 13:13-14; 2 Cor. 11:13), with a view to deceiving human beings into being loyal to him. Just because a person does such astonishing work, says little about his or her loyalty to God. Like the test in the OT that Moses gives, if the prophet urges you to abandon God and even does signs and wonders, do not believe him (Deut. 13:1-5).

There is a sense of surprise on the part of these people when at the great assize Jesus will announce that he has no relationship with them. If they did miracles in Jesus’ name, does that not guarantee their entrance into life? Sometimes in the NT people use the name of Jesus as their authority for casting out demons or healing (Mk. 9:38; 16:17; Acts 3:6; 4:10). Jesus denies any connection, because in their heart they were not loyal to him. We see here a similar principle as expressed by Israel’s prophets that her sacrifices, however many or magnificent, meant nothing if the people did not have a heart of obedience (Micah 6:8). They will hear Jesus’ terrible words – “depart from me, I never knew you.”

¹⁷² Is Jesus here responding to accusations against himself that he is demonized and thus performs exorcisms and healings?

Jesus does not deny the validity of their acts or even their positive value for those affected. However, because they have acted without loyalty to him or a consciousness of being his servants, they become “workers of lawlessness” (v. 23). As Carson suggests “There is no reason to judge their claims false; their claims are not false, but insufficient.”¹⁷³ How close one may come to the spiritual reality and still miss the mark is evidenced by the example of Judas Iscariot.

Jesus identifies himself as “Lord,” with the power and authority to wield this kind of judgment. Paul tells us that this is the confession that Christians make (1 Cor. 12:1-12; Romans 10:9-10), i.e., Jesus is Lord. It is his will that is determinative for entry into the Kingdom. The time of this judgment (“on that day”) is the eschatological end. In all this Jesus makes an astonishing Christological claim. He is the one who decides who enters his kingdom and who is banished from it.

Finally, we should note that the last part of v. 23 is a quotation from Psalm 6:8. The psalm is the prayer of a righteous sufferer vindicated by God and he tells his tormentors to depart. Is Jesus putting himself in the category of a “righteous sufferer”?

Jesus concludes his sermon with the well-known parable of the two builders – one wise and one foolish. This conclusion indicates the strong connections that the Sermon has with the wisdom tradition. I think Jesus (v. 24) is linking his words with the will of God (cf. 6:10), indicating they are one and the same. Obeying Jesus’ teaching is obeying the will of God (cf. 28:18-20). Hearing is one thing, doing is another and only the doing legitimizes one’s response to Jesus.

The parable fits well within Palestinian conditions. Flash floods are frequent. The wise person who knows what is coming builds with knowledge of this and so is secure when the storms come. The foolish person ignores this reality and builds in the flood-plain, perhaps the ground that is most easily accessible. When the storms come, his home is washed away and everything he has worked for is destroyed. Whether the storm exemplifies the final judgment or other more mediate crises is not made plain. However, what is clear is that failure to hear and obey Jesus’ teaching will result in a ruined life, because they “reveal authentic and inauthentic spirituality.”¹⁷⁴

Matthew creates a transition (vv. 28-29, 8:1) to the activities of Jesus in chapters 8-9. The statement that begins v. 28 occurs at the conclusion of four other discourses in Matthew. The astonishment of the crowd arises from Jesus’ authority. He cites the Law, only to change it or reinterpret it! He offers no support for his teaching from any other tradition. He is sufficient authority for what he says. In this he speaks like a prophet. Perhaps also it is the radical nature of Jesus’ teaching that generates astonishment within the crowd.

¹⁷³ Carson, 193.

¹⁷⁴ Blomberg, *op. cit.*, 134.

Jesus descends from the mountain, with crowds trailing and abuzz with astonishment, presumably inclusive of the disciples.

The Mission of Jesus (Matthew 8 – 9)

The structure of Matthew’s Gospel contains alternating sequences of teaching and miraculous activity. Following the SM, he has included a sequence of miracle stories. Although there are stories in chapters 8-9 similar to those we find in the early sections of Mark’s Gospel, Matthew has a unique sequence and selection, including the healing of the centurion’s servant (paralleled in Luke 7:1-10) and conversations with would-be disciples (Luke 9:57-60). Where he does overlap with Mark’s Gospel, Matthew’s accounts are very condensed.

The variety of encounters is quite large:

Healing of the Leper	8:1-4	[Mark 1:40-45] [Luke 5:12-16]
The Centurion’s Servant	8:5-13	[Luke 7:1-10]
Healing of Peter’s Wife	8:14-15	[Mark 1:29-31] [Luke 4:38-39]
Sick healed at evening	8:16-17	[Mark 1:32-34] [Luke 4:40-41]
Two Claimants to Discipleship	8:18-22	[Luke 9:57-60]
Stilling the tempest	8:23-27	[Mark 4:35-41] [Luke 8:22-25]
The Gadarene Demoniacs	8:28-34	[Mark 5:1-20] [Luke 8:26-39]
Healing of a Paralyzed Man	9:1-8	[Mark 2:1-12] [Luke 5:17-26]
The Call of Levi	9:9-13	[Mark 2:13-17] [Luke 5:27-32]
Question about Fasting	9:14-17	[Mark 2:18-22] [Luke 5:33-39]
Jairus’ daughter & Woman		
With issue of Blood	9:18-26	[Mark 5:21-43] [Luke 8:40-56]
Two Blind Men Healed	9:27-31	[Mark 10:46-52] [Luke 18:35-43]
Healing of speechless Demoniac	9:32-34	
Transition to Second Discourse	9:35-38	[Luke 10:1ff]

Jesus heals eleven specific individuals. He calms a storm. He engages in controversy with other religious groups about fasting and associating with tax-collectors. And there are several significant conversations about discipleship, including the specific call of Levi. It is the location of the stories about the Healing of the Paralyzed Man, the Call of Levi and the Question about Fasting (Matthew 9:1-17 = Mark 2:1-22; Luke 5-9) after the stories of the Stilling of the Tempest and the Gadarene Demoniacs (8:23-34 = Mark 4:35-41; Luke 8:22-39) that seems most unusual. If Mark’s order is the original, why Matthew changed it remains a mystery.

Matthew notes the presence of the crowd (8:18) and their presence stirs Jesus to go across the lake (8:18). At the conclusion to the healing of the two Gadarene Demoniacs the whole town asks Jesus to leave (8:34). The crowd is “filled with awe” when Jesus heals the paralytic (9:8). He dismisses the noisy crowd gathered at Jairus’ house, before he heals his daughter (9:23). Matthew concludes this section by summarizing the itinerant ministry of Jesus (9:35) in words reminiscent of 4:23-25 – teaching, proclaiming, and healing. His response to the crowds is one of compassion, because they are “harassed and abandoned to danger” or “distressed and dejected” (9:36) because they lack a shepherd. Perhaps

Jesus' various actions that Matthew narrates in chapters 8-9 are designed to demonstrate how Jesus is their designated shepherd. We should also note the variable reactions from the crowds.

The disciples are rather in the background in this section. They are included among "those following" in 8:10 as Jesus comments on the faith of the Centurion. Peter is mentioned in connection with his mother-in-law, but this is incidental (8:14). We meet two people who desire to be Jesus' disciples (8:18-22), but Jesus' response is not particularly encouraging. His disciples are with him in the boat during the storm. He criticizes their "little faith" (8:23-26). Because Jesus used the boat, his disciples presumably are with him for the healing of the Two Gadarene Demoniacs and the healing of the Paralytic (8:28-9:8). His disciples are with him during the meal with Levi/Matthew. Jesus is criticized by John's disciples for not requiring his disciples to fast (9:14). His disciples accompany him to Jairus' home (9:19). Finally, in 9:37 he urges his disciples to pray that God will send workers into the ripe harvest. So the disciples are present in almost every context, but they have very little involvement in the action. Only in the miracle of the calming of the storm are they directly engaged, interacting with Jesus, but in this context they display "little faith," hardly an encouraging sign.

By and large Jesus invests himself in the lives of many different people, both men and women, both Jews and Gentiles, whom he encounters in the towns and villages of Galilee and adjacent regions. There is even a Roman centurion involved with Jesus, as well as a person only defined as a ruler – ἄρχων (9:18, 23). The people of Gadara may well be Gentiles, given their occupation and location in the Decapolis. While Jesus may be surprised at the vitality of their faith, he considers it a fulfillment of God's purpose "that many will come from the east and the west and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" (8:11). The great variety of people who come to Jesus demonstrates how plenteous the harvest is and ready for reaping (9:38).

The things that Jesus deals with – disease, death, life-threatening dangers, demons – are the great factors that generated fear and anxiety in Jesus' contemporaries, both Jews and non-Jews. Jesus shows that he has the power and authority to deal with all of them.

The responses of these individuals, the disciples and the crowds to Jesus' work and words should be noted.

- ❑ Centurion – his implicit confidence in the authority of Jesus to heal his servant
- ❑ Disciples – "what kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him."
- ❑ People of Gadara – plead for Jesus to leave because of the destruction of the pigs.
- ❑ Crowds at the healing of the paralytic – "they praised God who had given such authority to men."
- ❑ Two blind men – believe that Jesus can heal them.

- Crowds at the healing of the speechless man – “Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel.”

However, the Pharisees conclude that “It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons” (9:34). Jesus has demonstrated his authority, not just in his teaching (SM), but now in his handling of illness and demons. The question is the source of his authority. Opposition is arising and beginning to find its voice.

Matthew does not reference the Old Testament very much in this section. He quotes once from Isaiah 53:4 (8:17) as he indicates why Jesus engages in so much healing ministry. This is a fulfillment citation, rendering the Hebrew text in a fashion that is different from the Septuagint (“this one bears our sins and suffers pain for us” οὗτος τὰς ἁμαρτίας ἡμῶν φέρει καὶ περὶ ἡμῶν ὀδυνᾶται). Matthew in contrast does not mention sin specifically here. He translates it as “He himself has taken our weaknesses and has carried diseases.” Isaiah 53 in the New Testament, particularly 1 Peter 2:21-25 defines the significance of Jesus’ death in terms of atonement and the ethical implications of the righteous sufferer. Matthew does not focus on the atonement implications at this point. Rather he uses this text as evidence that Jesus’ healing activity is part of the suffering servant’s mandate (Isaiah 42:6-7), demonstrating how God’s approval rests upon those who put their confidence in Jesus. They illustrate the reality of the Kingdom’s presence. Compare this to Jesus’ response to John the Baptist in 11:5-6.

The second citation is from Hosea 6:6 (Matthew’s citation (9:13) is the same as the Septuagint). This is quoted not by the writer of Matthew in an editorial section, but by Jesus in conversation as he disputes with the Pharisees because they criticize him for eating with tax-collectors (9:11-13). Hosea criticizes the Israelites for their failure to pursue personal righteousness, yet they continue to sacrifice, thinking that this would satisfy God. Mercy in this context renders the Hebrew term *hesed*, with its connotations of a selfless covenant love. Hosea lampoons their naivete – while sacrifice is good, what God really demands is a pure heart. This of course was Jesus’ theme in the SM. This is why the Pharisees, i.e., the righteous, do not respond to Jesus’ invitation to the Kingdom. They do not see their inherent falseness and the inadequacy of their righteousness. As Blomberg notes, there is a double rebuke in Jesus’ response, because he treats the Pharisees as learners, i.e., “go and learn” and sends them back to their books to discover what God’s word truly means.

Linked with the citation is another assertion by Jesus about the intentionality of his ministry. “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” I wonder how they heard the repeated first person – I desire, I have come. In Hosea’s text, it is God who speaks. Jesus ties himself with God’s values and indicates that these are the values he has come to incarnate. Where has Jesus “come from” and who has sent him?

There is probably one other intentional allusion to the Old Testament encased in Jesus’ parable about the bridegroom (9:15). It is Hosea (whom Jesus has just quoted in 9:13) who personified Yahweh

as the husband of Israel through his marriage with Gomer. Jesus assumes this role now vis-à-vis Israel. The bridegroom has come, the wedding is about to occur, and there can be no fasting on such a happy occasion. However, the presence of the bridegroom is limited in time. Soon he will leave. This short parable gives further insight into Jesus' use of the expression "I have come." But is the "bride" ready?

Let us consider now a little more systematically the flow of Matthew's narrative and the more significant elements that this collection of stories contributes to our understanding of Jesus and the Kingdom.

1. Healing the leper (8:1-4): Three elements emerge. First, that Jesus can touch a leper and remain ceremonially clean is quite unexpected. Rather his touch makes the leper clean by healing him. Second, Jesus requires the healed leper to seek the priest's verification of cleanness, and offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving to God. Presumably this would happen in Jerusalem where the appropriate sacrifice could be offered. This becomes a witness – to the priest and to others who observe – about Jesus and his ministry. What response did Jesus expect to his witness? This phrase occurs again at 10:18 and 24:14, where it describes a witness of the gospel to the nations. Is there any sense of hostility – i.e., a witness against them (cf. Mark 6:11)? Thirdly, the confidence of the leper in Jesus' power or ability to make him clean defines his faith. What leads the leper to make this declaration is not stated. Matthew does not record the response of this leper to Jesus' instruction (cf. Mark 1:44-45), nor does he note Jesus' compassion (cf. Mark 1:41). In Israel priests pronounce a person clean, but cannot make a person clean. Such healing is a divine act.
2. Healing the Centurion's servant¹⁷⁵ (8:5-13): A Gentile commanding a segment of the occupying Roman army approaches Jesus respectfully and acknowledges his ability to heal the paralyzed.¹⁷⁶ Luke 7:3-6 reports the good reputation of this Centurion among the Jewish populace. The confidence of the Centurion in Jesus' ability is quite astonishing, because he believed that Jesus could speak the word and the healing would occur some distance away. Did the Centurion see Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, as a military leader who has authority to command troops? What is the intimation of his repeated use of the title 'Lord'? The issue of authority is key. Regardless Jesus is amazed at his faith, such that he declares, with strong affirmation, that he has yet to see

¹⁷⁵ Although *pais* (παῖς) can mean either son/child or servant, it probably means servant here. Note the parallel story in Luke 7:1-10 where the sick person is identified specifically as *doulos* (δούλος). Παῖς in Matthew can mean 'child' (2:16; 17:18; 21:15) or 'servant' (12:18 (Isa.42:1); 14:2). The occurrences in 8:6, 8, 13 probably belong in the 'servant' category.

¹⁷⁶ Matthew's use of the perfect form *beblētai* (βέβληται 8:6) to describe the situation of the paralyzed person is rather unusual. It occurs again in this usage at 8:14 and 9:2. We discover a similar occurrence in Mark 7:30, Luke 16:20. There is also the unusual use of the perfect at John 13:2 to describe the activity of Satan in Judas' heart.

comparable faith in Israel. I wonder what Peter, Andrew, James and John thought when they heard this? What kind of faith did their following require?¹⁷⁷

We should note that this is the first time Jesus speaks about faith in Matthew's Gospel, but over half of the occurrences in Matthew will come in chapters 8-9 (8:10; 9:2, 22, 29). Matthew uses the example of this Centurion to illustrate the quality of faith, which is Christological in its focus. This faith recognizes in Jesus that God's power is at work. That Jesus discerns and accepts faith offered by a Gentile needs to be kept in mind when in Chapter 10 we read of his instructions for his disciples to go only to the lost sheep of Israel.

But Jesus is not content to stop here. He goes further and makes a declaration about the population of the Kingdom of Heaven that must have shocked everyone in his audience. Of course, Matthew does not clarify who is in Jesus' audience at this point (the plural you in vv.10-11), other than to define them as "those following." The Lukan parallel does not have vv. 11-12.¹⁷⁸ Jesus here speaks about the "kingdom of heaven" and also about "the sons of the kingdom" who in fact do not belong in the kingdom. Jesus uses the phrase again in 13:38. Those who think themselves to be part of the kingdom in fact by their lack of faith will find themselves outside of the kingdom, with dire consequences. The reference to gathering from the east and the west is a common motif in Jewish eschatology, signifying a comprehensive, global gathering.

How does this statement work in Matthew's narrative? Is it the anticipation of the rejection of Jesus by Israel that will come to fruition later in his Gospel? Does it anticipate in some sense the final Great Commission?

Darkness was used by Matthew in 4:16 and 6:23 to define exclusion from the Kingdom, where light dwells. As well, we have the sense of violent exclusion – thrown out. Who is the bouncer? Finally, the motif of wailing and gnashing of teeth comes five more times in Matthew (13:42,50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30). We find the same collection of motifs at 22:13 and 25:30. What does "gnashing teeth" represent? Anger? Hostility? Vexation?

Finally, Jesus intimates the Messianic banquet that all people of God, whether Gentile or Jewish, will enjoy with the Patriarchs. What vision of the people of God does Matthew promote by including this teaching of Jesus? The idea of displacement of some natural kingdom residents with Gentiles would not sit well with many in his Jewish audience.

3. Healing Peter's mother-in-law (8:14-17): This is the first interaction Jesus has with a woman outside of his own family that Matthew reports. The initiative is entirely with Jesus. He saw her in her sickness and reaches out to heal her. How she assisted Jesus is not spelled out, but it was

¹⁷⁷ Some see Jesus' emphatic statement in v.7 as an exclamatory question.

¹⁷⁸ There is a similar kind of statement in Luke 13:28-30, but it is given in a very different context.

constant. The summary note that follows stresses that Jesus healed “with word,” i.e., simply, using no incantations or herbal remedies. His authority again becomes clear.

4. Discipleship: Two accounts of discipleship (8:18-22 and 9:9-13) bracket three dramatic miracles. Presumably Matthew is making some statements about the nature of discipleship through these arrangements. First we have several inadequate responses from current disciples, including those on the boat in the midst of the storm. In vv. 18-19, 21 note the repetition of the verb *aperchomai* (ἀπέρχομαι) – cross over, go. The urgency of the command to cross the lake leads the scribe to confess that he is willing to follow “wherever you cross over,” although not knowing exactly where that will take him. Jesus responds by saying he will be joining a group that is outcast (v.20). Not even the smaller animals have to experience such deprivation. What makes this man’s response inadequate?

We have in v. 20 the first of twenty-eight occurrences of the phrase “the son of man” in Matthew’s Gospel. Debate continues about the significance of this phrase. It is Aramaic or Hebrew in its formation. It makes no sense as a Greek idiom. Some claim that it means “a somebody,” others that it is just a self-designation, i.e., this man, while others see consistent reference to passages such as Daniel 7 as the background and explanation for Jesus’ usage. I tend to think, given later linkages in Jesus’ teaching of this phrase with Daniel 7 that this is the preferred background. It is an oblique way, albeit ambiguous, for Jesus to make a claim about his heavenly origin, his divine authority, and his collective representation of the people of God. While Daniel 7 speaks of “a son of man,” Jesus uses the definite article, i.e., “the son of man.” In Greek the article here may signal that he is referring to a previous usage of this phrase as in Daniel 7.

Vv. 21-22 presents another inadequate response. It is hard to imagine a more serious filial duty among Jews (cf. Tobit) than the duty to see to the proper burial of one’s father. Yet Jesus declares that following him is more important, indeed it is more urgent. Jesus supports family obligations by and large. However, if one is forced to choose between family obligation and following Jesus, then Jesus has to be the choice. Other arrangements can be made to deal with the dead, if necessary.

When Jesus stills the storm (vv. 23-27), his disciples are with him in the boat. Jesus criticizes their fear of the elements and assesses this as due to a lack of faith (ὀλιγόπιστοι). The response of the disciples is amazement, and they wonder “what kind of person is this” because he has authority to quell the wind and the waves. Discipleship again is brought into connection with Jesus’ authority. Why does Matthew call this event a “violent shaking, shock” *seismos* (σεισμός

v. 24)?¹⁷⁹ Normally this means an earthquake. Mark's parallel speaks of a storm. But is this Matthew's perspective? The shaking of the sea is an eschatological sign in Haggai 2:6,21. In the OT it is God who stills the storm. That Jesus sleeps through such commotion might be interpreted in a variety of ways. His followers see it as indifference to what is happening. However, more likely it demonstrates Jesus confidence in his Father's protection. Nolland indicates he finds no example of any Greco-Roman ruler using human powers to calm a storm. Some see a connection, verbal and otherwise, between Matthew's account and Jonah's experience. Perhaps Matthew is preparing the ground for Jesus' statement that "one greater than Jonah is here" (12:41).

In the first extended account of an exorcism (vv. 28-34) the disciples play little role. In chapter 10 Jesus will give them authority to cast out demons. Demonization according to Blomberg is "the indwelling of unseen evil spirits in a way that prevents an individual from fully controlling his or her own actions."¹⁸⁰ Josephus, a contemporary of this writer, describes demons as "the spirits of wicked men which enter the living and kill them unless aid is forthcoming."¹⁸¹ Matthew and other Gospel writers distinguish between Jesus' exorcisms and his healings, although sometimes they are related. Jesus was an exorcist, but did his exorcizing in ways that were quite different from contemporary Jewish practices.¹⁸² Matthew's term *hoi daimones* (οἱ δαίμονες – the demons) only occurs here in the NT.

The demons repudiate Jesus' right to interfere with them (v.29). They recognize who he is, just as Satan does in the temptation narrative – the son of God. They appeal that it is not time for their punishment. Jesus is ahead of the eschatological schedule (v. 29). They acknowledge that Jesus has the authority and power to torment them – as he will be sending them into the herd of swine. This he does, by uttering a single word (v. 32)! The result of these actions is that the city folk beg Jesus to leave, just like the demons beg Jesus to send them into the swine (v. 31, 34). There is no amazement at his activity, like that expressed by crowds on other occasions. Why this change?

Jesus' power over these very violent demoniacs demonstrates another side of his authority. As well, we should recognize another "I have come" statement, only this time Matthew has it in the mouths of the demoniacs (v. 29).

The incident of the stilling of the storm and the exorcism of the demoniacs are connected in terms of Jesus' power. Also, they are connected in terms of water. Jesus preserves his disciples

¹⁷⁹ BDAG suggests the sense "storm" (918.b), but only lists Matthew 8:24 as an example of this usage. All other cases in the NT refer to earthquakes (cf. Matthew 24:7; 27:54; 28:2).

¹⁸⁰ Blomberg, p. 151.

¹⁸¹ Josephus, *Bellum* 7.185.

¹⁸² Graham Twelftree, "εἰ δὲ...ἐγὼ ἐκβάλλω τὰ δαιμονία", in *Gospel Perspectives* 6, p. 361-400.

from perishing in the water, but he gives permission for the demons to enter the swine, who then rush into the sea and drown, but the demonized humans are preserved.

The healing of the paralytic broaches the subject of Jesus' power to forgive sins (9:1-8). Even though Jesus heals the man and forgives his sins, instead of acceptance, we discover Jesus charged with blasphemy by the religious leaders. He attributes this to "entertaining evil thoughts (ἐνθυμεῖσθε) in your hearts" (v. 4) The crowd, conversely, gives reverence and glory to God "because he has given such authority for the benefit of human beings" (v. 8). Matthew does not explain the charge of blasphemy, as Mark does, with the religious leaders asserting that only God can forgive sins. But Matthew like Mark plainly says that Jesus claims to have the authority to forgive sins and this is probably the basis for this accusation. How would a Jewish person in the first century receive forgiveness of sins?

Jesus forgives the sins of another person in the Synoptic tradition in Luke 7:48. Matthew, however, has been emphasizing forgiveness as a major element in Jesus' kingdom program. In fact, he links God's forgiveness with the willingness of human beings to forgive one another (note the discussion about the statement in the Lord's prayer 6:12, 14-15; 5:21-26; 18:15-35). In the OT forgiveness of sins and healing from sickness are linked (as in Psalm 103:3). Jesus does not seem to discourage this idea within this miracle. However, what is unusual is the association of forgiveness of sins with the Messianic agenda (elsewhere Luke links it to the year of Jubilee material). Jesus himself declares that his death on the cross is precisely "for the forgiveness of sins" (20:28). As Allison and Davies note, although "the Messianic age was naturally expected to bring forgiveness (CD 14:19; 11QMelch. 4-9), there is very little evidence that the Messiah himself was expected to intercede or atone for sins."¹⁸³ How all of this relates to the Son of Man usage is a debated question.

This cycle of stories about discipleship ends with the calling of Matthew/Levi. He collects customs duties as a civil servant of Herod Antipas. This writer uses the name 'Matthew' of this disciple, but Mark and Luke use the name 'Levi'. Jews in antiquity often had several names. Presumably the banquet Jesus enjoys in v. 10 is held at Matthew's house, but the text is quite ambiguous – it could equally be Jesus' house. Other tax-collectors and 'serious sinners' join with him and his disciples. Again controversy erupts because Jesus acts in this unprecedented fashion. Jesus sets his own rules, based upon his Kingdom mission – why he has come.

The fasting question (vv. 14-17) leads to two parabolic sayings of Jesus – the bridegroom and the wineskins. Both in different ways present Jesus' rationale for not fasting – the time in

¹⁸³ Allison and Davies, *Matthew II*, 90. Consider the LXX text of 2 Chronicles 30:18-19 and the prayer of Hezekiah.

salvation history with the Messiah present precludes fasting; the Kingdom reality that Jesus is announcing comes with new rules and values. This is what Jesus was teaching in the content of the SM.

Matthew condenses twenty verses that Mark takes to tell the intertwined stories of Jairus' daughter and the woman with a hemorrhage, into eight (vv. 18-26). Both miracles, however, have their unique elements. Jairus' daughter is dead and yet he believes Jesus has the authority to restore her; the woman, despite twelve years of suffering, is healed instantly by merely touching Jesus' garments. Jesus does not become unclean despite touching a dead body and a woman with this physical problem. Rather he makes them both clean by miraculously healing them.

In the story of healing the two blind men, their faith becomes the key issue (v. 28). Those sitting in darkness do see a great light! Although he commands them to be silent about this, their joy compels them to tell their good news.

This series of miracles ends as Jesus restores the ability of a demonized man to speak. The response of the crowds and the Pharisees to this action presages the growing controversy that Jesus' ministry is generating. The crowds are awestruck – such things have never been done in Israel – so does this mean God is finally acting to restore Israel? Is that what these miracles portend? The Pharisees have a different interpretation – he is the agent of 'the prince of demons' – Belial. Miracles do not always produce faith.

The last verses of chapter 9 (36-38) bring forward the urgency of Jesus' mission and set it in the eschatological 'last days.' As many observe, the theme of harvest in Jewish literature is associated with God's final judgment (note the metaphor's in John's discourse in Matthew 3:12) and his 'workers' usually are his angels. However, Jesus changes the terms and indicates that the Kingdom reality means that his followers are already involved in the "last days" and become God's helpers in the harvesting process. It is already harvest time, i.e., the time when God will distinguish between those who are his people and those who are not. Whereas the Jewish leaders might think that they were God's helpers and the "sons of the Kingdom," i.e., the righteous, Jesus has consistently disabused them of this expectation. So a new set of workers for God's harvest is being prepared, including Gentiles, women, tax-collectors, great sinners, and the unclean. Those who should have cared for the Israel of God have shown themselves to be useless shepherds and the people of God are now exposed to all kinds of evil – as the stories in chapters 8-9 illustrate. Perhaps Jesus is suggesting that the demonic activity loosed in Israel is the direct result of the failure of its leadership to exercise proper spiritual care.

Second Discourse: Discipleship (Matthew 10)

The discourse on discipleship is a transition between the many stories of the harassed and destroyed sheep, restored by faith in Jesus, and the unexpected rejection of Jesus and his message by the religious leaders in Israel. Though these leaders reject Jesus as the Shepherd Israel needs, they are able to offer no substantive, alternative help to the distressed people of God. So Jesus, as Lord of the Harvest, begins to equip, delegate, and send his own workers into the harvest. He initiates his plan for expanding the Kingdom reality.

The Discourse on Discipleship – Matthew 10

Jesus' teaching in Matthew 10 is bracketed by the reference to "his twelve disciples" (10:1; 11:1). As well they are identified as "the twelve apostles" (10:2), the only place where this term occurs in this Gospel. Their appointment and commission is a response to the prayer Jesus invites in 9:37-38. The twelve represent the first set of new workers prepared, empowered and sent by the Lord of the eschatological harvest into the fields (cf. 28:19-20). Many more will follow. Jesus' action to summon the twelve expresses his role, I suggest, as the Lord of the harvest. The identification of the twelve as 'workers' is enhanced by the repetition of this term in 10:10 – "the worker is worthy of his nourishment." Jesus will also emphasize that the harvest is a dangerous place. Note John's use of harvest imagery in Matthew 3:12. The "works of the Messiah" (*ta erga* (τὰ ἔργα)) are expressed through his "workers" (*hai ergatai* (αἱ ἐργάται) 9:37-38).

Jesus has already called some of these people to be disciples. So this is not a call to discipleship, per se, but a pointed direction for their work as "apostles" in the kingdom. They become 'apostles', i.e. specific, authorized representatives, commissioned agents, of the Lord Jesus in the harvest. He empowers and authorizes them to do the same kind of Kingdom work as he does – heal the sick, exorcise demons, and proclaim the good news of the Kingdom (10:1, 7). This becomes Jesus' explanation for what it means to "fish for people" (4:19). We continue to debate to what degree the authority that Jesus has given to the twelve apostles continues to be operative in the church today and if so, by whom and in what way.

Why twelve? Jesus mentions the twelve tribes of Israel and twelve thrones (19:28) that the apostles will occupy in the judgment. Are the apostles the foundation of the new people of God, the new Messianic community that Jesus is creating, i.e., the extension of what God initiated in Israel, but no longer ethnically bound? Or do they form the kernel of a restored Israel, but not a substitution for Israel?¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁴ Is this an indication that in Jesus God is starting fresh in the formation of his people? Several times in Exodus and Numbers, because of Israel's rebellion, God threatens to eliminate them and create a "great nation" directly through Moses, i.e., to start over.

Matthew names the twelve and in this follows the familiar listing in Mark 3:13-19 and Luke 6:12-

16. However, we note the following:

- ❑ Matthew links Andrew directly with Peter, probably to create greater coherence with Matthew 4:18-19.¹⁸⁵ He says that Peter is ‘first.’ Whether this is as statement of chronological priority or another kind of priority is not defined. He follows them by naming James and John, the sons of Zebedee as in 4:20-22.
- ❑ Matthew is identified as a ‘customs collector’ (*ho telōnēs* (ὁ τελώνης)), but this is not stated in the other Gospels. It connects us back to 9:9.
- ❑ The other disciple named Simon is distinguished as “*ho Kananaios* (ὁ Καναναῖος).” This Greek expression transliterates an Aramaic *qan’ān (ā’)*, which means “zealous one.” Luke renders this as ‘the zealot’ (*zēlōtēs* (ζηλωτής)) (Luke 6:15). This is probably too early in the first century to reference a specific political movement, and more likely reflects his piety (e.g., Phinehas and Elijah – Number 25:11; 1 Kings 18:40).
- ❑ The last to be mentioned is Judas. The term “Iscaiot” is explained variously, but probably refers to a place – the man from Iscariot. There was a village of this name 12 miles south of Hebron. Matthew, as the other two Synoptic writers, notes his later involvement in the betrayal of Jesus.

Matthew takes up the discourse (v. 5) by noting that Jesus is addressing the twelve and giving them specific instructions. However, as we move into the discourse, its structure is not clear. Perhaps the three ‘amen’ sayings (vv. 15, 23, 42) mark the end of subsections within it. V. 16 seems to begin a new section (“Behold I am sending you...”). If this is the case, then perhaps we have three segments:

- ❑ 5-15 – initial authorization and instructions
- ❑ 16-23 – warning about the dangers involved and assurance that when they are abused and arrested, they should not worry what to say. God’s Spirit will speak through them. The more extensive ministry considered – Kings and Gentiles and the persecution described -- do not fit the period of Jesus’ ministry.
- ❑ 24-42 – continued series of various warnings, with encouragement to remain loyal and with various comforts expressed.

Hagner sees parallel structures “involving repetition and symmetry of the type one would expect in material designed for memory and oral tradition,”¹⁸⁶ but fails to discern any macrostructure. It is difficult to distinguish between instructions that pertain to an immediate mission and those that extend beyond that initial work into the life of the church. Perhaps the initial section (5-15) focuses upon the immediate task,

¹⁸⁵ Nolland, *Matthew*, acknowledges the verbal similarities with 4:18 (p.411).

¹⁸⁶ Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 269.

the second section is transitional, and the third section applies specifically to the mission beyond the resurrection (we have the same issue in Matthew 24-25). Carson argues that the real distinction between 5-16 and 17-42 is salvation historical. “There is implicit recognition that the two situations are not the same, but the first prepares for the second.”¹⁸⁷ Perhaps it is Jesus who “saw a continuing community that would grow under fire” and so prepares his followers for this future, even though they may not at that point have appreciated or understood the full sense of what he was describing.¹⁸⁸ If this is the case, then we have to see Matthew 10 as somewhat prophetic, i.e., Jesus foretelling how his community would grow and develop into the future. We should then consider this as we interpret his parables and other discourses. Is there a similar prophetic note and anticipation of the future messianic community expressed within them also (note the end of Matthew 7 and the entirety of chapter 18)?

Matthew never gives an account of the way this immediate mission was completed. Mark 6 contains both the commission and a short note of its completion. Luke records two commissions. The one in 9:1-6 corresponds to the sending of the twelve. 10:1-17 tells about the commissioning of the seventy-two. Some of the material in Matthew 10 is linked by Luke with the mission of the seventy-two. Perhaps Matthew has collapsed these two commissions into one discourse. Presuming that the twelve were included in the seventy-two, they would have received both sets of instructions.

Segment # 1 – 10:5-15

Jesus defines the scope of the mission first. The twelve are to take the message and its implications to “the lost (*apolōlota* (ἀπολωλότα))¹⁸⁹ sheep of the house of Israel.” This same expression occurs in 15:24 (cf. 18:14), defining Jesus’ mission in that context. Jesus may be borrowing this expression from the prophetic materials of Jeremiah 50:6 (LXX 27:6).¹⁹⁰ The comparison of Israel to sheep picks up Matthew’s comment in 9:36 – harassed and wasted (see also Matt. 18:12-14). In this sense they are ‘lost’, i.e., shepherdless, and thus in danger of destruction. Whom would he define within this group? Jesus concurrently tells his followers not to take this message to the Gentiles or the Samaritans¹⁹¹. One wonders why Jesus has to warn them against this. Perhaps it is a statement of priority, just as Paul keeps on saying – the gospel is for the Jew first, in terms of salvation history, because they are “lost.” We

¹⁸⁷ Carson, *Matthew*, p.243.

¹⁸⁸ In the OT prophecies, we have this same situation, where a prophecy applies initially to that timeframe, but then also incorporates within it significance for events are far distant (i.e., the Messianic implications of Isaiah 7 and the virgin birth).

¹⁸⁹ What sense does this verb carry here? It can mean perished, ruined, lost. The perfect participle is noteworthy, in the active voice, defining a current condition.

¹⁹⁰ Jeremiah LXX 27:6 πρόβατα ἀπολωλότα ἐγενήθη ὁ λαός μου, οἱ ποιμένες αὐτῶν ἐξῴσαν αὐτούς,.... “My people have been lost sheep; their shepherds thrust them out, [they caused them to wander on the mountains,...all that found them consumed them.]” In 27:17 Jeremiah describes Israel as πρόβατον πλανώμενον – a wandering sheep. Note how Peter picks up the image of wandering sheep in 2:25, but this imagery probably comes more directly from his use of Isaiah 53.

¹⁹¹ This is the only mention of the Samaritans in Matthew’s Gospel.

also note that this is consistent with Acts 1:8, but that God, after the resurrection and Pentecost makes the mission universal in scope. It may be that Jesus, conscious of the OT mandate for Israel to be a light to the nations, first sends his disciples to raise up a band of Israelite workers who will become the vanguard for the Messiah’s universal mission. While the response in chapters 11-12 is disappointing, the fact remains that it is Jewish Christians who carry the initial message to the Gentiles after Pentecost.

“As they go,”¹⁹² Jesus orders them to proclaim the same message that he proclaims – “The Kingdom of Heaven is near.” What is not present is the command to repent. Is this assumed? Along with this message they are mandated to “heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and drive out demons.” This is roughly the same list Jesus iterates to John’s disciples to demonstrate that he is the Messiah (11:5), reflecting the constellation of materials in Isaiah 29:18-19. As well, this reflects the range of miracles Jesus performed in chapters 8-9. What is not clear is whether the twelve exercised these powers. The one explicit occasion when someone asks them to heal or exorcise (17:14ff), they fail. On what occasions are they authorized to exercise these powers? Jesus rejects any hint that they might use these powers to gain personal benefit – monetary or otherwise.

The restrictions vary from Gospel to Gospel:

Matthew 10:9-10	Mark 6:8-11	Luke 9:1-4	Luke 10:4
	Do not take anything for the way, except a rod (<i>hrabdon</i> (ῥάβδον))	Do not take anything for the way	
Do not take along gold, silver or copper in your belt	Do not put copper in your belt	Do not take silver	Do not take a purse (<i>ballantion</i> (βαλλάντιον))
	Do not take bread	Do not take bread	
Do not take a knapsack	Do not take a knapsack	Do not take a knapsack	Do not take a knapsack
Do not take two tunics	Do not wear two tunics	Do not have [more than – textual issue] two tunics.	
Do not take footwear (<i>hypodēmata</i> (ὑποδήματα))	Wear sandals (<i>sandalia</i> (σανδάλια))		Do not take footwear (ὑποδήματα)

¹⁹² This (πορευόμενοι δὲ κηρύσσετε) is the same structure and language used in Matthew 28:19 – πορευθέντες οὖν μαθητεύσατε. However, NIV renders 10:7 “As you go, preach” and 28:19 “Therefore go and make disciples”. I am not sure the imperative captures the essential relationship between the aorist participle and the imperative in 28:19.

Do not take a rod (ῥάβδον)		Do not take a rod (ῥάβδον)	
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The order changes, but there is significant similarity. Matthew introduces these instructions with the verb *ktēsēsthe* (κτήσησθε) which means ‘acquire’ or ‘gain’. The two items that create some difficulty are the rod – Matthew/Luke forbid it, but Mark allows it; Matthew forbids footwear, but Mark allows sandals. Various ideas are put forward to explain the footwear discrepancy – Matthew forbids substantial footwear, but Mark allows sandals? The matter of the purse is also interesting. Blomberg suggests that some of the discrepancies might be the result of condensing the two missions (the twelve and the seventy-two) into one account in Matthew. This might explain the footwear problem, but does not seem to deal with the rod issue.¹⁹³ Matthew ends with the promise that “the workman is worthy of his nourishment.” Is this designed to build confidence in God’s care (Matt. 6:25-34)? Who are the twelve working for? Will God be a poor employer?

However we resolve these things, the instructions indicate urgency and simplicity and require dependence upon God for provision. The twelve are required to practice the principles expressed in the SM – seek God’s righteousness and all these things – food, clothing, etc. (reflect on Mt. 6:31-34) – will be granted to you. Some have also drawn a linkage with the Passover requirements (Ex. 12-13). In some sense there is an eschatological urgency – Israel needs to be challenged to respond. It is the time for harvest, for the new Exodus, to begin. Whether these instructions should be used to guide churches in their payment of their leaders is debated. Paul clearly perceives that the church resources its leaders so they are free to resource the body.

The last part of this segment focuses on the process the twelve should follow to conduct their work in a particular location. Matthew does not define “worthy” (*axios* (ἄξιος¹⁹⁴) – v. 11, 13) whether it applies to the person or the household. However, they are to “discern who is worthy in it” (v.11). Perhaps it has to do with their receptivity – receiving you and hearing your words (v.14). Once the twelve have evaluated and determined suitability (cf. 7:6??), their blessing of peace can be given. In some sense their blessing brings Kingdom blessing into that household. They are not to move around lest they be tempted with a search for better lodgings and neglect their urgent mission. If the household decides to reject the

¹⁹³ B. Ahern, “Staff or No Staff?” *CBQ* 5(1943): 332-37. Perhaps the resolution is to be found in the different verbs that Matthew and Mark use. In Matthew, the disciples are not to “acquire a staff,” i.e., to purchase anything additional, and in Mark the disciples are to take anything except a staff that they already possess. Another possibility is that the noun ῥάβδον is being used to refer to two different kinds of implements: a walking stick; a heavy club or staff. However, this second explanation seems less likely.

¹⁹⁴ There is a high concentration of this term in Mt. 10 (7x, particularly in vv. 10-13, 37-38) with only two other uses in 3:8; 22:8. Why is this?

twelve and their work, then a curse is expressed by “shaking off the dust from your feet” (v.14). You separate yourself from them in this dramatic way.¹⁹⁵

Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19:24-28 become examples of cities destroyed because of God’s judgment upon their sinfulness. The comparison Jesus makes here indicates that rejecting Jesus and his messengers is far more serious than the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah. Perhaps Matthew is hinting at the severe prophecies of judgment that are coming in 23-25. The use of ‘amen’ heightens the seriousness of this rejection.

Second Segment – 10:16-23

Whether v.16 belongs to what precedes or introduces what follows can be debated. The use of the initial ‘behold’ (*idou* (ἰδοὺ)) followed by the first person emphatic pronoun and the verb “I am sending” would suggest to me that this is the beginning of a new segment. In the first segment (v. 5) he sends the twelve to care for the sheep of Israel. Now he reverses the image and warns the twelve that he is sending (v. 16) them as sheep to work among wolves. So we shift from the mandate of their mission, to warnings about the hostility they will experience in this and all future missions. While they may be vulnerable, they go with the Spirit. The wolf motif surfaced in 7:15 and referred there to false prophets.

Their best means to cope with this dangerous situation is “to be wise as serpents but to act with consistent integrity like doves.” The adjective *akeraios* (ἀκέραιος) means unmixed and we find it linked with wisdom in Romans 16:19. Jesus in v. 17 uses the broadest of warnings – be wary of people! – but then he explains why. In v. 21 he includes the closest relations a person has – brother, parent, child – as potential persecutors if they do not follow Jesus. The list of aggressive behaviours is quite horrendous – arrest, scourging, trial before magistrates and kings, and even execution (v. 21) – all of which he himself will soon experience. He summarizes their status by saying “you will be hated by all because of my name” (v. 22). Both Jews and Gentiles will engage in these hostilities. Jesus may be alluding to Micah 7:6 (“for a son dishonors a father, a daughter will rise up against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, the enemies of a man are the men in his house” (NETS) διότι υἱὸς ἀτιμάζει πατέρα, θυγάτηρ ἐπαναστήσεται ἐπὶ τὴν μητέρα αὐτῆς, νύμφη ἐπὶ τὴν πενθερὰν αὐτῆς, ἐχθροὶ ἄνδρὸς πάντες οἱ ἄνδρες οἱ ἐν τῷ οἴκῳ αὐτοῦ. This is a lament over the pervasive influence of evil. The only thing the godly can do is wait and watch for God to act.).

Jesus explains that it is the delegation of his mission to his followers that places them in this vulnerable situation. It is “for my sake” (cf. 5:11) that his followers will be led before the magistrates and kings. Jesus needs his witnesses in those courtrooms. It is the authority of Jesus that they represent which

¹⁹⁵ The number of key words beginning with epsilon in these verses (11-14) is perhaps noteworthy. There may be a play on the words *eksetazō* (ἐξετάζω 11) and *ektinazō* (ἐκτινάζω 14 “to shake off”). The verb *eksetazō* (ἐξετάζω) means “to inquire, judicially investigate.” Note its use in Mt. 2:8.

causes this animosity. Yet when the time comes for them to speak, Jesus assures them that “the Spirit of your Father” will speak through them. They should have no anxiety about their witness (vv. 19-20), neither how they will speak nor the content of their address. It is not a question of a carefully prepared legal defense or finding some clever way to extricate oneself from this danger. Rather it is a matter of presenting their confession and their confidence in the gospel. They will represent God – his apostles or sent ones.

References to the Holy Spirit are not common in Matthew. Along with 10:20, we have 1:18, 20; 3:16; 4:1; 12:18, 28(vv. 31,32) and 28:19. Presumably because Jesus is present, the personal presence of the Holy Spirit is not necessary. Once Jesus ascends, then the Spirit will become the necessary means by which God resides in his people and empowers them for mission. Most of the references to the Spirit are in relationship to Jesus and his ministry – his birth, his baptism, his temptation. In 12:18 Matthew quotes Isaiah 42:1-4 in which God promises to place his Spirit upon the Servant. At 12:28 Jesus claims that “if by the Spirit of God I am casting out demons, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you.” This connects with the warnings not to blaspheme the Spirit (12:31-32), as he works in Jesus. Finally, at 28:18-20 Jesus’ disciples are to baptize in the name of “the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.” So 10:20 is quite singular in that it defines the involvement of the Father’s Spirit within them as they act as Jesus’ representatives. This idea is not repeated in Matthew 24, as it is found in Mark 13:9-10 (but it is not in Mark 6:8-12).

Over all this, stands the promise that “the one who endures to the end, this person shall be delivered” (v. 22). What is the end in view? Is it death by execution? Is it the end of the trial, with release? Is the end of the age? Blomberg interprets it as “perseverance will bring eternal life.”¹⁹⁶ Since some believers are executed, ‘saved’ cannot refer to the preservation of physical life, in his view. As Jesus promises in v. 39, “the one who loses his life for my sake, shall find it.” “To the end” is a Greek idiom meaning “finally, totally, completely, entirely.” However, given Jesus’ use of the expression “to the end of the age” in 28:20, perhaps it is not being used in v. 22 idiomatically, but with the sense – the end of a period.

Finally, we have the difficult statement that Jesus gives in v.23 – an ‘amen’ saying. The context is persecution and the response to this by Jesus’ followers. When they experience it in one city, they should move immediately to another city. Jesus then promises that “they will not finish the cities of Israel until the son of man comes.” Nolland interprets this to mean that Jesus’ followers will continue to find places of refuge until Jesus returns. “They will not have to abandon the Holy Land before they are relieved of their problem by the coming of the Son of Man.”¹⁹⁷ Carson argues that the “coming of the Son

¹⁹⁶ Blomberg, p. 175.

¹⁹⁷ Nolland, p. 427.

of Man" refers to the judgment that comes upon Israel in 70 CE. The urgency of the command hinges on this fact that the apostles of Jesus will not in fact finish the evangelistic task in Palestine before this event occurs. We will have to see whether other uses of the phrase "the coming of the Son of Man" can carry this significance. Perhaps 16:28 might be one such text. Blomberg sees Jesus prophesying "the perpetually incomplete Jewish mission, in keeping with Matthew's emphasis on Israel's obduracy. Christ will return before his followers have fully evangelized the Jews."¹⁹⁸ However, Jesus prophesies that the Gospel will be proclaimed "in the whole world as a testimony to all nations and then the end will come." (24:14). It is difficult to make Blomberg's interpretation coherent with Jesus' teaching in Matthew 24, in my view. Consider also texts that indicate that the Son of Man "has come," e.g. 18:11; 20:28, as well as future perspectives, e.g. 25:31. Perhaps the best solution is to see this as a reference to the resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit. In my view it is designed to emphasize the urgency of this mission.

Some commentators struggle with the connection in this discourse between the apostolic mission and the use of language that otherwise occurs in the eschatological discourse (Matthew 24-25). However, if Jesus indeed is speaking prophetically in Matthew 24-25, then I would presume such is also the case in Matthew 10.

Section 3 – 10:24-42

We have discerned the instructions for the immediate mission (10:5-15) and then the warnings about persecution that reflect the Christian mission as it will continue into the post-resurrection period (10:16-23). This last section continues with instructions and warnings to the disciples, giving additional reasons why they are mistreated and reminding them of the reward that God will provide.

First, Jesus gives the rationale for this hostility. Jesus brings the language of discipleship and slavery together. Neither category should expect to be treated in a manner more grand than their teacher or master. It would be great if the disciple or slave were respected like the teacher/master. So if they call the head of the house (*ho oikodespotēs* (ὁ οἰκοδεσπότης)) "Beelzebul",¹⁹⁹ his followers should expect the same treatment. Jesus may be referring to the Pharisees' accusation in 9:34.

Given this reality, secondly Jesus commands his followers not to be afraid. This command is repeated in vv. 26, 28, 30. Each time Jesus provides an additional explanation why:

1. There is coming a time when the motivations of every person's heart will be revealed and the injustices God's people have experienced will be dealt with (cf. 2 Thess. 1).
2. These people can only go so far as to take physical life; they cannot alter your spiritual and eternal destiny. Your obedience is to God and him you must fear and reverence. With him is the power to cast us body and soul into 'Gehenna'.

¹⁹⁸ Blomberg, p. 176.

¹⁹⁹ This probably means "Lord of the High Abode".

3. God is looking out for the good of his people and he values each one. Jesus uses arguments similar to those found in 6:26-27. Though we are finite creatures, we have an infinite Creator who cares for us.

The final section (vv. 32-42) seems to come back to a theme expressed in the SM, namely the importance of giving allegiance to Jesus. The principle is expressed in vv. 32-33 – admitting that you belong to Jesus "before people," enables Jesus to acknowledge such a person as his "before my Father who is in heaven." If we are loyal to Jesus, he remains loyal to us. Repudiating Jesus, however, results in Jesus repudiating us, just as he does in 7:21-23. Because we know already that Jesus is God's "beloved son in whom he is well pleased," we know that God will listen to and heed Jesus' endorsement.

Although God's blessing rests upon the peace-makers, Jesus tells us that he has not come to force people to make a decision – "I have not come to cast peace on the earth, but a sword. For I have come to cause separation/sow discord" (literally divide in two)...." Here again we have Jesus' intentionality emphasized. This is central to his mission. He seems to reference Micah 7:6 again in this passage, which is a word of judgment against Israel because her leaders have refused to honour God. The word "members of his own household" (*oikiakoi* (οικιακοι)) is also used in v. 25. Such a teaching would cause considerable consternation within Hellenistic households and cities who considered those who created such instability as subversives and would go so far as to ban such religions, exiling their followers. Note the word play between *oikodespotēn...oikiakous* (οικοδεσπότην...οικιακούς).

V. 37 is one of Jesus' most difficult sayings. On the face of it Jesus seems to be contradicting the command to honour one's parents or the general parental mandate to care for children. In some ways it parallels Jesus' advice to the would-be disciple who requests opportunity to bury his father (8:21-22). The key to understanding Jesus' intent lies in two directions:

- a. the recognition that all human relations are inconsistent and finite, and should not get in the way of a person's relationship with God;
- b. the place that Jesus demands in the life of his followers is first place. Not even parents should receive a love that is greater than that given to Jesus (*hyper eme* (ὕπερ ἐμέ)).

Jesus requires people to choose the person or thing to which they will give absolute loyalty. God brooks no competitors – neither will Jesus.

Three times in vv. 37-38 Jesus defines those who are deserving of him (*mou axios* (μου ἄξιος)) – those who do not love parents, who do not love children, who do not love life more than they love Jesus. He requires people to respond to what God is doing in and through him right now. While we, living this side of the crucifixion, see Jesus' words about "taking up his cross" as reflecting Jesus' own death, his disciples at this point have no clue about this. We have to interpret Jesus' words as referencing the common mode of Roman execution that serious criminals and political subversives would experience.

Carrying a cross indicates that the sentence has been given and execution is about to occur. There is no turning back. To follow Jesus requires the willingness to suffer such a shameful and painful death and expose oneself to danger. Some might even hear this as a call to military action against the Romans. The disciples of Jesus will run the risk of losing their place in things, no longer considered to be part of society, but rather outcasts. In v. 39 Jesus describes this as “losing one’s life on account of me.” Yet Jesus promises that those who dare to make this choice will in fact ‘find life’ – eternal life.²⁰⁰ It is possible to see how words of Jesus like these might lead his followers to think that as Messiah he would lead a revolt against Rome.

We might consider how Jesus’ instruction to the twelve to go to the “lost (*ta apolōlota* (τὰ ἀπολωλότα)) sheep of the house of Israel” relates to his final word in this discourse that “the one who loses (*apolesas* (ἀπολέσας)) his life on account of me will find it” (v.39). Followers of Jesus are “lost people” but in an entirely different sense from “lost Israel.”

Finally, Jesus ends his discourse (vv. 40-42) by indicating that another proper response to him is in accepting and helping those who represent him. Receiving Jesus’ representatives means that a person is honouring Jesus, as well as God Who sent him. Such hospitality demonstrates that they are righteous. Jesus had mentioned the parallel between the suffering of prophets and the suffering of his followers in 5:12. Now he also draws the parallel of reward. Even those whose discipleship is modest (the least) and who serve²⁰¹ such a person because he or she is a disciple, they will receive a reward from Jesus. (cf. 18:1-6 – the inversion that exists in the Kingdom). Perhaps here Jesus anticipates his claim that the least in the kingdom are greater than John the Baptist.

11:1 marks the end of this second discourse. His speech is described as “directing, ordering” (*diatassōn* (διατάσσων)²⁰² and with specific focus on “his twelve disciples.” However, he continues to “teach and proclaim in their cities.” The antecedent of ‘their’ is the twelve. Perhaps this hints at the initiation of their mission.

²⁰⁰ This statement must have been an incredible impact on Jesus’ followers because it is his most quoted saying – Matthew 16:25; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24; 17:33; John 12:25.

²⁰¹ A "cup of cold water" is considered a minimal act of mercy (Nolland, 446) in Test. Isaac. 6:21.

²⁰² This word only occurs here in the NT.

Response to the Mystery of Jesus Messiah (Matthew 11-12)

Chapters 11:2-12:50 – Growing Opposition and Serious Warnings of Impending Judgment

If chapters 8-9 focused on the miraculous powers and authority of Jesus in response to the faith people placed in him, chapters 11-12 conversely reveal the doubts and outright denial that many expressed about his Messiahship. Remember the contrast Matthew defined in 9:33-34. The contrast between these two sections is immense and in between Jesus has expressed to “his twelve disciples” the dangers of discipleship – sheep among wolves. We begin to see in chapters 11-12 how this plays out. At the centre stands 11:25-30 in which Jesus sets himself apart from all others as the source of access to God and in which he invites all to “take his yoke.” However, many reject his offer and refuse his yoke, and in so doing cut themselves off from “rest” and a relationship with God.

Consider how the flow in this narrative sequence works:

- ❑ John in prison – “are you the coming one or should we expect another?” His doubts and Jesus’ response (11:2-6) – the “works of the Messiah.” John’s experience illustrates the dangers Jesus faces.
- ❑ Jesus’ testimony about John and his place in salvation history (11:7-15) – “he is Elijah.”
- ❑ The rejection of Jesus and John by the crowds (11:16-19) – “Wisdom is justified.”
- ❑ Jesus pronounces judgment on unrepentant Jewish cities (11:20-24) – eschatological timeframe
- ❑ Jesus is the only way to know God (11:25-30) and his way is “easy” – the paradox of discipleship
- ❑ Sabbath Controversies (12:1-21)
 - Picking grain (12:1-8) – Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath
 - Healing the man with the withered hand (12:9-14) – Pharisees conspire to kill him
 - Withdrawal and fulfillment of Isaiah 42:1-4 (12:15-21)
- ❑ Exorcism Controversies (12:22-45)
 - Jesus and Beelzebul (12:22-37) – the power of the Holy Spirit
 - Demand for signs -- The Sign of Jonah and the Sign of Solomon (12:38-42)
 - Return of the Evil Spirit (12:43-45)
- ❑ Family Controversy (12:46-50)

Throughout this passage we also have various uses of the comparative expression “greater than.” Jesus is greater than the Temple (12:6), Satan (12:28-30), Jonah (12:41), and Solomon (12:42), as well as John the Baptist. John is “more than a prophet” (11:9). The least in the Kingdom is greater than John (11:11). But who will recognize this “greatness”? If John is struggling to get his mind around the nature of Jesus’ Messiahship, no wonder others do as well. Yet, the crowds affirm that “This is the son of David, isn’t he?” expecting a positive answer (12:23). This is immediately followed by the Pharisees’ accusation that “he does not cast out demons except by Beelzeboul, prince of demons.” On what basis did the

Pharisees reach their conclusion? When the demons identified Jesus as “son of God,” did this lead some to think the demons were acknowledging a superior demon? Is this comparing Jesus to someone like Simon the Sorcerer who was described by the people as “the divine power known as the Great Power” (Acts 8:10)? The controversy swirls around the question of Jesus’ role and significance.

Jesus and John the Baptist – 11:2-19

The last note about John occurred in 4:12, when Jesus hears about John’s arrest (cf. 14:1-12). John becomes the first example of what discipleship means – a willingness to give one’s life for Jesus’ sake. In prison John hears things about Jesus – the works of the Messiah, as Matthew puts it -- and wonders whether he is “the coming one” (cf. John’s language in 3:10.). Perhaps some of this uncertainty is already detectable in the question about fasting raised by John’s disciples in 9:14. Is there a way to resolve the tension between John’s certainty in Matthew 3-4 and his current doubt? If Jesus claimed to release prisoners, why was John still in jail?

In response Jesus encourages John’s disciples to observe his ministry, compare it to the prophetic announcements in the OT (Isaiah 29:18-19; 35:5-6; 61:1), and then reach the proper conclusion about him. By his teaching and miraculous actions Jesus is attacking the power of evil in the world and releasing people from its slavery. This same list is found in 4Q521, “4Q Messianic Apocalypse: 2:1-12,” where the term ‘Messiah’ is linked with similar activities. For Jesus, this is precisely how the Kingdom reality is drawing near and invading Satan’s space. He becomes Christologically explicit in v. 6 as he warns those who take offence at him that they will receive no approval from God. Jesus challenges John to respond positively to his own question, even while Jesus recognizes that his mode of operation will generate uncertainty and require faith for his appropriate identity. But what are the factors that cause such stumbling? Are they intentionally provoked by Jesus? If so, to what end?

- ❑ Jesus’ interpretation of Jewish principles and practices?
- ❑ Jesus’ claim to be Messiah, but his refusal to launch the expected military and political campaign to restore Israel and punish evildoers?
- ❑ Jesus’ announcement that his followers would experience persecution – just as John is?

Are these the same factors today that cause people to reject or disregard Jesus? Consider the list Jesus provides in 13:18-22.

In 11:7-15 Jesus turns the tables. John had asked for clarity about Jesus and his mission. Now Jesus provides clarity about the significance and role of John. Undoubtedly, not everyone accepted John and his prophetic announcements. Jesus acts to remove those doubts. The more clarity people have about John’s role, the greater clarity will emerge with respect to Jesus’ role. The crowds would not have gone out into the wilderness just to see “a commonplace reed.” So their very action indicates they sensed John had significance. If they had sought a kingly figure, then they would have gone to a palace and sought a

person royally attired. Since John was neither in a palace nor garbed like a king, his prophetic status was the attraction – witnessed by his unusual clothing and diet. Jesus, using a peshar-type of scriptural interpretation (this is that) (v.10) and identifies John as the one described in Exodus 23:20 and Malachi 3:1.

Who is being addressed through this quotation (the second person pronouns are all singular *sou* (σου) “before you.” Is it Jesus? Is it Israel? The way is presumably Jesus’ way. If Yahweh is the subject (“I”) in the quote, perhaps Jesus regards this quote as part of the conversation God has with Jesus (11:27) and which now Jesus is reporting. This is the wisdom God has revealed to Jesus. In the Exodus passage referred to the messenger is God’s angel, sent to lead Israel into the Promised Land and protect her from her enemies. In Malachi the one who prepares God’s way is Elijah = John (Malachi 3:1, 23), an identity that Jesus makes clear in v. 14.

Vv. 11-15 give us Jesus’ assessment of John:

- ❑ No human being is greater than John because of his role in Salvation History as the forerunner of the Messiah.
- ❑ His presence has marked the initiation of the Kingdom reality.
- ❑ He concludes the era of the Law and the Prophets and something new follows in God’s design.
- ❑ He is the promised Elijah.

Jesus proclaims that John marks the end of the Old Covenant era and the arrival of the New Covenant era. This is similar to Jesus’ earlier statement about new wine needing new wineskins. As great as the first covenant era was, with its revelations of God’s love, power and mercy, the second covenant era is far more glorious because God is with humans in an extraordinary way. Jesus expresses this by saying that John, as great as he was in the first covenant era, is not as great as the least in the Kingdom reality of the second covenant era. Such greatness does not rely on the quality of the person, but rather on the opportunity to experience the blessings being introduced by the Kingdom reality – gospel, peace, righteousness – the opportunity to see God! The use of Kingdom of Heaven in this setting suggests a strong identity with the Messianic community, i.e., the church.

While Matthew recognizes the transition that is occurring from John to Jesus, he nevertheless wants to see their respective ministries as intrinsically connected. V.12 expresses this in an enigmatic fashion. “From the days of John the Baptist until now” could mean that John is part of the Kingdom era. However, the statement in v.11 would seem to eliminate that possibility. So the time reference would signify “after John the Baptist until now.” If the verb *biazetai* (βιάζεται) in the first clause is middle voice,

then it means “the Kingdom of Heaven has been forcefully advancing.”²⁰³ However, this seems to run counter to John’s perception. Jesus has seemed anything but forceful in terms of military or political maneuvering. His forcefulness is expressed in his dealings with demons, his healings, his authoritative interpretations of OT materials, his power over creation, etc. There is a second possibility. As Blomberg notes, the verb (βιάζεται) could be a passive voice formation, in which case the clause would mean “the Kingdom of Heaven is suffering violence, i.e., is being violated/forcefully impacted.”²⁰⁴ The second clause probably has the sense that “violent people are attacking it.” Perhaps what Jesus is noting is that his vigorous initiation of the Kingdom reality is meeting with increased opposition, as the imprisonment of John the Baptist illustrates. Such an interpretation fits well with the theme of Matthew 10 and the growing hostility that we are discerning in chapters 11-12.

John has asked (11:3) if Jesus is “the coming one.” Now in v.14 Jesus affirms that John is Elijah, “the one who was going to come” (who comes “in the spirit and power of Elijah” (Luke 1:17)) in fulfillment of Malachi’s prophecy. However, Jesus is “the coming one” prophesied by John. Perhaps we have an *inclusio* here.

Jesus acknowledges that not everyone will agree with his evaluation (“if you are willing to accept it”). However, he insists that this is the truth and true faith will demonstrate itself by really hearing and accepting what Jesus is affirming about John. The parable in vv.16-19 and its interpretation show the variance between Jesus’ understanding of John and Jesus’ personal claims and what some in the crowds are saying about their respective roles. Like children who refuse to play either the wedding game or the funeral game, the people of Israel have refused to respond either to John or Jesus, even though they have brought God’s message in diverse, but prophetic ways. What is surprising here is the charge that John was demon-possessed and that Jesus, “the Son of Man,” was a glutton. I think that John and Jesus are being compared to the children inviting their friends to play. “This generation” (v. 16) then would be the respondents cited in vv. 18-19. Unfortunately, in this response they reject “the Wisdom” that could really help them (cf. the parable of the wise and foolish builders at the end of chapter 7). Wisdom’s “works” (ἡ σοφία ἀπὸ τῶν ἔργων²⁰⁵ αὐτῆς) take the reader back to the “Messiah’s works” mentioned in vv. 4-5. But in this case the works of Wisdom probably incorporate the ministries of John and Jesus, expressing how God intends to carry forward the initiation of His Kingdom. This plan will be justified, even if many human beings consider it foolish.

²⁰³ Consider the parallel in Luke 16:16 – “the good news of the Kingdom of God is being preached.”

²⁰⁴ Here is another play on words that works in Greek, but does not seem to work in Aramaic very easily – *biazetai* (βιάζεται), *biastai* (βιασταί). This is the only place in the NT where both terms occur. The noun is very rare in Greek literature.

²⁰⁵ Note the textual variant *tōn teknōn* (τῶν τέκνων) found also in Luke 7:35.

Denunciation of Cities – 11:20-24

These oracles of judgment build upon the previous parable that marks the rejection of John and Jesus by many of their contemporaries. We have read about Jesus' work in Capernaum, but nothing has been said about Bethsaida (home of Peter, Andrew and Philip) or Korazin, but they seem to be located close to Capernaum. Jesus' itinerant ministry around Galilee presumably took him to these places. Probably some of the miracles recorded in Matthew 8-9 happened in these places. What Jesus laments is that these miracles did not produce the response to the Kingdom reality that he anticipated. So to them he announces woe, not blessing. He emphasizes the seriousness, indeed the surprise, of this response by comparing them to the pagan cities of Tyre and Sidon and the OT city of Sodom (cf. 10:15), that God judged and destroyed by fire (does this presage the prophecy about Jerusalem in 24-25?). Such pagan people, if they had seen Jesus' miracles, would have responded in repentant faith, in contrast to the Jewish inhabitants of these Galilean towns. Judgment is coming and Jesus warns them of the consequences of their actions. These are certainly extreme comparisons. Despite the 'fame' that spread about Jesus, the response fell short of what Jesus required. Just as he counseled his disciples to "shake off the dust of their feet" against those who would not receive them, Jesus here does the same with these Jewish towns. Jesus borrows language from Isaiah 14:13, 15 used to describe Babylon's wicked arrogance to characterize Capernaum's failure to repent.

The Invitation – 11:25-30

This has to be one of the most extraordinary passages in Matthew's Gospel, at least in terms of insight into Jesus' self-understanding of his role, his relationship with God, and the significance of his message. In spite of the negative response from the Galilean cities, Jesus continues to invite a positive response, urging people to recognize in him the only way to connect with God, the only way to bring wisdom into life, and the only way to enjoy God's blessing. The theme of reversal is prominent – the wise and learned (embracing godless intellectualism or spirituality) remain in the dark, and the "little children" (remember "the least" in 11:11) discover God's revelation. God exercises his sovereignty in disclosing his wisdom, but he calls humans to respond freely to this good news. His 'good pleasure' is operative in these processes. Human beings, like John, might require different signs or Messianic activities, but Jesus is acting as God has ordained for him.

In v. 27 Jesus defines the "revealing role" of the Son. The father-son relationship between Jesus and God is clear, as is the intimacy of the knowledge they have of one another. Matthew uses *epignōskō* (ἐπιγινώσκω "I fully know"), whereas Luke uses the simplex (*ginōskēi* γινώσκει 10:22). This mutual, exclusive intimate knowledge between God and someone else is difficult to parallel in Judaism. The relationship of wisdom to God is not defined like this in Jewish sources. Nolland suggests that Moses' relationship with God (Exodus 33:12-13) might be a partial parallel. The compound form of the verb may

express intensification. The ‘all things’ may refer to knowledge²⁰⁶ or it may refer to authority (28:18 *edothē* ἐδόθη “have been given”), or perhaps it combines both. Regardless, God has “passed on” (*paredothē* παρεδόθη) all of it to Jesus. What he says and does comes with God’s full authority and backing. Compare the use of the titles “the Son” and “the Father” in Matthew 24:36; 28:19.

Jesus extends an invitation – ‘come’, just as he did to the initial disciples. The “weary and burdened” (cf. the characters in the Beatitudes) are pictures of exhausted day-labourers seeking respite and restoration.²⁰⁷ Jesus promises ‘rest’, a Sabbath-like rest. He switches metaphors and urges them to accept his ‘yoke’ and engage in the work that he requires. His yoke will rest easily and comfortably upon the neck because it brings salvation. It is a well-designed, comfortable yoke. The load assigned may be heavy, but this yoke enables it to be handled well. A yoke brings an animal into service. People are to take it up onto their own necks – a personal decision and action is intended. Acceptance requires humility and submission to Jesus (cf. 18:3-5). Obedience morphs into instruction – a new kind of discipleship – learning from the one who has received all things from the Heavenly Father.

Jesus is not promising exemption from suffering in this imagery. We have to read this in the light of Matthew 10 -- the persecution of disciples, and 11 – John’s imprisonment. However, as Jesus promised in the SM, if we seek God’s righteousness, we are relieved from the burden of anxiety and worry. Some see an allusion to Ben Sira 51:27 – “See...that I have laboured but little and found for myself much rest (*anapausis* (ἀνάπαυσις)),” referencing Wisdom.

The last part of v. 29 is probably a quote from Jeremiah 6:16 (“ask where the good way is and walk in it and you will find rest for your souls. But you said, ‘We will not walk in it.’”). God offered peace to Israel, but they rejected it and went into Exile.

Why does Jesus stress that he is “meek and humble”? Does this characterize his messianic approach and thus help Matthew’s readers understand why he does not act like John expected? If Jesus is meek and humble, i.e., submissive to God’s mission, is this then the attitude and character that should define his followers? Do these terms summarize the ethic of the SM?

Plainly there is some paradox here in Jesus’ words, a paradox with which John wrestled.

Sabbath Controversies – 12:1-21

I think the promise of rest is picked up in this following section that discusses appropriate behaviour on the Sabbath, the day of rest. Perhaps we discern the nature of Jesus’ yoke here. If he provides a continuous rest, why is there any need for Sabbath practice? Jesus leads his disciples through

²⁰⁶ To “pass on” is language that defines the transmission of tradition (cf. 1 Cor. 11:24; 15:4ff).

²⁰⁷ Again we have a play on words as Matthew contrasts the condition of *pephortismenoi* πεφορτισμένοι (v. 28) with the *phortion* φορτίον (v. 30) that Jesus expects his followers to carry.

the grainfields and so he is intentional. While the criticism is directed to the action of the disciples, it is Jesus who responds, taking the criticism as rightfully his to bear. Perhaps the presence of this ripened grain is viewed by Jesus as one of the ways God is providing for his disciples.

In the matter of the Sabbath, Jesus does not merely reinterpret the Fourth Commandment, he abolishes it because it is fulfilled in his own mission. Matthew's version of David's action (cf. 1 Sam. 21:1-6) focuses on his hunger, not his need, although this is probably implied. Jesus' citation of the priests' work (Numbers 28:9-10) in the sanctuary on the Sabbath to validate his action is not found in Mark's Gospel. So Jesus gives two precedents to justify the actions of his disciples and both involve people on a mission from God. In the case of David the argument seems to be that if David was justified in interpreting the Law this way, then the Son of David, could also interpret the Law in a similar fashion – perhaps one greater than David is present. Jesus challenges the ability of the Pharisees to understand and interpret their own sacred writings.

As he compares himself to the priests, his justification does not stem from any Levitical heritage, but rather builds on the fact that “one greater than the temple is here” (12:6). If the temple and its sacrificial rituals are more important than Sabbath principles, then Jesus, being greater than the temple, similarly is justified to make his own rules for the temple rituals. Further, the quotation from Hosea 6:6 indicates that Jesus is allowing his disciples to act in this way on compassionate grounds. Mercy will trump the Sabbath-keeping ritual.

Is 12:8 an editorial comment or part of Jesus' own teaching? I think it belongs to Jesus' teaching because he is the one that has been using the “Son of Man” designation, not Matthew in his narrative framework. Jesus further has the sovereign authority given to him by God to redefine and interpret correctly God's intent in giving such commands. As Blomberg indicates, Jesus “will determine how the Sabbath is now fulfilled in the Kingdom age.”²⁰⁸ Jesus' authority as Son of Man is also indicated in 9:6.

The second controversy occurs as Jesus heals a person on the Sabbath in a synagogue. There seems to be no medical emergency driving this miracle. It is an act of mercy to relieve the person of this condition as soon as possible. On this occasion the synagogue leaders, perhaps the Pharisees of v. 2, bait Jesus because they want some evidence by which they may lay a legal charge against him. They assume he has the power and the willingness to comply with this request. Jesus responds with a parable, building on the assumption that it is permissible for an animal owner to rescue a distressed sheep on the Sabbath. So why is it not permissible to help a suffering human being on this day, because “human beings are more valuable than animals?”²⁰⁹ Jesus declares such rescue “doing good” and to be lawful on the Sabbath.

²⁰⁸ Blomberg, p. 197.

²⁰⁹ Comparison of humans with birds occurs in 6:26; 10:31.

When Jesus in mercy heals the person (v. 13), the incensed Pharisees “plot how they might kill Jesus” (ἀπολέσωσιν).²¹⁰ Perhaps there is emphasis on “destroying” Jesus.

The withdrawal of Jesus from further confrontation and in order to promote his Kingdom ministry is based on the definition of the servant in Isaiah 42:1-4. Matthew 12:17-21 quotes this passage and is one of the formula quotations. It has specific linkages with 11:28-30, as well as explains the meekness of Jesus as intentional – he will not quarrel or cry out. His stern rebuke to the healed requires them not to publicize these healings. However, such a command is impossible to carry forward. In the narrative it functions to assure the reader that as Messiah, Jesus is not concerned about developing a particular kind of power base. His goal will be to produce justice, but it will not be accomplished in a military or violent fashion. His goal will be achieved and it will affect not just Israel, but the nations. The hope that he generates among the nations is the hope of salvation and presages the intention of the Great Commission. This quotation again is very different from the Septuagint version. Jesus offers a very different vision of the Messiah’s role in his first coming.

Exorcism Controversies – 12:22-45

God may identify Jesus as his son; Jesus may fulfill the prophetic role of the Suffering Servant expressed by Isaiah; his authority as son of God may be underscored by healings, raising the dead and exorcisms; but still the religious leaders persist in their evaluation – Jesus’ power arises from demonic sources, not the divine source who is Yahweh. This apparently is the same claim they made regarding John the Baptist.

Four segments are included – the exorcism of the blind and mute person, with following discussion (22-32), the warning against careless words (33-37), the demand for a sign (38-42), and the return of the evil spirits (43-45). The initial and final discussions about evil spirits seem to form an inclusion for this segment of the narrative.

When Jesus exorcizes the demon (v. 22), the crowd is astonished and wonders (v. 23) “This isn’t (μήτι) the Son of David, is it?” The wording of the Greek would expect a negative response – No! So while they are open to entertain this possibility, they are not very sure. The Pharisees are even more negative: “This person does not cast out demons except by Beelzeboul, prince of demons”(v. 24). The Son of David would refer both to Solomon and Messiah. A common accusation within later Jewish sources is that Jesus was a sorcerer – he performed miracles but he did so using Satan’s power. Is this why Jesus did not want the demons to publicly identify him?

Jesus addresses the Pharisees’ accusation through parables, as he did in response to the refusal by the people of Galilee to see his miracles as evidence of his Messianic role (11:16-18). He recognized their

²¹⁰ Cf. the use of this verb in Matthew 10 with reference to Israel and discipleship.

inner disposition that generated this analysis (cf. 9:4). Kingdom language dominates his response, as he uses a 'kingdom', a city(-state), and a household (perhaps royal dynasty) for the comparisons. If internal dissension dominates in such political/social entities, then their survival is seriously jeopardized. The kingdom 'is laid waste' and the city or household/dynasty loses its stability (cf. 7:24-28 and the parable of the two houses).²¹¹ The final member of this comparison is "Satan casts out Satan." If there is civil war in Satan's kingdom, then he is doomed. If Jesus is casting out demons by Satan's power, then Satan is undermining his own rule. There should be a diminishing of the effects of evil, but this is not the case. Further, how do the Pharisees explain the ability of their own followers to cast out demons? Are they also satanically empowered? By accusing Jesus in this way, they pass judgment on their own actions.

Jesus invites them to reach the opposite conclusion, namely that it is the Spirit of God working in him that is responsible and this is evidence that "the Kingdom of God has come upon you." Probably we have to see in Jesus' response the sense that the manner in which he does these things (by word only) shows an authority greater than that normally exhibited by the Pharisees or other Jews in exorcism. It is this authority that demonstrates the presence of the Kingdom. V.28 provides the strongest evidence that in Jesus' teaching the Kingdom of God is present in some form. It is not an entirely future entity. In his response, Jesus also compares his kingdom with that of Satan's and sets up the primary opposition that explains the moral and spiritual warfare that continues within this world. Luke speaks of "the finger of God" in the parallel passage.

The strong man analogy that follows communicates Jesus' aggressiveness against evil, as well as his power. The proper explanation for Jesus' ability to do exorcisms comes from the fact that he has overpowered Satan (as shown in Matthew 4) and can plunder his house at will. Even though Satan is strong, Jesus is stronger. Here is another comparative to consider – one stronger (cf. 3:11) than Satan is present. V. 30 stresses that one's relationship to Jesus is the primary spiritual matter – being with him and gathering with him, i.e., participating in shepherding the flock, is the critical question. Otherwise one is against him and scattering, i.e., the flock?

Vv. 31-32 draw a conclusion (for this reason). Jesus claims that forgiveness for "all sin and blasphemy that people commit" is possible, with one exception. Those who slander the Spirit shall never receive forgiveness – in this age or the coming age. Those who attribute God's work to Satan cannot receive God's forgiveness, because they will not recognize the work of God for their salvation. What is the nature of the contrast between the Son of Man and the Holy Spirit? Blomberg suggests that it may reflect the ambiguity of the Son of Man terminology and actions, in contrast with the Spirit's actions, i.e., exorcisms and healings that are clear and unambiguous. Jesus defines 'blasphemy' in v. 32 as "speaking a

²¹¹ This of course is what eventually happens to Jerusalem because it is "divided" in its response to Jesus.

word against the Holy Spirit.” The word of warning is consistent with other statements of judgment that Jesus has been expressing in Matthew’s narrative. Finally, note the use of the common Jewish concept of distinctive ages – “this age and the coming age.” What is the coming age in Jesus’ perception? Is it the kingdom age or the eschatological age after the second coming?

Jesus concludes (vv. 33-37) his interaction with the Pharisees with a parable statement (v.33) from which he draws additional applications of the same nature. These religious leaders make sinful accusations because of the attitude of their ‘hearts’, i.e. their inner self where judgments and discernments are made. Because this is evil (*πονηρός*), so then their words are also evil (v. 34; cf. 6:22-23). They appear pious but are in reality “offspring of vipers,” just as John the Baptist previously named them (3:7). Their speech betrays their spiritual condition, just as the kind of fruit a tree produces indicates whether it is a ‘good’ tree or an ‘infected’ (*sapros σαπρός*) tree that will produce ‘infected’ fruit. This analogy is similar to that Jesus used in 7:18, while the statement about ‘treasure’ reflects the analogy he used in 6:21.

How important is the language we use? Even ‘deedless’ or ‘idle’ words can reveal the true intent of a person’s commitments. In 10:32-33 Jesus warned his disciples about their confession before people – what they said – and how this would reveal their true relationship with the Messiah now and in eternity. Perhaps he intends the same warning here. Is Jesus here establishing ground rules by which God will judge human beings? If so, again we have him demonstrating his knowledge of God’s ways and his authority.

A new, but connected dialogue occurs in vv. 38-45. Although there is a paragraph division in many English versions after v. 42, it may well be that we are to understand this entire segment as a single paragraph, as Jesus responds to the demand for a ‘sign’ (v. 38). Note that the reference to a “wicked generation” occurs in vv. 39 and 45. Just as Jesus responded to Pharisees in v. 24, so some “of the teachers of the law and the Pharisees” respond to him in v. 38. “They answered” and demanded a ‘sign’. Jesus has just done a miracle and exorcism (i.e., healed the blind, mute man v.22), and the religious leaders accuse him of using the power of Beelzebul (we played the flute for you but you did not dance – 11:17); now they want a sign (we sang a dirge, but you did not mourn – 11:17) and Jesus refuses. They require him to confirm his credibility, just as Moses had required a prophet to do so in Deuteronomy 13:1-2. By calling them an “adulterous generation,” i.e., one that engages in religious idolatry and breaks covenant with God, he shows that their request is not genuine, i.e., it is not arising from faith. What is the nature of their idolatry? Consider Ezekiel 16:38 or 23:45.

A great deal of discussion has occurred about the nature of “the sign of the prophet Jonah” (v. 39). Jesus seems to identify his death as the ‘sign’, equating his 3 days between death and resurrection as analogous to Jonah’s time in the belly of the great fish. Jesus’ death is due to his rejection by the Jewish religious leaders. Perhaps then the sign is his message of judgment which leads to his death. We have

commented earlier on the comparative language – “one greater than Jonah is here.” What is ironic is that the Gentiles – those living in Nineveh and the Queen of Sheba – will be critical of the generation of Jesus’ Jewish contemporaries because they failed to recognize God at work in Jesus. A similar reversal is noted in 11:21, 24 in the comparison of villages such as Capernaum with Tyre and Sidon and Sodom.

How is Jesus greater than Jonah? Perhaps in the consequences of his message? How is Jesus greater than Solomon? As the new ‘son of David’, Jesus is not just wiser than Solomon. Given the context of exorcism and the current Jewish beliefs that Solomon had given the Jewish people the knowledge by which to control evil spirits, Jesus is greater than Solomon in his authority over the demons.

This sequence began with Jesus exorcising a demon. He comes back to this issue in vv. 43-45. Nolland argues that the language of 45c requires us to take Jesus’ statement as a parable. However, Blomberg considers it to be commentary on the release Jesus gave in vv. 22-23. Whether we should consider this to be Jesus’ teaching about demons or a parable, the warning seems clear. Just because one is released (by Jesus or anyone else) from demonic possession, does not guarantee continued relief. A person who is freed in this manner, must then act to install God’s authority and in this case God’s authority is represented by Jesus Messiah. People might be amazed and astonished at the actions Jesus does to release and heal people. However, if they do not connect these miracles with his message and the authority of his role as Messiah, then it will do them no good now, and will certainly do them great harm in the future. The mention of the “wicked generation” picks up the language of v. 39

This interchange is interrupted by the note that Jesus’ family is waiting to speak with him (vv. 46-50). Matthew does not provide any explanation for this intervention as Mark does (3:21), attributing their response to rumours that he was ‘mad’. Just as John struggled to discern whether Jesus was the messiah, so it seems Jesus’ own family was not automatically convinced. Their personal, familial relationship with Jesus does not automatically place them within the Kingdom. Only “doing the will of my Father in heaven” enables a person to claim a personal connection with the Messiah. Perhaps this anticipates Jesus’ teaching about “my assembly” in chapter 16. The references to Jesus’ family and hometown form a parenthesis around the discourse on parables (Matt. 13).

As we conclude our review of Matthew’s narrative in chapters 11-12, the rejection motif has deepened considerably. Despite this, Jesus continues to act as one who will not break a bruised reed. Yet he is greater than the Temple, Satan, Jonah, Solomon, Sabbath and John the Baptist. The warnings multiply. Those who rejected him are a wicked and adulterous generation, the offspring of vipers, equated with the inhabitants of Tyre and Sidon and Sodom. In doing this they slander the Holy Spirit of God and reject the will of God. The discourse in chapter 13 will provide Jesus’ commentary on this growing rejection.

Third Discourse: Parables (Matthew 13)

Matthew has highlighted the parable teaching of Jesus in this 13th chapter. After the initial parable about the soils, we have three parables introduced by the phrase “another parable” (vv. 24, 31, 33), but in each case followed by “the kingdom of heaven is like.” Then three others begin directly with the phrase “the kingdom of heaven is like” (vv. 44, 45, 47). The first one explains why parables are used to communicate the kingdom message of Jesus. The last six parables are explicitly defining some aspects of the kingdom of heaven.

Three of the parables have interpretations (soils, sheep and goats, and the net). In three sections there are reflections on the use of parables (vv. 10-17, 34-35, 51-52), with the first two reflections incorporating material from the Old Testament. In the first instance Jesus teaches that his use of parables flows from Isaiah’s prophecy (v. 14) and in the second instance (v. 34-35) Matthew inserts an editorial comment which contains a quotation from Psalm 78:2 introduced by “that which was spoken through the prophet.”

There is also a flow between the crowds and the disciples. Jesus addresses the first parable to the crowds, but then interprets it to his disciples. The next three parables are taught to the crowds, with the interpretation of the weeds’ parable given to the disciples privately “after the crowd left” (v.36). The last three parables are addressed to his disciples in this private context apparently, enhancing in some sense his explanation of the parable of the weeds. They culminate in Jesus’ question (v. 51) “Do you understand all these things?”

Mark also has a chapter devoted primarily to parables (4) and Matthew follows his sequence up to 13:23. The only other parable from Mark in this section is the one about the Mustard Seed (31-32). Other elements in Mark 4 are scattered (i.e., Matthew 13:12,34).

What is a parable and why did Jesus incorporate so many into his teaching? As we note from 13:3, “Jesus spoke many things in parables” to the crowds. In v. 13 Jesus repeats that he “speaks to them in parables” and in v. 34 Matthew, paralleling Mark, confirms that “without a parable he was saying nothing to them.” The term parable as used in the Old Testament covers a wide range of literary forms – stories, wise sayings, riddles, etc. Essentially it defines a form of speech which incorporates two levels of meaning: the literal meaning relates to a secondary level of meaning. The story makes sense in terms of its literal meaning, but the intended and more critical message of the speaker lies in the secondary level.

Craig Evans in a recent essay²¹² provides the following background related to Jesus’ use of parables:

²¹² Craig Evans, “Parables in Early Judaism”, Chapter 3 in *The Challenge of Jesus’ Parables*, edited by Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2000): 51-75.

1. apart from the parables of Jesus there are very few Jewish parables that can with certainty be dated to this period;
2. the character of the parables derived from Rabbinic sources are not exactly comparable to those of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels;
3. Jesus derived the parable form of teaching either directly or indirectly from the Scriptures of Israel.

He notes about ten parable stories in the OT Jewish Scriptures, some in the wisdom tradition, some in the Pentateuch, but most in the Prophets, particularly Ezekiel. As well, a number of parables occur in the contexts of visions (Joseph, Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar). There are about 325 Tannaitic parables, a period roughly parallel to the first two centuries of the Christian church. Themes incorporated within these parables relate to God as King and his sovereign rule of his kingdom. To what degree Jesus ‘borrowed’ from this rabbinic practice or Jesus in fact influenced this rabbinic practice is a moot point and cannot be determined, in my view. Klyne Snodgrass in the latest, most comprehensive review of Jesus' use of parables (*Stories with Intent. A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*) says:

To our knowledge *no one* else used parables as frequently or as forcefully as Jesus does in the Synoptic Gospels. When parabolic material does appear, it often mirrors the prophetic and confrontational stance of the OT parables. (p.42)

Jesus seems to have used stock characters or motifs in his parables. Many of them are agricultural in flavour (sowing seed, harvesting, growing plants). Some of them relate to family matters or judicial issues. Others focus on construction, fishing, shepherding, and domestic elements (cooking).

In Matthew’s narrative Jesus uses parables from the very beginning of his ministry. The Sermon on the Mount has several. So we should not see Matthew 13 as marking the introduction of parables into Jesus’ ministry as a response to Israel’s rejection of Jesus. Rather, as Blomberg says:

The parables appear here as an important explanation of why the response to Jesus is becoming increasingly polarized and as a prediction of how that polarization will continue to grow.²¹³

If a person is already disposed to reject Jesus, then parables serve to increase that spirit of opposition; if a person is disposed to place faith in Jesus, then parables serve to stimulate and provoke interest and deeper reflection. “The understanding of the parables is not so much cognitive as volitional.”²¹⁴ In some sense parables permit Jesus to present the message of the Kingdom of God forcefully, but not so forcefully as to coerce the human spirit. The response is still that of faith. In his parables Jesus both reveals and conceals

²¹³ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 212.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*

his message simultaneously, maintaining something of the divine mystery embedded in his mission and message.

Considerable discussion has occurred about the “allegorical” interpretation of Jesus’ parables that we find in Matthew 13. Did Jesus offer these or are these the constructions of the early church? I think within the context of the parable genre the secondary level of meaning, which is the more important meaning, often requires explicit definition so that the audience understands the speaker’s message. If the term “allegory” is not appropriate, then we need to find another term. There is nothing inherently peculiar about Jesus’ disciples asking him to explain the meaning of some of his parables, particularly near the beginning of his ministry or at critical transition points. We have to be careful not to read a 21st century understanding of allegory into the first century context. Perhaps one of the contributing factors to the disciples' struggle to understand is that this method of teaching was not common in first century Palestine and they were not sure about the rules of interpretation. Remember in the OT parables often occurred as parts of dream-visions which God alone could enable humans to interpret.

Parables express subversive ideas. Often some element in the story itself is unusual and will form the basis for the subversive idea being communicated in the second level of meaning. For example, the bizarre behaviour of the young son in Luke’s parable of the Two Sons highlights how some Jewish people have responded to their role as covenant people of God and Jesus intends to shock his audience by his characterization of the younger son in the story.

Finally, I think it is important to interpret the parables within the literary or narrative context that the Gospels provide. We have no other certain context within which to set them and thus to interpret them. Presumably Jesus would share the same story numerous times in his teaching, altering it somewhat as he felt it necessary. He might even use the same story to reflect upon different themes in different contexts.

The Sower and the Soils 13:3-23

Matthew connects the interaction between Jesus and his family and his statement about doing the will of God with the parables. He says “that same day” (v. 1) Jesus addressed the crowds and taught them in parables. Matthew does not specify whose house Jesus was in (cf. 12:46 Jesus is somewhere inside; 13:1 Jesus leaves ‘the house’). The large crowds of people require him to speak from a boat in the water, while they lined the shore.

There are many proposed interpretations of this parable. N.T. Wright, for example, considers this story to be an interpretation of the way God revealed himself to Israel throughout history and the varied responses God received from his people. Others see the parable as a theological statement about why Jewish people are responding to Jesus in diverse ways, explaining which of these variations was, in fact,

the right response. Most of us today immediately interpret this parable as a story illustrating how Christians live as disciples.

I think Jesus intends this parable to respond to the controversies narrated in Matthew 12. The struggle to respond correctly occurs in the context of many different kinds of opposition. Sometimes Satan is involved directly; other times he is involved indirectly. For Jesus the critical question is this: people hear the message of the Kingdom, but do not press in to understand it fully. Note the difference in wording between v. 18 and v. 23. In v. 51 Jesus asks his disciples whether “You have understood all these things?” This is the key question. Is this first parable describing failure or success of Jesus’ mission? As the story unfolds the iteration of failures to produce fruit keep mounting. Are the yields in the final category sufficient to enable the farmer to announce a successful harvest? The farmer sows extravagantly; but does he reap in a similar fashion?

The disciples wonder “why Jesus is speaking to the crowds in parables” (v. 10). They seem to regard this form of teaching as unusual. They do not ask him to explain what the parable means. This is their question about the parable of the weeds (v. 36). So in vv. 11-17 (“this is why...” v.13) Jesus gives his explanation and privileges them with a full explanation, revealing what previous prophets and righteous people had longed to see and hear.

He affirms their privilege – “to know the mystery of the kingdom of heaven.” In what sense is it mystery? The idea has apocalyptic roots, particularly in Daniel (2:28, 44; 4:9). God has already prepared his plans; the question is when and how he chooses to reveal them to humanity. Here perhaps it is important to remember that the Father reveals everything to the Son (11:25ff). The inscrutable nature of God’s purposes is also implied. Although the disciples know the secret (whether they realize this or not is another question), the crowds do not. Presumably the crowds still express no committed faith. They see what Jesus does and they hear his teaching, but they have not responded with repentance and committed faith to his invitation to follow. So the parables function simultaneously to reveal and to conceal – presenting the possibility of salvation and incurring judgment upon those who choose not to respond. He illustrates this further in v. 12. Those who have will get more; but, those who do not have, will lose the little they may already have. (Is this related to Jesus’ warning not to cast pearls before swine? Or perhaps to Paul’s statements in Romans 1:21ff?) Those who see or hear Jesus and discern nothing extraordinary are in the second category. So Jesus speaks in parables, communicating his message indirectly with them.

Jesus then says in v. 13 “this is why I speak in parables,” summarizing the statement in Isaiah 6:9. All of the Gospels reverse the order found in Isaiah 6:9 – hearing, then seeing. The Gospels uniformly have seeing, then hearing. However, this is the order found in texts such as Jeremiah 5:21. So is Jesus alluding to Isaiah or to Jeremiah in the first instance? The narrative goes on to reference Isaiah 6:9-10, quoting the LXX form almost verbatim. Matthew’s wording leads us to conclude that this is part of what

Jesus says to the disciples. This is not one of the formula quotations. In Mark's Gospel Isaiah is not mentioned at all as the source and so we are not certain in Mark that Jesus is paraphrasing Isaiah's or Jeremiah's words. Regardless, the point Jesus is making is that Israel, as in the time of Isaiah and Jeremiah, sees and hears, but this does not result in understanding (v. 13). Rather, they refuse to repent and discover the forgiveness and healing that Jesus offers to them. Finally, in vv. 16-17 Jesus pronounces the disciples blessed because they have responded. They are in a more privileged position than the prophets of old who yearned to see God at work in this way, but did not.²¹⁵ This reflects what Jesus said about John the Baptist in 11:13. His followers are in a unique time in God's plan of salvation history, a time of fulfillment.

Even though the disciples do not ask for an explanation of this initial parable in Matthew, Jesus nonetheless gives one (vv.18-23). He is very emphatic in v. 18 "You, then, listen to the parable of the sower." Note the contrast between the first and the fourth categories – hearing and understanding (vv. 19, 23). Hearing also occurs in vv. 20, 22, and some response occurs, but apparently with insufficient understanding so that what sprouts remains fruitless. The issues that prevent fruit from occurring are significant – no understanding, pressure and persecution, wealth and anxiety. Parables of fruitlessness occur in the OT Prophets (e.g. Isa.5).

Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds 13:24-30, 36-43

If the parable of the sower and the soils identified reasons why people were responding to Jesus differently, then the parable of the wheat and the weeds outlines the implications of these various responses. It indicates that there are not 'four' different kinds of responses, but essentially two, although the negative responses may arise for varying reasons. I am not sure why the disciples need this parable explained, when according to Matthew the previous one was clear.

While the story line is somewhat unusual, it has a certain logic. How often a person's enemies would commit such an act is unclear. However, farmers would understand the way that weeds often looked similar to the wheat and the dangers that weeding would pose to the crop.

The interpretation clarifies the references intended by specific elements:

37	sower of good seed	son of man
38	field	the world
38	good seed	sons of the kingdom
38	weeds	sons of the evil one
39	the enemy	the slanderer
39	harvest	end of the age

²¹⁵ Compare 1 Peter 1:10-12.

39	harvesters	angels
40	gathering of weeds	judgment at end of the age
41	harvest	son of man sends his angels

What is confusing is the statement in v. 38 ‘the field is the world’ and the statement in v. 41 that “the son of man will send his angels and they will gather *from his kingdom* all the things that cause offence and those who act lawlessly.” Perhaps we are to understand it this way:

- a. the field, i.e. the world, contains both sons of the Kingdom and the sons of the slanderer.
- b. at the end of the age (v.40) the weeds, i.e. unbelievers, in the world are gathered and condemned.
- c. at the end of the age (v.41) the kingdom, as it is perceived from the human perspective, is purged of those who have infiltrated but who do not truly believe. As in the parable of the soils, there is ‘sprouting and some growth’ in response to the word, but there is not necessarily perseverance.

I am not sure we should press too quickly to affirm that the kingdom and the messianic assembly are two distinct things. However, what is clear is that no false believers will be permitted to participate as a kingdom member beyond a certain point. At some point the Son of Man will make the boundaries of his kingdom perfectly coincident with the boundaries of the messianic assembly.

Again Jesus emphasizes the strongly divergent outcomes that revolve around the response to himself and his message. God will assess all humanity and it is a person’s relationship with the Messiah that marks his or her ultimate destiny. The outcome for the unbelieving is gruesome. For those who believe, “they shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (v. 43).

In between the parable and its interpretation Jesus offers two more, much shorter analogies to the kingdom – grain of mustard seed and yeast hidden in the loaf. In both cases Jesus emphasizes that the present form of the Kingdom may seem singularly unimpressive, but the outcome will be more significant than many imagine. These analogies also emphasize, as do the two more extensive parables, the presence of the Kingdom and its activity in the world. It is effective.

Matthew inserts the editorial comment in vv. 34-35 that Jesus used parables consistently in speaking to the crowds. But in this activity, Jesus fulfilled what the psalmist (in this case Asaph who is called “the prophet”) wrote (78:2). This is the eighth of ten formula quotations in Matthew’s narrative. It claims that the parables are revelatory and that Jesus knows the “hidden things of God” as no other (cf. 11:27).

This Psalm criticizes the rebellious spirit that marked Israelite history. “Again and again they put God to the test; they vexed the Holy One of Israel” (v. 40). “Like their fathers they were disloyal and faithless, as unreliable as a faulty bow” (v. 56). It goes on to remind Israel that God became so angry that

“He abandoned the tabernacle of Shiloh,...He gave his people over to the sword” (vv. 60-61). It ends by declaring that God “chose David his servant...and David shepherded them with integrity of heart” (vv. 70-72). The psalmist considers this rehearsal of Israel’s relationship with God as “parables” and as he narrates the story he “utters things hidden from old” (v. 2), i.e., helps his audience discern God’s purposes and intent in Israel’s history. If a reference like this in Matthew’s Gospel is intended to bring the larger context of the Old Testament passage into view, then the use of parables in response to the negative reaction towards Jesus from Israel’s leaders would be consistent with the message of this entire Psalm. Jesus, as the one to whom God is revealing all things (11:25-27), now shares what God is doing in him through parables. However, the pattern of Israel’s response to God’s actions is being repeated. Just as God became angry in the past, even to the point of destroying Shiloh and then generated a new means of accomplishing his plans, so God now in Jesus is developing a new segment of his plan. This quotation points the Matthew’s audience to an OT text that provides a heuristic frame of reference to understand what God is doing in Israel through Jesus.

Parables Spoken to the Disciples 13:44-50

The last three parables Jesus tells to his disciples. The first two focus on the issue of discipleship in the kingdom and the need for total commitment to something as valuable as the Kingdom. Both characters in the parables discover something of immense value and sell everything they own in order to possess the treasure. Whether one stumbles across the truth or is relentlessly seeking it, the action is the same when the discovery occurs. They understand the value of what they have discovered and act upon it. One of the pending questions is whether others in Israel will in fact discern the treasure that is present among them, as apparently the Twelve are doing.

In the parable of the net, Jesus picks up themes he has already expressed in the parable of the wheat and weeds. Earlier in the narrative Jesus has talked about making his disciples “fishers of people” (4:19). However, in this parable Jesus identifies the ‘angels’ at the end of the age as the ones who sort the ‘righteous ones’ from the ‘evil ones’ (v. 49; cf. 12:33 and the fruit of trees). Jesus again describes a terrible punishment for those who are evil – fiery furnace – weeping and grinding of teeth. It seems that true and hypocritical respondents to the gospel co-exist in the earthly manifestation of the Kingdom reality “until the end of the age.” The messianic community (Matthew 18) is given some instruction on how to exercise discernment in matters of discipline, but ultimately it will be the ruler of the Kingdom (the Son of Man) who finally will distinguish the righteous from the evil (7:15-23 – wolves in sheep’s clothing). Why does Jesus essentially repeat this instruction from the parable of the Weeds and Wheat?

Conclusion 13:51-52

Jesus concludes his private session with his disciples by asking whether they understand “all these things?” They answer affirmatively. Whether this is the case will emerge in the last half of the

Gospel narrative. They belong to the children to whom God is revealing his wisdom (11:25-26). They are discerning the mystery of the Kingdom (13:11). Their association with Jesus gives them access to knowledge of God that previously was unavailable. Because of what they are learning, being discipled, they become ‘scribal teachers’, the new experts in discerning God’s program and understanding his revelation in Jesus. Nolland notes that scribes also had a judicial function.²¹⁶ This requires a careful ability to review the previous revelations from God (the old) and discern from that what should continue to be relevant in the light of the new things God is doing in the Messiah (cf. Matthew 18)

The metaphor of the ‘landowner’ or ‘master of the household’ (v. 52) occurred previously in v. 27 (cf. 24:45). The scribe has treasure (cf. vs. 44-46) gained from his commitment as disciple and faith-based understanding of God’s work in Jesus. He shares this treasure with others. This is the expectation Jesus has for his followers in 28:18-20.

Matthew marks the end of this discourse, as others, with the words “And it happened when Jesus finished these parables, he left there” (v. 53).

²¹⁶ Nolland, *Matthew*, 570.

Polarization – Growing Rejection, Growing Acceptance (Matthew 13:53 – 16:20)

The question of Jesus' identity emerges as the primary issue in this section of Matthew's narrative. Jesus called for a decisive response to his message in the Sermon on the Mount (5-7). His miracles in chapters 8-9 demonstrated his authority and the nature of the Kingdom reality he announced. Chapters 10-13 outlined the growing controversy around him, with some accepting him, others uncertain, and some absolutely rejecting him. Jesus has explored the theological reasons for these diverse responses in chapter 13.

In this section of his narrative Matthew recounts the explicit rejection of Jesus and John by various groups (the town of Nazareth, Herod, Pharisees and Sadducees), his ministry among various Gentile groups, and then the affirmation by his own followers that he is the Messiah, the Son of God. In this section Matthew follows the Markan sequence with considerable precision.

It is possible to analyze this segment in various ways. I think Blomberg (227ff) offers a reasonable hypothesis:

1. 13:53 – 14:12 Rejection of Jesus by the town of Nazareth; Rejection of John by Herod Antipas
2. 14:13-36 The Son of God reveals himself to Israel
3. 15:1 – 16:12 Conflict with Pharisees and Teachers of the Law, followed by Jesus' withdrawal into Gentile regions (feeding of the 4,000) and further demand for signs from the Jewish religious leaders. 16:5-12 forms an inclusion with the feeding miracles.
4. 16:13-20 Peter's confession – the result of divine revelation.

Following this sequence, Jesus reveals that his ultimate destination is Jerusalem, where he will suffer and die.

Villagers of Nazareth and Herod's Birthday Party – 13:53-14:12

Matthew does not mention Nazareth explicitly in 13:54, but does refer to his "ancestral home" (cf. 12:46-50), which presumably Matthew would identify as Nazareth given what he has reported in chapter 2. The response is mixed as he teaches in their synagogue. While his wisdom and the reports of his "miraculous powers...astonishes" them, they know his family well. Carpenters who have no formal rabbinic training probably will not qualify to be Messiahs! The term *tektōn* (τέκτων) refers to someone who was a woodworking craftsman, making utensils, household furniture, and perhaps beams for construction. Could the "son of the carpenter" also be "the son of God"? Given that normally people of importance emerge from the upper social strata and that Jesus' family obviously lacks any distinction, his

rise to prominence suggests the use of unusual, perhaps forbidden power.²¹⁷ In what sense? They know his brothers²¹⁸ (four are mentioned) and even his sisters (plural), as well as Mary his mother. Large families were not rare in first century Palestine. Note the series of questions that imply positive answers in vv. 55-56a, surrounded by the same question "from whence is this wisdom and these powers (supernatural powers or miracles?) to this person?"

Matthew records their conclusion – they took offence at him (imperfect tense, v. 57). They become contemptuous, just as the Pharisees do (15:12). At 11:6 Jesus had pronounced a blessing on those who were not contemptuous of him, i.e., who did not regard him as one who would entice them to apostasy. In the Parable of the Sower and Soils, pressure and persecution led some to be “offended” and not produce fruit (13:21). Their reaction places them in a category of extreme spiritual danger. While Jesus seems to use a common proverb to describe this reaction (“a prophet is not without honour except in his hometown”), his announcement has deeper significance (cf. criticism of Jewish religious leaders in chapter 23). If his hometown (including his family members?) will not accept Jesus as Messiah, who else in Israel will do so? “Their faithlessness” leads him to refrain from doing "many miraculous wonders" there. Their lack of faith leads him to respond by withholding Kingdom blessing, just as he counseled his disciples to do. Their faithlessness contrasts with the faith of the Gentile Centurion (chapter 8), but is consistent with Jesus’ critique of Capernaum, Korazin and Bethsaida at 11:20-24. Note that Matthew in v. 58 clarifies Mark’s statement in 6:5 that Jesus “could not do many miracles” in Nazareth by wording it as “Jesus did not do many miracles.” He is deliberate and in charge. Jesus’ statement about “a prophet without honour” applies not only to himself, but also to John, whose story now follows.

Herod will treat another prophet with contempt, to the point of executing John the Baptist to carry out an oath made because a young lady danced in a pleasurable way at his birthday party! How could he act with greater contempt? Matthew tells us that Herod knew John was a prophet, but nevertheless went ahead with the execution. It was John’s public criticism of Herod’s marriage to his brother’s wife that led to his arrest.²¹⁹ We are not told what the people in Nazareth named as the source of Jesus’ wisdom and power. Herod is not so reticent. When he hears about Jesus, his conclusion is swift – “He is John the Baptist raised from the dead and for this reason the powers are at work in him” (14:2). The word ‘powers’ is the same as that found in the question put by the people of Nazareth in 13:54. So what exactly did Herod think was happening within Jesus? What powers was he embracing that enabled him to cast out

²¹⁷ The Romans believed that their emperors had the power to do miracles on occasion, because of their supposed relationship with the gods.

²¹⁸ Only James and Jude have further mention in the NT. James becomes the leader of the early church and perhaps writes the Epistle of James. Jude also writes an epistle.

²¹⁹ Josephus (Ant. 18.136) reports that Herodias “parted from a living husband to marry her husband’s brother and that this was to flout the way of our fathers.”

demons and perform miracles? Were they demonic, as the Pharisees expressed?²²⁰ We should also note how this iteration of possible explanations for Jesus is repeated in 16:13-16.

14:3-12 provide a flashback, explaining why Herod thinks Jesus could be John resurrected – Herod had beheaded John. Perhaps in some sense Herod thinks that John is planning to execute vengeance against him by working through Jesus. As Nolland comments, “There are no reported instances in Jewish or Hellenistic sources of a belief that being raised from the dead can confer supernatural powers.”²²¹ However, this may have been a commonly held superstition. Josephus’ account of John’s death at the hands of Herod Antipas stresses the political agitations created by John’s criticism of Herod’s marriage to Herodias, the wife of his half-brother Philip. (Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.116-119, 136. Josephus claims that the defeat suffered by Herod’s army immediately after John’s execution was divine retribution.)

The issue of divorce (14:4) which leads to John's arrest is also used by the Pharisees in 19:3ff to try and get Jesus into trouble with Herod Antipas. Presumably they hope to stir things up and compel Herod to arrest and execute Jesus, just had he had dealt with John the Baptist.

The Two Nature Miracles and Healing the Sick in Genneserat 14:13-36

Matthew does not press any comparison between Jesus and Herod as the shepherd of the people such as Mark does in his narrative (6:35). We should probably see the entire sequence of vv. 13-36 as one continuous story, with the conclusion in v.33 “Truly you are son of God” reflecting the right conclusion to draw from these actions of Jesus. However, we should also note the strong linkage with what preceded in 14:1-12. What did Jesus hear in v.13? Is Matthew referring explicitly to the report of John’s death brought to him by John’s disciples? Or is Matthew referring to the understanding of Herod about Jesus’ activities – “the powers are at work in him”? (v. 2) I think the sense of the narrative would be that Jesus withdraws because of Herod’s interest, misguided as it is, in his work and the way Herod had treated John. If Herod thought Jesus was “John Resurrected,” then he might be tempted to arrest Jesus as well because of this assumed connection with John the Baptist.

There do seem to be verbal similarities between the miraculous feedings that occurred during Elijah’s time and Jesus’ activity here (cf. 2 Kings 4:42-4). Note also how Ahab and Jezebel were hostile to Elijah, seeking his death.

Matthew has already noted Jesus’ compassion for the crowds of Israel at 9:6. Matthew tells us that Jesus’ compassion for them motivates him to heal them and then feed them. Matthew does not

²²⁰ I would suggest that the NIV translation “miraculous powers” clouds the reference to “powers”, i.e. spiritual beings who exercise supernatural powers. This is more in line with Paul’s reference to “principalities and powers.”

²²¹ Nolland, p.580.

mention any teaching of the crowds at this point. It is the disciples who point out to Jesus the need of the crowd for food and the lateness of the hour. However, Jesus orders them to provide for the crowd. As we would ourselves, the disciples are astonished at the magnitude of the demand – they think they have no sources from which to procure such food. No mention is made about money as in the parallel Markan account. “Five loaves and two fishes” are not enough by any normal human measure to satisfy a crowd of 5,000 men. Yet, as Jesus continues to give commands, the disciples obey.

Many commentators note that the sequence of verbs in v. 19 – taking, he blessed and breaking, he gave – matches the sequence in the Last Supper (26:26). This leads many to see echoes of Communion in this account. However, this is also the normal sequence of any Jewish meal. Further Matthew does indicate that Jesus “looked up into the heavens” as he prayed, something not found in the Last Supper material. Finally, we might ask what would such a parallelism, if deliberate, signify? Is it related to “knowing Jesus through the breaking of the bread” (Luke 24:35)? According to 14:33 there is a revelatory component, but it does not emerge until the end of the entire sequence. I think we need to link this more to the discussion that Jesus will have later with his disciples after the second feeding miracle, where he warns them about the “yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (16:5-12). It is the multiplying of the loaves and the fishes to the point that they had more left over (twelve basketsful) than they had when they began that has revelatory significance in Jesus’ mind. Jesus sends his disciples “to the opposite side,” dismisses the crowds and retreats into the hills to pray alone. Matthew emphasizes the solitary situation of Jesus, but does not explain further Jesus’ need to pray.

After Jesus has prayed, in the fourth watch (i.e., 3-6am) “he went to them, walking on the sea” (v. 25). Matthew emphasizes that “the boat had proceeded already many stades (1 stade = 600 feet),”²²² even though they were opposed by the waves and the wind. The terrified reaction of the disciples to this apparition (*phantasma* (φαντασμα)) is quite understandable as they probably connected this supernatural phenomenon with the destructive potential of the storm and considered it all very threatening. Jesus takes action immediately to dispel their fear and identifies himself as *egō eimi* (I am ἐγώ εἰμι; cf. John 13:19). In the Greek OT this expression identifies Yahweh numerous times (e.g., Isa. 43:10-11). There is ambiguity here because as Greek idiom it can mean “it’s me.” God is the One Who walks on the waves and Jesus demonstrates his divinity by doing the same.

Matthew’s note about Peter’s action is the first of several stories where Peter will assume greater prominence. His response (v. 28) to Jesus parallels Jesus’ own way of identifying himself – “Lord, if you are (*su ei* σὺ εἶ) (Lord),...” It is unclear in the textual tradition whether Matthew wrote (v. 29) the aorist verb form “and he went to Jesus” or the infinitive “in order to go to Jesus.” How does this request by

²²² John provides specific information about the distance (John 6).

Peter differ from the demands by the Pharisees that Jesus perform a sign? Why does Jesus respond positively? Perhaps it is similar in essence to the request of the leper – if you are willing, you can make me clean. Here Peter is saying to Jesus, if you are in fact Jesus, you can make me walk on the water. So command me to do this. He is not questioning Jesus’ ability, but rather is seeking to discern whether the apparition is truly Jesus, as it claims. In effect Peter’s statement is a form of confession, one that foreshadows what he will admit in 16:16 – you are the Messiah, the son of God. This in fact is the conclusion that the disciples in the boat come to in v. 33 “truly you are son of God (cf. 27:54).” Matthew used the word “worship” in v. 33 to characterize this response. Since Jews are only to worship God, this act on their part speaks volumes in terms of their discernment. Jesus characterizes Peter’s response to him as an act of faith, even if “little faith.” In the midst of faith uncertainty or doubt may also exist.

There is a short interlude or summary passage (vv. 34-36) in which Matthew describes the healing ministry of Jesus in Gennesaret. It takes us back to 4:23-25.

Excursus on “doubting” (14:31)

Worshipping, but Uncertain (Matthew 14:31; 28:17)

The relationship between faith and doubt has exercised the best of Christian minds. We can trace this tension back to the very origins of Christianity. Jesus faces the strange admixture of worship and uncertainty several times in the response of his disciples to his actions. It is possible — might we even say normal – to worship the Lord Jesus with an obedience mixed with uncertainty and hesitation.

Although there are several words used in the New Testament to express the concept of doubt (*diakrinō* and *dialogismos*), we will focus on the verb *distazō*, which occurs in the New Testament only at Matthew 14:31 and 28:17.[1]

The verb *distazō* has the basic sense of uncertainty that arises from trying to choose between two options. It carries connotations of hesitation about a course of action or can mean to doubt or waver. Plato and Aristotle both use it to express the idea of doubt. Several centuries later the Hellenistic-Jewish author of the Letter of Aristeas to Philocrates (c. 130 BC) describes how in response to the provision of seventy-two scholars to translate the Hebrew Pentateuch into Greek, Ptolemy Philadelphus produces several gifts for the Temple in Jerusalem. One of these gifts is a new table for the showbread. The king wanted “to increase the proportions fivefold, but...doubted (*distazein*) whether such a table might be useless for priestly ministrations.”[2] In this context we discern the sense of the verb as hesitation about acting in a certain way because the implications of that act were unknown or perceived to be unfortunate.

Towards the end of the first century CE. Josephus wrote his *Jewish War*. In Book II he recounts the life of Herod the Tetrarch, who ruled Galilee during Jesus’ ministry. The Roman emperor Gaius appointed Agrippa king over the former tetrarchy of the deceased Philip. When Herod the Tetrarch heard this, he became envious. Herodias, Herod’s wife, spurred him on, according to Josephus, by saying “Now that he [Gaius] has made a king of Agrippa, a mere commoner,...surely he could not hesitate (*distaseien*) to confer the same title on a tetrarch.”[3] Unfortunately, Gaius responded quite differently and banished Herod to Spain, where he died. Here again the sense of hesitation is clear, but applied to a different set of circumstances.

This verb also conveys a sense of doubt, hesitation and uncertainty in writings by Plutarch and Diodorus Siculus. Plutarch in one of his essays[4] gives advice to a person who feels a headache coming on. Such a person “hesitates [*distazonta*] about bathing and taking food, [but] a friend will try to hold him back.” Diodorus Siculus, an historian living in the first century B.C., described the war between the cities of Syracuse and Carthage. When Hamilcar, the Carthaginian general sought to deceive the magistrates of Syracuse into surrendering the city, “the magistrates, . . . being in doubt [*distazontes*], watched closely that there might be no disorder, but they sent the envoys [from Carthage] away at once.”[5]

In Matthew 14:22-33 Jesus, after the feeding of the five thousand, sends his disciples in a boat across the Sea of Galilee, during the night, while he went into the mountain to pray. Early in the morning Jesus came walking across the water. When Peter and the other apostles saw him, they think, “It’s a ghost!” (v.26). But Jesus speaks and encourages them. Peter, to prove it is Jesus, asked the figure to let Peter come to him on the water. Peter climbed out of the boat and began to walk across the water, until the disturbance of the wind and water made him afraid and he started to sink. He cried out to Jesus for rescue. Jesus did and said, “You of little faith, why did you doubt (*edistasas*)?” (v.31)

In response to this mysterious appearance of Jesus and his command to get out of the boat, Peter obeyed. However, the thrashing wind and sea produced fear. He discovered himself doing what humanly was impossible – walking on water – until fear began to dissolve his faith. According to Jesus’ analysis it is Peter’s lack of faith, arising from his doubtful uncertainty, that causes him to sink. That is the only variable in this picture that has altered. While Jesus is critical of Peter, he does not abandon him, but saves him, grasping him. They both climb back into the boat. This must imply that Peter kept walking on the water, held secure by Jesus, until he was safely in the boat. Peter’s faith in Jesus led him into a bold, obedient response to Jesus’ command. The turbulence of the storm, however, shakes his confidence and he wavers. Yet, Peter does reach Jesus. Peter has faith, but it is ‘small’, and without Jesus’ intervention could be overwhelmed by the circumstances of the moment.

The second occurrence of *distazō* is found in Matthew 28:17. Jesus again came in mysterious circumstances to meet his disciples. It was after the resurrection and the Eleven had returned to Galilee. As they assembled on the mountain according to Jesus’ directions, “they saw him”(v.17). Matthew described their response with two verbs – “they worshipped him, but some/they doubted/were uncertain/hesitated (*edistasan*).” Plainly the Eleven are the subject. Whether all or some of the Eleven ‘doubted’ is unclear. What is more intriguing is the relationship between worship and doubt/uncertainty/hesitation.[6] Apart from 4:9 where the devil is tempting Jesus to worship him, either Jesus or Yahweh is the object of worship in Matthew’s Gospel. Homage and worship are linked together. Plainly the Eleven, seeing Jesus resurrected, could not help themselves. They had to worship. Such a response is normal when human beings encounter a theophany, even though they might be uncertain of the implications of such an encounter.

It is possible that the last part of v. 17 (“they doubted”) should be linked with v. 18 rather than v. 17. This would lead to the following translation of vs. 17-18:

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go and when they saw him, they worshipped. Now they doubted and when Jesus approached, he spoke to them saying,...

But what nuance should we give to the verb *distazw* here? Can they be doubting that it is really Jesus? Possibly. We discover the same struggle among the Eleven in Luke 24:38. As they were receiving the report from the two people who met the resurrected Jesus on the Emmaus road, Luke tells us that Jesus “stood in their midst” and begins to converse. They are agitated and “doubts (*dialogismoï*) rise” in their

minds. In the following verse Luke says that Jesus urged them to take various steps to assure themselves that he truly was the crucified Jesus. So considerable uncertainty seems to be present among the Eleven as they come to terms with the reality of the Jesus resurrected. In the longer ending of Mark's Gospel Jesus also scolds the Eleven for failing to believe the witnesses of his resurrection.

In the course of Matthew's Gospel, 28:17 records the first resurrection appearance of Jesus to the Eleven. So perhaps Matthew is summarizing a variety of responses to the risen Jesus that the Eleven expressed during several resurrection appearances. Regardless of how we might reconstruct these events, Matthew affirms that when Jesus appeared in his resurrection glory to the Eleven, it created agitated uncertainty. Apparently the Eleven knew God was doing something, but some or all of them were quite uncertain as to the meaning or implications of Jesus' resurrection. While they had seen Jesus raise people from the dead several times, they knew this event was of a different order. They had followed Jesus during his ministry, but what would it mean to follow the resurrected Jesus?

It may well be that Jesus speaks "The Great Commission" in order to deal with their uncertainty and unpack the significance of his resurrection. He emphasizes his universal, complete and unsurpassed authority; he tells them what their mission will be – making disciples of all nations – and how to do this; finally he assures them that he goes with them on this mission – for as long as it takes and wherever it may lead them.

1. We get a sense of how Greek speakers understood this word when we discern that a common name for the subjunctive mood, the mood of uncertainty, was *distaktikē*. A.T. Robertson calls the subjunctive the "mood of doubtful statement" (*A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman Press, 1934): 927.
2. *Aristeas to Philocrates*, edited and translated by Moses Hadas (New York: KTAV Publishing House, Inc., 1973):123. When Josephus (*Antiquities* 12:61) repeats this story, paraphrasing the original account, he says that the Ptolemy wanted "to construct one as much as five times as large as the one there, but *was afraid* [phobeisthai] that it might be of no use in the temple ministrations...."
3. Josephus, *Jewish War*, II, 182.
4. *Moralia* 62a.
5. Diodorus Siculus 20.15.3.
6. Diodorus Siculus 20.15.3.

The Pharisees and Tradition – the Problem of Defilement (15:1-20)

The primary critics of Jesus in Matthew's narrative are the Pharisees. In particular they criticize his unwillingness to follow their religious regulations and his rejection of their authority. John criticized Herod Antipas and was executed. Jesus criticized the Pharisees and scribes and he will be executed. In this extended segment, largely paralleled in Mark 7:1-20, Matthew contrasts the Pharisees' understanding of religious defilement with that defined by Jesus. This time it is Pharisees and Scribes from Jerusalem who question Jesus.

We are not sure about the standards of ritual purity within Second Temple Judaism. That eating food with unwashed hands would make that food unclean and also transfer uncleanness to the person eating is not found in the OT generally. However, it seems clear from this interchange that the Pharisees

at that time did believe that unwashed hands carried their own defilement and that this defilement could be transferred to food. If you ate this subsequently defiled food, you too would be defiled. A pious person would take care, i.e., by washing hands, to prevent himself from being defiled by such things. We see some of this kind of development in the rules for the Qumran community which required daily bathing as necessary for maintaining ritual purity. Perhaps the point of John's baptism was that this purification unto repentance removed all defilement and dismissed any further need for the rituals required by the Pharisees.

Jesus mimics the question of the Pharisees in his response (v.3) – “why do you also break God’s command through your tradition?” The "tradition of the elders" would be the kind of oral interpretation that Jesus perhaps had addressed in the SM – "you have heard it said, but I say." Jesus accuses them of contravening God’s command through their regulations, using one part of God’s law to rationalize disobeying another part of God’s law. Such a response must have sounded outrageous. The very things that they regarded as adding to piety Jesus claims only multiply sin (cf. Paul’s concern in Galatians 2:17-18). Their concern probably reflects their program to extend the standard of priestly purity to encompass a normal Jew’s entire existence (in order to create a “priestly kingdom” according to Ex. 19:5-6?).

Matthew has a different order than Mark who quotes Isaiah first and then speaks to the issue of Korban – gift (v.5). Jesus quotes from Exodus 20:12 and 21:17, both dealing with the command to honour one’s parents. Jesus claims that some Pharisees used the notion of vows to God to sidestep their responsibility to care for their parents. By a notional gifting of a resource to God, they could keep use of it personally and not be obliged to use it for the care of others. They used one part of the law to justify disobeying another segment of the law. In v. 6 Jesus claims they “annul the word of God through your tradition.” He accuses them of hypocrisy, exactly as Isaiah had prophesied in 29:13. Failure to commend what God commends results in a person being unable to offer worship that is acceptable to God (cf. 6:1-8).

In vv. 10-11 Jesus offers a parable to the crowd, whom he summons, urging them “to hear and understand.” He uses food digestion to illustrate that food regardless of its origins cannot defile a person; rather it is the immoral intents of a person’s mind and will that contaminate his life. The term “make common” (κοινοῖν) was used in cultic contexts to distinguish what possesses purity appropriate to the ritual and what does not. Matthew does not tell us whether the crowds understood the parable. Does the omission of the word “nothing” (cf. Mark 7:15) in v. 11, in contrast to Mark’s account, suggest that Matthew is being sensitive to conservative Jewish Christian dietary practices?

Jesus then engages in dialogue with his disciples (vv. 12-20) when they tell him that the “Pharisees, hearing the word, were offended.” Such a response indicates that they had some inkling of the nature of Jesus’ parable and its message – but they rejected it. Their reported response links back to the

rejection motif introduced in chapter 9:34; 12:14, 24; 13:54-58. Jesus responds with another parable that is unique to Matthew in this context, but includes motifs iterated in other places (cf. 3:10 where John speaks against the Pharisees and Sadducees). It becomes in fact another oracle of judgment with the sense that God will destroy what does not originate with him, even though some might claim otherwise. He warns his disciples to stay clear of these religious leaders; they are blind and cannot be good guides for other blind people. This presages Jesus' warning to his disciples in 16:5ff about the 'yeast' of the Pharisees and Sadducees.²²³

Peter asks Jesus to "explain to us this parable" (v. 15). Which parable is he referring to – the one about digesting food or the one about uprooting plants, or both? Jesus seems surprised that they "still are without understanding."²²⁴ His answer indicates that Peter was referring to the parable Jesus told the crowds. Jesus distinguishes between stomach (ἡ κοιλία) and heart (ἡ καρδία). It is the heart that is the source of human intents/decisions/actions. The products of the heart defile a person, not what she chooses to eat.

Matthew reorders and shortens the list of evils that are found in Mark's account. Murder, adultery and sexual immorality are the first three, reflecting perhaps the order of the first three antitheses in the SM. They all relate to the Ten Commandments. Jesus concludes in v. 20 by going back to the Pharisees' original question and confirming his conclusion – unclean hands do not defile a person; unclean thoughts, however, will create defilement before God.

This segment of the narrative shows us that Jesus was quite capable of quoting materials from the OT in his teaching. So when we consider 13:14ff and the allusion to Isaiah 6:9-10, we should not make a hasty conclusion that this statement is not part of Jesus' teaching.²²⁵

Jesus withdraws to Gentile Territory and then Returns to Galilee 15:21-39

Jesus' interaction with the Canaanite woman is similar to that which he had with the Gentile Centurion in chapter 8 and the Gadarene demoniacs in 8:28ff. Here also the expression of faith by a Gentile overcomes Jesus' sense of exclusive mission to Israel. He demonstrates that he can assist a Gentile in need without diminishing his mission to Israel. Matthew says nothing about Jesus' unachieved desire to remain out of the public eye during this retreat to Tyre and Sidon. Further, we have no hint about the way in which this woman came to know about Jesus and his presence in this area.

She appeals to Jesus as "son of David," using the faith claim that a Jewish person would use. Her concern is for her daughter who is "badly or severely demonized" (v. 22). But Jesus ignores her persistent

²²³ Luke has a similar statement in 6:39. Paul also uses this analogy in Romans 2:19.

²²⁴ In vv.15-16 we find two Greek words that only occur once in the NT – *phrazō* φράζω – explain, show, tell; *akmēn* ἀκμήν – an adverbial accusative meaning 'still' (cf. Blass, DeBrunner, Funk, *Greek Syntax*, section 160).

²²⁵ 13:14 is the only context in Matthew where the verb *anaplēroō* (ἀναπληρόω) occurs.

cries. Here is a Gentile woman addressing a Jewish man. For Jesus to respond could be construed quite negatively. His disciples are bothered by her and ask Jesus, “send her away,” the same advice they had given to him about the crowds in 14:15. In his response Jesus seems to address the woman, not the disciples. His narrow definition of his mission to “the lost (ruined?) sheep of the house of Israel” (note previous reference to this expression in 10:6) is not questioned by the woman, but she does insist that other nations might benefit from Israel’s blessing. She has sufficient faith to be able to interpret Jesus’ parable about the dogs. Her response demonstrates an understanding generated by faith and Jesus affirms that she has “great faith (*megalē...hē pistis* (μεγάλη...ἡ πίστις) – contrast this with the “little faith” demonstrated by Peter in 14:21),” just as the Gentile Centurion demonstrated. Jesus heals her daughter at that point, even though he has not gone to the house, just as he did in the case of the Gentile Centurion’s servant. Again, how is Jesus defining ‘faith’ here? This is the second time a woman, apart from his family, addresses Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel and it is Gentile woman (cf. 9:22).

Jesus returns to the "sea of Galilee" and the hill country surrounding it, where he continues his ministry of healing (15:29-31). His continued success leads the crowds to “give glory to the God of Israel” (v. 31; cf. 9:33). In Zechariah 11:16 the disastrous shepherd “does not care for the perishing or seek the wandering, or heal the maimed, or nourish the healthy.” The desperation of the people is indicated by the language – “they cast them at his feet” (v. 30).²²⁶ The amazement of the crowd matches wording in 9:8 and 9:33. They note the same miraculous activities of Jesus that he draws to the attention of John and his disciples in chapter 11.

The second feeding of a multitude in Matthew’s context does not seem to occur in a Gentile context (as in Mark’s Gospel – the Decapolis). It may have, but Matthew gives no data to require this. The crowd Jesus has concern for (v. 32) is presumably the same crowd that he has been healing in v. 30.

Jesus voices his concern for the crowd (v. 32) to his disciples. Since the crowds have been with him for three days, his compassion for their physical welfare has increased. The need for food has become critical. The option of sending them away is not viable, because some may be too weak and might faint along the road. His disciples respond with a rhetorical question – there are no resources in this deserted area so where can we locate enough bread to satisfy the hunger of such a crowd? Jesus demands that they give him the food they possess, their own resources – seven loaves and a few small fish. He multiplies it and after everyone is fed, “seven baskets of fragments” are gathered – again the surplus far exceeds what Jesus started with.²²⁷

²²⁶ At 9:36 Jesus has compassion on the people because they are harassed and cast down (*errimmenoi* (ἐρριμμένοι)), the same verb as is used here.

²²⁷ Matthew, as Mark, uses two different words to describe the baskets used for collecting fragments. In 15:37 it is *spuris* (σπυρίς) and in 14:20 it is *kophinos* (κόφινος). It is not clear what the distinction between these baskets signifies. Acts 9:25 the *spuris* is big enough for Paul to sit in.

Some again suggest a deliberate parallel with the Lord's Table is being emphasized by the use of terms such as *eucharisteō* (εὐχαριστέω) and *klaō* (κλάω), breaking. However, these are common words used in the context of Jewish meals and so there is no necessary linkage. Finally, we do not know where Madagan is – the place Jesus takes his disciples after this second feeding miracle.

We might have expected Jesus' disciples to respond in this second situation with greater reference to the first. However, we get no sense from Matthew's narrative that Jesus' disciples made any connection between these two situations. This fact may be the basis for Jesus' discussion that emerges in 16:5-12.

The Yeast of the Pharisees (16:1-12)

In 12:38-39 the scribes and Pharisees asked for a sign from Jesus and the one he gave was “the sign of the prophet Jonah.” Here the Pharisees and Sadducees ask Jesus for “a sign from heaven” and this is characterized as a “testing.” Their request is little different in motivation from Satan's in chapter 4. Matthew does not explicitly say what kind of action or event would qualify to convince these religious leaders. Perhaps Jesus' use of the weather phenomena would suggest something in the natural realm, like the fire descending from heaven in the case of Elijah on Carmel. Or, perhaps the voice from heaven that occurs during the Transfiguration would be such a sign. What has just occurred in the feeding of the four thousand, for some reason, does not suffice. However, perhaps none of them were present.

Jesus chastises them for their ability to discern the coming weather from the changes in the sky, but their inability to discern the coming times in God's schedule based on the actions which he and John have performed – whether by teaching or miracle. He refuses to give the requested sign because the very nature of their request shows a skepticism and lack of faith. They wish him to fail the test and that is why they have made the request. He repeats his earlier statement – only the sign of Jonah will be given (12:39). Jesus walks away from them. Their skeptical request adds further to the theme of rejection that Matthew has been building since chapter 9.

Matthew moves to the next interchange between Jesus and his disciples (vv. 5-12) by noting a geographical change and the disciples' failure to bring bread (maybe some of the bread left over from the feeding of the four thousand). Matthew makes it plain that Jesus is warning his followers to beware “of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (v. 12). Presumably he is referencing their failure to respond to him and the accusations they are making against him. However, it might go further than that and relate to the “tradition of the elders” that Jesus had criticized in the first part of chapter 15.

The disciples think he is making some joke or riddle about their failure to bring bread for the journey. Clearly the way Matthew describes the discussion among the disciples, they are not sure they have understood him. Jesus perceives their uncertainty and so explains what he meant. The feeding of the five thousand and four thousand should have assured them that failure to bring bread was no problem for

Jesus to solve. He could produce it on the spot, if he desired (i.e., as Satan in the temptation story well knew). If the disciples truly had grasped the essence of what these miraculous feedings meant, they would never have thought Jesus was anxious about their food supply. Jesus names this as “a lack of faith” (cf. 6:31; 8:26; 14:31 – cases where people failed to appreciate the power and presence of God).²²⁸ Matthew makes sure his readers understand that the disciples finally perceive (*sunēkan* (συνῆκαν)) his message and accept his warning (v.12),²²⁹ rather than leaving things open-ended as Mark does in his parallel pericope. Nor is there any use of the hardness of heart language in Matthew related to the disciples.

Jesus employs the analogy of leaven positively in reference to the Kingdom of Heaven (13:33). Here Jesus refers to the sects of the Pharisees and Sadducees who were quite small in number, yet exercised through their teaching and position a great influence on Jewish affairs, both religious and political. Is there a sense that this yeast has to be removed (as in the feast of unleavened and Passover) before the Jewish people will respond to Jesus?

It is often suggested that Jesus only hosted one miraculous feeding and that the account of the four thousand is a duplicate. However, Matthew includes details from each account that suggest they were distinct episodes.

Peter's Confession 16:13-20

By all accounts this segment of Matthew's narrative is climactic. The expression in v. 21 “From that time Jesus began...” is thought to mark the final stage of the narrative story. Peter voices for the disciples their evaluation of Jesus to this point – Messiah, Son of God. As well, we discover Jesus speaking more definitively about the mission beyond the cross using the term *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία – ‘assembly’) for the first time and daring to saying it belonged to him. Finally, we get a glimpse of the role that Jesus intends Peter to play in this future. Yet in these various elements we discern many questions which continue to stir strong debate.

- ❑ What concept of Messiah does Peter have in mind when he makes his declaration? How does this relate to their declaration in chapter 14 after the walking on the water?
- ❑ In what sense is Peter the foundation of this future?
- ❑ What is the nature of this authority to bind and loose?
- ❑ What does Jesus mean by *ekklesia* and could he have used this term as a first century Jewish person to refer to a re-visioned Israel?

²²⁸ Note how Jesus commended the Centurion and the Canaanite woman for their faith.

²²⁹ In some of the cultic regulations in the OT yeast was to be removed, i.e., feast of unleavened bread, related to Passover.

The region of Caesarea Philippi would be in the northernmost corner of Galilee, near the source of the Jordan River. While this city did boast a temple to the god Pan, there does not seem to be in Matthew's account anything that relates to this pagan element. Perhaps he is just continuing to show how Galilee of the Gentiles, sitting in darkness, now is seeing the great light brought by Jesus (cf. Matt. 4). There is however a towering cliff at this city with a large cave at its base. The temple of Pan and other temples were constructed in this setting. Such caves were often viewed as gateways to the underworld.







There is a textual issue related to the question Jesus asked his disciples. Did he ask them “Whom do people say the son of man is?” or “Whom do people say that I, the son of man, am?” Regardless of

one's decision about this textual issue in v. 13, Jesus in v. 15 makes it very clear that he is asking what people and his disciples are saying about him. He certainly identifies himself as the Son of Man here.

The disciples share four opinions held about Jesus: people say he is John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. Each of these public evaluations would presume that Jesus is the resurrected John or Elijah or Jeremiah and that this resurrected state explains the source of his power and wisdom. We have seen Herod claim that Jesus is John resurrected. Jesus himself has identified John as the expected Elijah, though not in a resurrected form. However, this is the first time we have had Jesus identified with Jeremiah. However, in 2 Maccabees 15:11-16 Jeremiah appears in a vision as helper and in 2 Esdras 2:18 Jeremiah and Isaiah are sent to help. Of course there are additional parallels between Jesus and Jeremiah, particularly in their respective oracles proclaimed against the Jerusalem and the Temple, pronouncing God's judgment upon Israel for its disobedience. Perhaps Deuteronomy 18:15-18 would provide support for Jesus' identification with another prophet figure. It is interesting that none suggest a new Moses or David. Is this significant for modern suggestions about a Jesus-Moses parallelism? Would this language imply Messianic status?

Jesus then requires the disciples to declare themselves (vv.15-16). Weight is given to the mention of Peter by using his double name "Simon Peter" (cf. 4:18). Jesus uses his full Semitic name "Simon Barjonas" (v. 17; Son of John/Jonah – John 1:42; 21:15). He is presumed to answer for all. He declares that "You are the Messiah, the Son of God who lives." Although Matthew identified Jesus as Messiah in the opening chapter, this is the only place in the Gospel where a person confesses that Jesus is Messiah.

- ❑ The term "Messiah" is not used in the OT to reference a divine figure. Normally it describes the process of anointing that identifies a person called to a particular role in God's plans – king, priest, prophet.
- ❑ First occurrence of it with reference to a separate and distinct messianic figure is in the Psalms of Solomon 17:21-26 (c. 50 BC), where the promised Davidic king is identified as messiah. As well we find similar uses in the Qumran materials to refer to a priestly figure – the anointed of Aaron and Israel (1QS 9:11). In 4QpGen^a (4Q252) 2:12 "the anointed one" is identified with "the branch of David."
- ❑ The concept of "anointing" indicates someone is set apart by the deity for a specific role.

So what is Peter saying when he makes this confession? It would seem through Matthew's various descriptions of Jesus as "son of David" that he is defining Jesus as the expected royal, Davidic figure whom God would send to restore the fortunes of Israel as he had promised (cf. usage in the Psalms of Solomon).²³⁰

²³⁰ The occurrence of messianic references in later, first century Jewish writings (i.e., 2 Baruch, Targums) probably reflects the strong interactions between Christianity and Judaism related to Jesus as Messiah.

The expression “the son of God who lives (or the living God)” links us back to the declaration of the disciples when Jesus walked on the water (14:33). What is Peter affirming through this epithet? Is this a statement of Jesus’ deity? Jesus will agree with this identification in his trial before the High Priest in 26:63.

The material in vv. 17-19 is unique to Matthew. Jesus immediately affirms the truth of Peter’s confession and pronounces a special blessing on him (v. 17). Jesus declares that Peter has not received this insight from some human source (flesh and blood), but God the father “has revealed” this. How this has occurred Jesus does not explain. Perhaps this is an elaboration of what Jesus was saying in 11:25-27 – God reveals his wisdom to “little children”, i.e., those who put their faith in Jesus as son of God. Peter has done this several times – following as a disciple and then climbing out of the boat and walking to Jesus on the water.

Just as Peter has identified Jesus as Messiah, so now Jesus identifies Simon as “Rock/ Petros” and “on this rock (*petra* (πέτρα))” he declares he will construct “my assembly (*mou tēn ekklēsian* (μου τὴν ἐκκλησίαν)).” Jesus defines Peter’s destiny through this oracle. In Matthew Jesus usually calls him Simon. In Acts he is regularly Peter.²³¹ We probably should not see a major distinction between the words *petros/petra* (πέτρος/πέτρα) at this stage.²³² The use of the demonstrative pronoun “This rock” raises one or two questions. Normally “this” would link this noun back to something previously mentioned. So what in vv. 16-17 would Jesus be referring to – Peter’s confession that Jesus is Messiah, the act of Peter confessing this, or Peter himself who would be the future leader of the Jerusalem church? I am not sure how important making a decision on this really is. Surely Jesus is reflecting on the nature of his confession and his imminent role in establishing the messianic assembly in Jerusalem after the resurrection.

Nolland²³³ asks whether the stone imagery is related to contexts in the OT where God lays a stone in Zion (Isaiah 28:16). The Qumran community used this Isaiah text to define itself. Perhaps Jesus also has this in mind with reference to Peter. As well, the Qumran community related these stone texts to the community as a symbolic temple, “the foundation of the holy of holies for Aaron.” Whether we should see any temple imagery in Matthew 16:17-18 is debated. Its combination with the building motif may indicate this (cf. 1 Peter 2:4-7). Or, with a different sense, Jesus might be reflecting on Isaiah 51:1-2 where Abraham and Sarah seem to be defined as “the rock from which you were hewn.”

²³¹ Note the way that Paul alternates between Simon and Peter in Galatians 1-2.

²³² Could Peter’s statements in 1 Peter 2:4-6 be a clarification of Jesus’ statement, to make absolutely clear that Jesus is the foundation stone, not Peter, for the new people of God?

²³³ Nolland, 671.

We also must come to terms with Jesus' use of the term *ekklēsia* (ἐκκλησία). This was one of the terms used in the Septuagint to define the covenant assembly of Israel in the Pentateuch.²³⁴ While it has a long history of usage in Greco-Roman contexts to define the assembly of the polis/city, it is more probably the Jewish Septuagint usage that guides Jesus. Given its use primarily in Deuteronomy to refer to the constitutive assembly of Israel as it is about to enter the Promised Land, the emphasis in Jesus' use is on the gathering of God's people to inaugurate the next stage of God's purposes. Stephen in Acts 7 will define Israel in the wilderness as the *ekklēsia* (ἐκκλησία). In some sense I think Jesus must be claiming that his teaching and ministry is redefining and reconstituting Israel. What will emerge is the messianic assembly, the newly gathered people of God created around the person of the Messiah. He is not referring to an institution or organization per se, but rather the gathered people of God founded on a new covenant. What is the more intriguing question is how this expression as used by Jesus relates to the Kingdom reality he is representing and offering to humanity. Perhaps the mention of the Kingdom in the following verse would suggest that Jesus sees more concentricity between the messianic assembly and the kingdom reality than we are prepared to accept today.

Jesus does not set his assembly in opposition to the Roman empire, but rather Satan's empire – *pulai haidou* (πύλαι ᾗδου). "The gates of Hades" in the ancient world defined the sphere of death. The verb *katischusousin* (κατισχύσουσιν) has been interpreted variously. The Gates of Hades can be considered the aggressor or the messianic assembly could be so construed. I think it is the messianic assembly that is the one prevailing (cf. the Parable of the strong man whose house is plundered in 12:29). This requires a translation such as "the gates of Hades shall not be stronger than it." The sense would then be that the messianic assembly with the gospel is able to rescue people from the sting of death, placing them in the kingdom of God who lives.

If this is a correct understanding of v. 18, then it leads naturally to v. 19 with its emphasis on entry into the kingdom – binding and losing, using the keys of the kingdom as a means to bring people from death to life.²³⁵ As Blomberg suggests, it refers "to Christians' making entrance to God's kingdom available or unavailable to people through their witness, preaching and ministry."²³⁶ Entrance into the Kingdom is linked with forgiveness of sins. The same kind of language will recur in Matthew 18:18. Consider the role of all the apostles as the foundation of the church in Ephesians 2:20 and Revelation

²³⁴ Deut. 4:10 (NETS) "about the day when you stood before the Lord your God at Choreb, on the day of the assembly (*tēs ekklēsias* (τῆς ἐκκλησίας)) when the Lord said me, 'Assemble the people...'; 31:33 "And Moyses spoke the words of this song, to the very end, in the ears of the whole assembly (*πάσης ἐκκλησίας*) of Israel."

²³⁵ Perhaps there is some relationship between "the gates of Hades" and "the keys of the Kingdom." Both refer to ways of opening or closing access.

²³⁶ Blomberg, 254.

21:14. Others consider this binding and loosing to define the responsibility of the church leadership to define appropriate behaviours (as for example Paul does in his letters).

Jesus' restriction upon the disciples sharing this information at this time probably relates to their imperfect understanding of it, as well as the imperfect understanding of his role as Messiah, exactly what the following segment will demonstrate.

Initial Predictions of Death and Resurrection and The Fourth Discourse **(Matthew 16:21-18:35)**

If as many think the initial words of 16:21 introduce the third and final segment of Matthew's narrative, then the references to the journey to Jerusalem and consequent sufferings which also occur in that verse would seem to set forth the major themes Matthew will elaborate in the remaining chapters. Matthew incorporates four discussions about the passion that Jesus has with all or some of his disciples:

16:21-23; 17:9-13; 17:22-23; 20:17-19.

Beginning with 21:1 Jesus enters Jerusalem. Another significant discourse occurs in chapter 18. We will need to explore how its contents relate to this larger theme of the passion.

The materials in 16:21 – 17:27 include the following:

16:21-28 – First passion prediction and implications for discipleship

17:1-13 – Transfiguration and second passion prediction

17:14-20 – Disciples inability to exorcise a demon

17:22-23 – Third passion prediction

17:24-27 – Miraculous provision of the Temple Tax

Each passion discussion is linked with an interchange between Jesus and Peter, primarily because Peter has misunderstood the implications of Jesus' teaching or actions. These dialogues stand in sharp contrast with the one that has occurred in 16:13-20 where Peter had confessed Jesus as Messiah, Jesus had affirmed this was a revelation from God, and had prophesied about the future role of Peter in the establishment of his messianic assembly. The inability of the disciples to deal with a demon in 17:14-20 draws the other disciples into this problem of "small faith" which Peter also struggles with (17:20).

16:21-28 First Passion Prediction and Implications for Discipleship

Matthew tells us that at this point "Jesus began to show (*deiknuein* (δεικνύειν)) his disciples that it was necessary for him to go away to Jerusalem and to suffer many things." Matthew does not use the verb "teach" here, but "show" (cf. 4:8 Satan shows Jesus the kingdoms; 8:4 Jesus tells the healed leper to

show himself to the priest). I wonder if he is emphasizing the idea of ‘reveal’, or perhaps Jesus communicates this information by example as well as by word. This is not philosophical or moral teaching, but rather is a revealing by the Son of God how his mission will now unfold. Similarly the term *dei* (δεῖ it is necessary) marks these events as a required part of God’s program. The Kingdom cannot come any other way. Jerusalem will be the context for his final acts.

Regularly in the literature scholars speak of three passion predictions. However, as I count them in Mark and Matthew, there are four. The passion prediction integrated with the Transfiguration account regularly is not regarded as a passion prediction. While it is not as fully formed as the other three, Jesus nevertheless speaks clearly about the suffering of the Son of Man (17:12) and resurrection (17:9), linking his suffering with that which John the Baptist experienced.

Despite the reference to Jerusalem in Matthew 16:21, the activities of Jesus in Matthew 16-18 remain firmly in the region of Galilee. Only in 19:1ff do we begin to see him move geographically towards Jerusalem. In 20:17-18 Jesus specifically says “We are going up to Jerusalem.” So again we need to be careful not to presume that this section is “on the way to Jerusalem.” Matthew does not indicate this. All that 16:21 indicates is that at some time it is necessary for Jesus to go away to Jerusalem, but not when. Of course, “to go up to Jerusalem” could mean to participate in the feasts or something quite general.

In the context of Jerusalem the Messiah will “suffer, be killed, and be raised” and the agents who will initiate these events are “the elders and high priests and scribes”, i.e., those who form the Sanhedrin and oversee Jewish religious affairs. Herod the Great had consulted with the high priests and scribes regarding the prophesied birthplace of the Messiah (2:4), and this resulted in his efforts to kill the baby Jesus. Now they finally will succeed because Jesus allows it.

Matthew has been foreshadowing these events by noting the conspiracy of the religious leaders (12:14) and Jesus’ own statements comparing him to the bridegroom (9:15) and his definition of discipleship as cross-bearing (10:38). However, note that Jesus does not reveal the nature of his death until the final prediction in 20:18-19. While the hostility of the religious leaders which has been escalating and the actions of Herod Antipas to execute John the Baptist might have led Jesus to conclude that his death was quite probable, the notion of resurrection and his expectation that this would occur, was not something he could assume, humanly speaking.

Peter’s response is both emphatic and surprising. He grabs hold of Jesus and rebukes him! Perhaps his words might best be rendered “May God have mercy on you for suggesting such a thing! This shall never happen to you!” It reveals how shocking and utterly contrary Jesus’ notions of Messiah were to the first century Jewish mindset. If Jesus’ most intimate disciples could scarcely grasp the reality of a suffering Messiah, no wonder the Jewish religious leaders rejected him. What created the greatest affront

to Peter -- the suffering of the Messiah or that the Jewish religious leaders would be responsible for their Messiah's death?

Jesus uses equally strong language to reject Peter's exclamations. They represent Satan's words and ideas, a trap for the Messiah, and do not in any way reflect "the things of God." They have their source purely in human speculation (v. 23). Instead of being the stone on which Jesus will build his messianic community, Peter is now functioning as the "stumbling-stone (*skandalon* (σκάνδαλον)," preventing the Messiah from accomplishing the very thing that was essential for the formation of the messianic community. Such perversity could only originate with Satan and Jesus turns his back on such suggestions.

Having 'shown' how the Messiah's mission will be accomplished, Jesus then explains the implications for those who follow him (vv. 24-28). Jesus states the essential principle in v. 24 and then follows it by three explanations (vv. 25-27). He concludes with an 'amen' saying. In 10:38 Jesus stated negatively what he now expresses positively in v. 24. In 10:38 the setting was the costliness of discipleship in terms of family and other social relationships. Here, however, he explains what "taking up a cross" means by adding the idea of "denying self." He then proceeds to explain what self-denial requires. The formation *aparneisthai* (ἀπαρνείσθαι to deny) signifies "to renounce, refuse or deny knowledge of, commitment to or acquaintance with something or someone." Given the other metaphor used here of taking up the cross bar, i.e., being willing to accept a criminal's death by execution, the emphasis would seem to be on renouncing any commitment to self and giving full and total allegiance to Jesus, no matter what the cost. Again, we have to remember that in the flow of the narrative, the disciples do not yet know that Jesus will be crucified. They have no basis yet for connecting this metaphor with the suffering Jesus will soon experience. Their only reference point would be the Jewish-Roman context of political and criminal justice. Following Jesus requires a willingness to be condemned to death by Rome and executed on a cross. Of course, the disciples would probably know some stories of previous Jewish men who claimed to be Messiah and how the Roman officials dealt with them and their followers.

Given the absoluteness of his demand, Jesus provides some rationale for any human being to make this choice. First, he promises that "losing one's life" in this way, i.e., giving up all claims to it, in fact will result in its preservation (v. 25). Second, he argues that the value of a person's life far outweighs all the wealth and power that the world might offer. There is no currency worth exchanging one's life for. Every option results in incredible loss, other than the option of following Jesus. The commercial terminology Jesus incorporates into v.26 is noteworthy. Finally, he warns them that each person will have to render an account of "his deeds/actions" (*kata tēn praxin autou* (κατὰ τὴν πράξιν αὐτοῦ)) to the Son of

Man when he returns in glory. The presumption is that if our actions are contrary to those commanded by the Son of Man, then our accounting will be inadequate.²³⁷

V. 28 offers its own set of challenges. The first section seems clear. “Tasting death” would normally mean “have died” and “some of those standing here” would include some of Jesus’ disciples. So Jesus is forecasting that some disciples will still be alive when some event occurs. It is the second part that creates difficulty. Jesus says that some disciples will still be living and will see “the son of man coming (present participle) in his kingdom.” To what is Jesus referring? A similar statement had been made in 10:21-23 relative to the disciples’ mission to Israel. Blomberg opts for the explanation that Jesus is talking about his glory that is foreshadowed in the Transfiguration.²³⁸ In other words Jesus in Matthew 16:27-28 refers first to his second coming (v.27) and then to his current “coming” that results in his transfiguration (and resurrection?) (v.28). The Transfiguration is the next event in Matthew’s narrative. Blomberg seeks confirmation for this proposal in passages such as 2 Peter 1:16-18. Others consider v.28 a reference to the power of God’s rule that is expressed in the resurrection of Jesus and the establishment of the messianic assembly at Pentecost, which I think is most likely. Still others assert that Jesus refers to his second coming, but got the timing wrong. This language comes from Daniel 7 with the figure described as “like son of man” is given power and eternal authority and the kingdom by the Ancient of Days. The call to discipleship followed by the prophecy about the return of “the son of man in the glory of his father” indicates that Jesus is preparing his followers for a time that will follow his passion, but will precede his second coming.

17:1-13 The Transformation of Jesus

A week after his first passion prediction Jesus experiences a remarkable transformation, witnessed by three of his disciples – Peter, James and John. Jesus is quite deliberate about choosing these three to participate with him in this event. This has to be one of the most significant and mysterious incidents in Jesus’ ministry. I wonder how it relates to his use of ‘parables’ as the way he communicates and reveals himself to the crowds and the disciples?

For whom did this event occur? Was this something God did in order to encourage Jesus in his mission, one of the special revelations that expressed the intimate relationship between Jesus and his Father in heaven? Or was this something that Jesus orchestrated in order to help key leaders among his followers know clearly that he was Messiah, the Son of God, despite his prophecies about suffering and death?

Matthew describes the actual event in vv. 2-3:

- Jesus is transformed in front of them

²³⁷ Do these three rationales relate conversely with the three temptations that Jesus experienced in Matthew 4?

²³⁸ Blomberg, 261.

- ❑ His face shines like the sun
- ❑ His clothing becomes white as light
- ❑ Moses and Elijah appear and have a conversation with Jesus.

In the OT God is associated with light. When Moses interacts with God on Sinai his face shines to such an extent that fellow Israelites cannot look at him (Exodus 34:29, 30, 35; cf. 2 Corinthians 3). In 13:43 Matthew has included Jesus' statement that after the judgment "the righteous shall shine like the sun," sharing in and reflecting God's glory. For Jesus this shining luminescence or radiance reveals his essential glory. These three disciples experience Jesus' divine nature.

Seeing these amazing things, Peter tells Jesus that this experience is good. Whom does he include in the pronoun 'us'? Are Moses and Elijah included? Is Jesus? Then he says, "If you are willing, I will make here three tents/tabernacles – one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." What is Peter desiring – to prolong this experience? Does he see it as the initial stage of Jesus' eschatological plan for the Kingdom? Does he sense that Moses and Elijah have come to assist Israel and require some shelter during their ministry, perhaps fulfilling Malachi 4? Before Jesus can answer "a bright cloud envelopes them" and a voice from the cloud says "This is my son, the beloved, in him I am well-pleased – listen to him!" This repeats the statement made at Jesus' baptism (3:17). Clouds in the OT often are associated with theophanies (cf. Exodus 19). The response of the three disciples is to "fall on their faces and become very afraid," i.e., they knew God had appeared. Only when Jesus taps them on the shoulder do they emerge from their fear. When they open their eyes, only Jesus remains present. Only here and in 28:18 does Matthew have Jesus "draw near." The command "to listen to him" implies that he speaks for the deity.

What does this event do in Jesus' ministry?

- ❑ Emphasizes that Jesus' definition of Messiah, including suffering and death, is the way God has designed things. God endorses Jesus as suffering Messiah.
- ❑ Indicates that all that Jesus says and does carries forward what God revealed through Moses and the Prophets in the OT.
- ❑ Reveals something of Jesus that the disciples had only seen dimly – his divine essence.

As they descend from this mountain, Jesus commands these three to say nothing about this experience to anyone "until the son of man has been raised from the dead" (v. 9). This is the second injunction to silence (cf. 16:20). Perhaps their possession of this knowledge and refusal to share it with the other nine disciples leads to some of the controversy about who is first that follows. Jesus calls this experience a 'vision' (*horama* (ὄραμα)). This term is used 21x in Daniel, often to describe his apocalyptic visions, as well as visions God gave to Abraham and the spectacle of the burning bush in Ex. 3. Nolland also suggests that there is some linkage between Daniel's experience in Daniel 10:9-10 and that of the

disciples here.²³⁹ Does the Transfiguration "replace" visionary experiences that previous men of God saw (e.g., Daniel, Ezekiel, Isaiah), but now it occurs in real space and time? We should consider carefully the similarities between this event and the post-resurrection event narrated in 28:16-20. It suggests that the Transfiguration is in some sense a pre-resurrection revelation of the glorified Jesus.

The commands to silence are often linked to something called the Messianic Secret. In Mark's Gospel particularly we find several occasions on which Jesus enjoins people who have experienced miracles not to reveal them to others, but they cannot help themselves. At times he also commands the disciples not to share things he has revealed. Some speculate that this is a Markan creation, designed to explain why Jesus was not acclaimed as Messiah prior to the resurrection. Others see this as a deliberate strategy by Jesus to prevent premature and ill-advised responses to him that would interfere with his ability to carry out his mission. I would connect this with the Matthew citation of Isaiah 42 in chapter 12.

The reason why the disciples ask about the prophecy regarding Elijah's appearance is unclear. Some think that the Elijah's appearance in the recent 'vision' leads them to consider Malachi 3:23 (ET.4:5) "God will send Elijah before the great and terrible day of Yahweh." The Jewish religious leaders linked Elijah into God's eschatological program. His appearance would signal its inauguration in some sense.²⁴⁰ So when they see Elijah talking with Jesus, they suspect that the day of Yahweh is about to begin. Others connect their question to Jesus' prophecy that "the son of Man will be raised from the dead." They probably thought that the resurrection should follow the appearance of Elijah. So if the Son of Man, i.e., Jesus, is Messiah, then how and in what way does Elijah fit into this scheme, particularly in relation to resurrection? I am not sure we have to choose between these two. It may well be that the combination of both of them leads to the question raised by the disciples. However, their question highlights the differences that existed within the eschatological scenarios proposed by the Jewish leaders and that revealed by Jesus. Here is another distinction between Jesus and the Jewish leaders that probably caused considerable debate and misunderstanding.

Jesus affirms once more (cf. 11: 14) that John is the Elijah. "He has already come and they did not recognize him, but they did with him what they desired" (v. 12). This is exactly what is happening with Jesus. So Jesus' eschatological program is not out of sequence with that of Malachi's. Rather, it is the failure of the disciples to recognize what God is doing that produces their problem. John came, he fulfilled his role in announcing the kingdom and identifying Jesus, and then he was executed. Jesus now follows. "The son of man is going to suffer under them" (v. 12). Jesus iterates his imminent suffering, death and resurrection in this interchange with his disciples. This I consider another passion prediction,

²³⁹ Nolland, 705.

²⁴⁰ Sirach 48:10. Elijah comes "in order to calm the wrath of God before it breaks out in fury." Is John's message about God's judgment related to this perception?

bringing clarity to how his suffering and death relates to that of John and fits into the eschatological schedule partially revealed in the OT. Matthew specifies that “the disciples understood that he spoke to them concerning John the Baptist.”

17:14-20 Disciples’ Inability to Exorcise a Demon

Jesus encounters a dramatic failure of the remaining disciples when he returns to them. For some reason they cannot carry out the mandate Jesus had conferred in chapter 10. In some ways Jesus’ descent and encounter with failure reminds us of Moses’ experience with Israel’s defection around the Golden Calf as he descended from Sinai with the Law (Ex. 32). However, Matthew does not seem to take any specific narrative advantage of this potential parallel. Rather, he has a condensed version of the story that Mark recounts.

According to Matthew’s description the boy suffers from epileptic-like seizures (*selēniazetai* (σεληνιάζεται); cf. 4:24), which are triggered by demonic interference. These episodes endanger his life, exposing him to burning and drowning. The father had brought his son to the disciples for healing, but “they were unable to heal him.” No reason is given for their failure. However, Jesus diagnoses it as due to “faithlessness and perversity (*diestrammenē* διεστραμμένη).” Jesus criticizes his followers for the same spiritual attitude that their Jewish contemporaries had been displaying to Jesus. Their failure to help the “ruined sheep of Israel” puts them in the same category as the contemporary religious leaders. Jesus’ language here reflects perhaps Deuteronomy 32:5 and Israel’s failure during the Exodus. Moses’ similarly complained to God about having to bear with the Israelites (Num. 11:12). Jesus’ rhetorical question implies an imminent absence, but we are given no details.

Jesus responds to the father’s plea and heals the boy. The disciples privately question “Why we were unable to cast it out?” (v.19) Their failure is a concern to them. Obviously it differs from their more recent experiences. Jesus analyses their problem as “little faith.” Their unbelief is similar to their contemporaries, but Jesus does acknowledge that they have responded to some degree. Yet, even in this response, more is required. He compares their “little faith” to something smaller than a grain of mustard seed. Perhaps, as Nolland suggests, the problem is that they have some faith, but are failing to exercise it as they should.²⁴¹ Jesus assures them that mustard-sized faith is sufficient to move a mountain. The contrast is striking. The principle is clear – with God nothing is impossible. Just as Jesus prophesied to Peter that what he bound on earth would be bound in heaven, so now he carries forward the same principle. God will accomplish his powerful work through the people who rely on him in true faith.²⁴²

²⁴¹ Nolland, 716.

²⁴² Other references to ‘little faith’ in Matthew include Peter (14:31); worried disciples (6:30); cowardly disciples (8:26), and distracted disciples (16:8). This term describes failure on the part of disciples to believe that God will take care of them. In this context failure has occurred because they have not believed in God’s ability to care for this man’s son. Perhaps it contrasts with the great faith of the Centurion (8) and the Syro-Phoenician woman (15).

17:22-23 – Third Passion Prediction

Matthew's initial language suggests that the incidents related to the confession of Peter, the statements about discipleship, the transfiguration and the exorcism all happened in the vicinity of Caesarea Philippi (16:13). Now "they gathered together in Galilee," presumably relocating to the vicinity of Capernaum as v. 24 indicates.

In the first prediction, the passion experience is not linked with the Son of Man. However, in his comments about the passion after the Transfiguration and again in this prediction, Jesus identifies the Son of Man as the person who will experience these terrible things. Jesus affirms that this person "is going to be handed over into the hands of people" (v. 22). What the specific nuance of the Greek verb here is can be debated – betrayed is certainly one option (cf. Isa. 53:6, 12; Daniel 7:25 and its use of the Son of Man terminology. There the "saints of the Most High" are handed over to the fourth beast.). Here the Son of Man will experience humiliation through human agency. In 16:21 Jesus had specified the "elders, chief priests and scribes." Here he is more generic in his description. They will kill him, but he shall be raised on the third day.

The reaction of grief expressed by the disciples indicates they have accepted this outcome, even though it saddens them and they do not understand how it integrates with their eschatology.

17:24-17 Payment of the Temple Tax

This story is unusual for several reasons. First, how does it fit into the narrative sequence and what does it contribute to the story at this point? Second, Matthew does not tell us whether Peter went and did what Jesus said. It is presumed. Third, this is another story where the focus is on Peter. Perhaps Peter responds too quickly to the question posed and Jesus, through his exchange, teaches Peter a more nuanced understanding of this issue.

The practice had emerged by the time of Jesus for every Jewish male throughout the Roman empire to pay an annual levy of two-drachmae, roughly equivalent to two days' wages, to support the general sacrificial rituals conducted daily and on special occasions in the temple. Only those who regarded the current temple and its cult as polluted would not participate (i.e., those in the Qumran community). While Jesus argues that "the sons of the king/kingdom" should not have to pay such a tax and so he and his followers should be exempt, he realizes that to withhold payment would be interpreted as a rejection of the temple. He was not ready to make this declaration yet. So he empowers Peter to find the money to pay the tax, presumably for himself and for Peter (4 drachmae would need to be found).

I wonder what Jesus would have done if the question had been addressed directly to him, rather than to Peter? The form of the question expects a positive answer. Peter's response indicates that he has every expectation that Jesus would comply with the normal responsibilities of a Jewish male. However, there is some evidence that rabbis and priests were exempt. So would Jesus claim exemption because of

quasi-rabbinical status? Does Jesus' concern about not causing offence prepare us as readers for the discussion about giving offence in the following discourse (Matt. 18)? Perhaps Jesus is emphasizing his basic commitment to the OT Law and his desire to honour God and the Jewish sacrificial system?

Matthew places particular emphasis on this concept of "causing offence" (*skandal* – root). It occurs sixteen times in his narrative.

- ❑ Give or cause offence – 11:6; 13:57; 15:12
- ❑ Jesus is the cause of offence –

This concept will be a focus in the discourse that follows.

The Discourse on Life in the Royal Family of God – Matthew 18

Since the feeding miracles narrated in Matthew 14ff, the portrayal of the disciples has shifted. Their lack of faith, their inability to understand, and their inability to cast out a demon have occurred. In contrast we have the climactic event of Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of the God who lives, and Peter's subsequent rebuke. In the fourth discourse the question that initiates it concerns "greatness in the kingdom" and this question comes from the disciples. In the stories that follow, leading up to the entrance into Jerusalem in chapter 21, this issue dominates. The principle that "the last will be first and the first will be last" emerges as a primary perspective. The discourse in chapter 18 explores what this means for the disciples and how it will guide behaviour in the post-resurrection messianic community.

The brief interchange that Jesus has with Peter about the Temple Tax has surfaced two issues: first, that the followers of Jesus are "sons of the king" and have privileges; second, that these privileges do not enable them to act in such a way as to cause offence to others. Just so, greatness in the kingdom does not give Jesus' followers license to offend the "little ones" who also are in the kingdom.

The focus in this discourse is on the concept of humility:

- ❑ 18:1-9 Jesus seeks to inspire humility in his disciples
- ❑ 18:10-14 The Father humbles himself to save his children
- ❑ 18:15-20 Disciples must forgive one another – problem of repentance
- ❑ 18:21-35 Parable of unlimited forgiveness

18:1-9 Inspiring Humility

Matthew does not tell us what generates the disciples' question about "greatness in the kingdom." Presumably the nexus of events that have occurred in Peter's confession, Jesus' passion predictions, and the transfiguration experience have stirred some expectation that incredible events are soon to occur. Peter's question in 19:27 "We have left everything to follow you. What then will there be for us?", as well as the request from James and John to sit in the most favoured and influential places in the kingdom

(20:20ff), indicate how powerfully these issues were affecting the thoughts and discourse among Jesus' followers. Although they may not understand exactly what God is about to do in Jesus, they sense that something climactic is imminent.

Jesus takes time to teach them that priorities in the Kingdom and the way that leaders relate to followers have significantly different patterns in contrast to those modeled in the political and religious institutions most familiar to the disciples. Their concepts of 'greatness' have to undergo substantial renovation before they conform to the concept of greatness operating in the Kingdom reality. In the next few chapters Jesus will use various means to define and enforce these Kingdom principles. His own prediction of passion and resurrection serves as a constant foil to these discussions.

For his first lesson, Jesus defines greatness in terms of a little child. Apart from what Jesus' teaching here establishes about the value of children, he certainly challenges the disciples' perceptions of their status. He links entrance into the kingdom with attitudes and behaviour expressed by those claiming to be subjects of the kingdom. Just as he challenged those who claimed to be forgiven by God to then be practicing forgiveness, so here he challenges those who claim to be great in the kingdom to be demonstrating the child-like dependence upon God that they embraced when they initially entered the kingdom. This requires a "turning" or "changing" that demonstrates true repentance. Disciples cannot interpret entrance into the kingdom as a pathway to status and power. Such current categories function as expressions of self-centred ability, ambition, and accidents of birth or fortune. Within the Kingdom, complete dependence upon God, i.e., meekness, forms the essential reality. Jesus had defined this in Matthew 6 – seeking first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness. In his discussion about discipleship in Matthew 16 he had defined this as "denying self, taking up a cross beam and following Jesus." For human beings to embrace this aspect of Kingdom living, indeed to be willing to enter the Kingdom, requires humility. We need to see humility as submission to God and submission to one another – an application of the two great commands. And once a person is in the Kingdom, humility continues to be the operative principle.

We should also note that every disciple can be "the greatest in the kingdom." There is no suggestion of a hierarchy in the kingdom. Every disciple has the potential to be the greatest.

A significant expression of a humble attitude and behaviour requires every child to be treated as if he or she was Jesus himself (v. 5; cf. 25:35-40). I think Jesus equates "little child" with the notion of disciple. Just as it would be blasphemous to try and subvert the righteous activity of the Messiah, seeking to cause him to sin, so God regards it as equally horrendous and sinful to cause "one of these little ones who believe" in Jesus to sin.²⁴³ This description of a disciple is noteworthy. Again, consider how Jesus

²⁴³ How does this relate to Paul's teaching about weak and strong in Romans 14?

deliberately and intentionally places himself centrally in this matter of Kingdom involvement. What does it mean “to believe in Jesus”? Surely it has to do with accepting his claims to be Messiah and Son of God. To act in ways that destroy a person’s confidence in Jesus and lead them to sin brings the strongest condemnation from God. This is the opposite of discipleship that results in saving one’s life.

The woe Jesus announces is severe in vv. 7-9. Jesus acknowledges the sinful contamination that is the earthly reality. Sin is part of our being and doing. However, Jesus is offering us a way to break this cycle and refuse to participate in Satan’s destructive scheme. We can enter life because Jesus has bound the strong man and is plundering his house. We are not doomed to serve Satan. Jesus has used similar language in 5:29-30 in relation to sexual sin. Here, however, the application is far broader – any sinful activity that causes others to sin. Is there a kind of sin that only has personal ramifications or does all sin infect others? The motivation that Jesus uses here is the avoidance of “the eternal fire” that is Gehenna. This is just as much a reality as eternal life.

18:10-14 The Father humbles himself to save his children

Jesus brings forward a second principle – no disciple has the right to despise another disciple. In the kingdom every believer is important to God, even the one who goes astray. The reference to angels is intriguing and probably serves to emphasize the interest and awareness that God has in the lives of each of his people. Perhaps these heavenly spiritual watchers parallel the network of human ‘shepherds’ that God gives to his church to guide and protect his people.

The parable is parallel to that found in Luke 15:3-7, but is applied in a different situation. We have to be careful in the interpretation of this parable lest we assign to God inappropriate attitudes. He has joy over each of his people – there are no favourites with God. If he goes after the wandering sheep, he does not leave the others unprotected or without care. He is God. We should not conclude that sinning and restored believers somehow generate more joy with God and thus find rationale for our sinful behaviour in such a false perception (cf. Romans 6 – sinning that grace might abound). Jesus does emphasize the initiative that God takes to restore and the lengths he will go to enable that to happen. Yet, there is no guarantee. The condition used in v. 13 (third class) may leave open the possibility that God may not find it, i.e., succeed in the restoration. There is human will involved. Finally, Jesus here does not comment on apostasy. Rather, he presumably is recognizing that a human confession of faith may prove false. We might ask how God’s pursuit of the wandering sheep defines humility.

18:15-20 Disciples must forgive one another – problem of repentance

If God is willing to go to such lengths to secure the restoration of a “lost sheep,” then it is incumbent on his assistants also to exercise similar efforts to encourage repentance, forgiveness, and

restoration. Jesus recognizes that sometimes a disciple acts in a sinful way that causes another disciple to be offended. He places the onus on the offended disciple to seek reconciliation.

The sequence of interactions is designed to deal with the problems of sinful behaviour at the lowest level and to keep the issue within the smallest circle. This enables the potential problems of shame and loss of dignity to be managed appropriately. Dealing with a brother in this way may seem awkward in our society, but was normal in Jewish culture and frequently is espoused in the NT. Jesus expects that normally such an action will result in resolution and reconciliation. Is it part of our humble attitude towards one another and our pursuit of greatness in the Kingdom? How does Jesus model this with his disciples?

If there is no repentance, then at some point the entire messianic assembly will need to address the sinful attitude and action of this disciple. If this disciple refuses to listen to the voice of the messianic assembly, then the Messiah gives authority to his assembly to expel the sinful person (cf. 13:40-43, 49-50). This person's attitude reveals that he is not really part of the Kingdom, but is in fact "a pagan and tax collector," spiritually speaking. This person now needs to be evangelized all over again (1 Cor. 5:1-5). He obviously has not entered the Kingdom in the first place (5:43-48).

Jesus affirms that the action of his assembly represents his own action. The Messiah's assembly is capable of discerning and expressing action that Jesus endorses. In 16:19 Jesus had applied this level of discernment to Peter. Now he extends it to the whole assembly. The one whom the entire assembly agrees is not walking in obedience with God is in fact not walking in obedience with God. There is solidarity between Jesus and his people. Jesus assures his followers that through prayer they will be able to discern God's direction and that Jesus works with them towards achieving such discernment. Actions of discipline, following Jesus' guidelines, will have Jesus' endorsement. Binding and loosing plainly in this setting refer to the assemblies' action regarding the sinning disciple. Perhaps this reflects the action advised by Jesus in Matthew 10 when a community or household refuses to accept the gospel or those representing the gospel. Of course, such guidelines can be abused and manipulated by those in power. Note as well that v. 19 relates to decisions taken by the assembly.

18:21-35 Parable of unlimited forgiveness

Again, Peter brings forward an issue that bothers him and seeks Jesus' direction. If the offended believer is to take the initiative, this implies a constant willingness to forgive. Peter wonders whether there are any limits to the number of times a disciple should forgive another. His suggestion of 'seven times' seems generous to him and I am sure to us today. However, Jesus turns the issue in a unique direction. Our willingness to forgive expresses our submission to God and our own acceptance of forgiveness from God. If we are not willing to forgive constantly, then this has more to say about our own

spiritual condition, than about the spiritual condition of the one offending us. Jesus says in essence that our willingness to forgive should be unlimited – seventy times seven. In this he may be reversing Lamech’s declaration about revenge in Genesis 4:24. Jesus urges in the strongest terms a reversal of this pattern of hatred and vengeance. Jesus then offers a parable to Peter to express the logic behind his assertion.

In the parable various elements should be noted:

- ❑ The term “debtor” occurs only elsewhere in 6:12;
- ❑ The term “slave” (*doulos* (δοῦλος)) and his relationship to the human king defines kingdom relations as well;
- ❑ The amount of the debt is beyond imagining. Herod collected 900 talents in 4 BCE in taxes from his kingdom.
- ❑ The ability to pay the debt, while protested by the slave, is ostensibly impossible (v. 26). The king recognizes this and thus forgives the debt;
- ❑ There is no discussion about how such a huge debt was ever incurred;
- ❑ The subsequent action of the slave towards his “fellow slave” (v. 28) is really the focus of the parable. Having received forgiveness and experienced compassion, the slave does not extend it to his peers, despite the relatively small amounts of their debts. He is offended at the debtor and does not offer forgiveness;
- ❑ The action of the slave constitutes him a “wicked slave” (v. 32). The master does not question the legal right of the slave to act as he has done, but does assert that the slave had the moral obligation to demonstrate mercy, having received mercy himself;
- ❑ Jesus’ application in v. 35 reflects the principles Jesus had previously taught in 6:14-15. He shifts to the plural ‘you’, responding to Peter’s question but applying the lesson to all of the disciples who presumably were listening in. A sincere and generous forgiveness is required for greatness in the Kingdom because this demonstrates humility.

The end of the discourse is signaled by the refrain found in 19:1 “and it happened when Jesus finished these words,…”

True Discipleship (Matthew 19-20)

Twinned with Jesus' predictions of his passion are his principles for discipleship in the new Kingdom reality. Matthew commenced this dialectic in 16:21, continued it through the discourse in chapter 18 and now will bring it to conclusion as Jesus enters Jerusalem in 21:1. Jesus has been defining greatness in the Kingdom, i.e., the way of discipleship, in terms of "receiving the least of the brothers," forgiveness, and renouncing claims to self. When sin interferes, the presence of the kingdom becomes blurred or imperceptible. Jesus continues to remind his followers of their accountability to God as human beings and to choose the way of life, i.e., "believing in me." The disciples are struggling to grasp what Jesus is showing them about the kingdom reality, about his messiahship, and about their discipleship.

In chapters 19-20 Matthew continues to develop these three strands. Geographically, Jesus leaves Galilee and proceeds "into the regions of Judea beyond the Jordan," i.e., Perea, probably east of the Jordan, thereby avoiding Samaria. These chapters summarize the much longer segment in Luke 9:51-18:34. Jesus has started his journey to Jerusalem. John's Gospel indicates that Jesus went to Jerusalem various times in his ministry. The Synoptics choose, it seems, to focus on the final journey, simplifying Jesus' mission so that it begins in Galilee and concludes in Jerusalem, the headquarters of Judaism and the location of the Temple. It mirrors a pattern of increasing confrontation, with Jesus becoming more aggressive in his ministry program, by moving into Jerusalem.

As Matthew 19 opens we find Jesus enmeshed in controversy with the religious leaders.

19:1-12	Teaching about Divorce	
19:13-15	Teaching about Children	
19:16-20:16	Teaching about wealth and eternal life:	
	The controversy	19:16-22
	The dialogue with the disciples	19:23-30
	Parable of the Vineyard Workers	20:1-16
20:17-19	Fourth Passion Prediction	
20:20-28	Teaching about Greatness – Question of James and John	
20:29-34	Healing of Two Blind Men	

In the first three instances people come or are brought to Jesus with some concern – Pharisees, parents/children, rich man. Jesus engages them, and out of his comments dialogue proceeds with his disciples (19:10-12; 19:23-30; 20:20-28). The last two episodes also deal with concerns people bring to Jesus – for position and for healing. It is interesting that the controversy about divorce follows immediately upon Jesus' strong presentation about forgiveness among his disciples. A similar order

occurs in Matthew 5 as the need to be reconciled with a brother prior to worship precedes Jesus' discussion about adultery. Is this significant?

19:1-12 Teaching on Divorce

This is the second time Jesus has discussed the issue of divorce and the Kingdom (cf. 5:27-32). In the first instance he had limited the basis for divorce to *porneia* (πορνεία any kind of sexual immorality) and restricted the possibilities for remarriage. In Matthew 19 the Pharisees challenge him on this matter. Perhaps they thought that if John the Baptist was arrested (14:3-12) and executed by Herod Antipas because he publicly criticized his marriage to Herodias, his brother's wife, they might get Jesus into similar trouble and have Herod execute him. If Herod thought that Jesus was "John resurrected," then presumably he would expect some public criticism about his divorce to be expressed by Jesus. Matthew, as Mark, says that they were deliberately 'testing' Jesus (cf. Satan's testing of Jesus in Matthew 4). With the crowd as witnesses, they lay the trap with their question: "Is it lawful for a person to divorce his wife for any reason (*kata pasan aitian κατὰ πᾶσαν αἰτίαν*)?"

There was debate within Judaism about this issue. One school of thought, typified by the famous rabbi, Shammai, interpreted Deuteronomy 24:1 as only allowing divorce based upon sexual infidelity ("anything indecent"). Hillel, conversely, interpreted "anything indecent" as referring to any cause, no matter how trivial it might seem. The initiative lay with the husband. We have to remember that Jesus' response is given to a very precise question and in a situation of controversy. He does not give us a full discourse on every aspect of divorce in this discussion. Further Jesus probably is not interested in details of the Torah per se, but rather how the Torah relates to him and his ministry. He also wants to correct current misunderstandings about God's intent as revealed in the Torah and its application.

Jesus refers them to the Jewish sacred texts found in Genesis describing the creation of human beings. God's intent is discerned in Moses' instruction that "a person will leave father and mother and cleave to his wife and the two shall become one flesh." Jesus here quotes the Septuagint text almost verbatim. God intended his people in marriage to move their allegiance from parents to spouse. Jesus does not define the last part of this statement, but probably he refers to the deepest intimacy between husband and wife. Jesus never explores what this oneness means spiritually. In essence Jesus is arguing that the creation statement gives us God's foundational principle and desire with respect to marriage. This principle is the foundational perspective from which all guidelines for marriage should flow and with which they must be compatible. If this is the case, then a human being should not break apart what God himself has joined together and made one. The fall did not absolve human beings from obeying this injunction. God's intent is that every marriage be permanent.

The Pharisees respond with a reasonable question. If God said that in Genesis, why did God give to Israel through Moses in Deuteronomy 24:1 a different regulation, so that "Moses commanded to

provide a statement of divorce and send her away?” While this section of the Law does not explicitly condone divorce, the fact that it regards divorce as a reality and makes provision for it is viewed as justification for its practice, and opens the door for abuse. Here we have another example of the improper use of scripture to justify breaking the law. Jesus had criticized the Pharisees for this in Matthew 15 and again underscores this problem. Jesus counters their question by affirming again that this was not God’s intent. Rather, it was human sinfulness (*sklērokardia* “hard-heartedness” σκληροκαρδία; this defines Israel’s obduracy in Greek Deuteronomy) that led God to make this provision. It was to be the exception required because of human failure; it was not to be considered the norm. In mercy God makes a way for human beings to deal with sinful actions and still to enjoy a meaningful life. Between these two statements in Genesis and Deuteronomy, the fall had occurred.

Jesus provides his Kingdom principle, in contrast to what Moses had allowed. As in the antitheses in Matthew 5 so here, Jesus speaks out of his own authority. He repeats what in essence he had taught in Matthew 5: “Whoever sends away his wife except for marital infidelity (*epi porneiai ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ*) and marries another, commits adultery.” Many pastoral questions swirl around the issues of divorce and remarriage (cf. Blomberg, 292-293). The present tense might mean “commits adultery.” If divorce becomes the only solution, then both parties have to confess failure before God and deal with that sinfulness as with any other sinfulness.

The response of the disciples to Jesus’ conclusion is dramatic. He is stricter than Shammai, so they conclude “it is not advantageous/beneficial to marry.” Do they speak more than they know? Jesus agrees that their conclusion is “hard to grasp.”²⁴⁴ “This message” probably refers to what the disciples have just said. He affirms their conclusion. God has designed celibacy for some, but not for all. To be celibate “for the sake of the kingdom” is a noble thing, even though such people could get married. Cf. Paul’s discussion of marriage and celibacy in 1 Cor. 7. Righteousness in the kingdom is more demanding than the Pharisees define. This is why forgiveness and reconciliation need to be practiced more often and more explicitly as Kingdom principles, even in the case of marriage. Perhaps Jesus is arguing that if divorce is necessary, for the sake of kingdom a person could choose not to remarry and avoid any hint of sinfulness, i.e., remain a eunuch. Forgiveness is always an option and perhaps the preferred path.

19:13-15 Teaching About Children

This short segment records the action, presumably of parents, in bringing their children to Jesus. They want him to “place hands on them and pray for them.” Such an action would be followed to seek God’s blessing for them. The word *paidia* (παῖδια) can refer to children of various ages. His disciples seek to prevent this from occurring, but their motivation is not defined. Did they think this was a

²⁴⁴ Perhaps there is a play on words between *chorizo* (19:6 χωρίζω separate) and *chōreō* (19:11 χωρέω grasp). Cf. 13:11.

distraction for Jesus or in some way unsuitable for the Messiah to do? Whatever the reason, it demonstrates their lack of concern for the vulnerable and powerless. If they cannot respond positively to literal ‘children’, how will they respond appropriately to “the little ones” (chapter 18), i.e., novice disciples, showing repentance and humility? Here they fail the test of discipleship as Jesus has defined it.

What is Jesus teaching about the Kingdom here? Jesus wants the children to come to him. Why? Probably because it is a visible demonstration of the way that all people should come to God for salvation and also demonstrates his humbleness. “People such as these” possess the Kingdom! Jesus is not saying that all children automatically are part of the kingdom. Rather he is arguing that kingdom involvement requires a child-like dependence upon God. If his disciples do not know how to value and welcome such children into the Kingdom, how do they demonstrate their own entrance into the kingdom with childlike faith? Perhaps this is akin to the statements Jesus has been making about the need to demonstrate forgiveness in order to show that one has received forgiveness.²⁴⁵

19:16-20:16 Teaching About Wealth and Eternal Life

Jesus’ teaching about the relationship between wealth and spiritual status causes considerable debate among the disciples. Matthew takes considerable space in his Gospel to respond to these issues. It suggests that these issues were of particular import to him and/or his audience. The interaction between the rich man and Jesus is followed by the dialogue with his disciples. Matthew includes the parable of the vineyard workers which occurs between the repeated principle “the first shall be last and the last first” (19:30; 20:16 Jesus reverses the order in 20:16).

Matthew reports Jesus’ encounter with “one” drawing near to him (v. 16). Not until v. 22 does Matthew reveal that this man “was possessing many properties.” In v. 20 Matthew describes him as *veaniskos* (νεανίσκος, young (20-40)). His question is clear – “what good thing should I do in order to possess eternal life?” (v. 16) Only here and in v. 29 does Matthew use the expression “eternal life,” although he had talked about life as a goal several times (cf. 18:8-9). The disciples in v. 25 seem to equate this with being ‘saved’.

A textual difficulty occurs in Jesus’ answer. Mark in his account has Jesus challenge the man’s statement that Jesus is ‘good’. Some texts in Matthew have a similar reading, but there is another reading that indicates the man asks Jesus to name the good thing he must do to possess eternal life. It is hard to know exactly what Jesus said. The logic seems to be that “God alone is good” or “The Good Person is One” (a variation of the Shema in Deut. 6:4) and so God alone knows what good thing a person needs to do in order to have an eternal relationship with God. If he is asking Jesus about this, then what is he

²⁴⁵ Personally, I see no connection here with the issue of baptism, contrary to what many commentators’ claim. Rather, the wording takes me back to Matthew 18 and Jesus’ statements about disciples = children.

assuming about Jesus' connection with God? In other words the question he asks makes him appear like a disciple of Jesus, but Jesus wants to know really what is in his heart and what he understands.

The man responds to Jesus' question (v. 18) by asking "which ones?" Is this a genuine question or a smoke screen? Was he looking for an easier standard of righteousness than the Pharisees proposed? Or had Jesus' teaching regarding the Pharisees' understanding about the commands created confusion in his mind? Jesus' formula seems to be a surprise – "keep the commands." This would be the standard answer any Jewish Rabbi would give. Matthew does not have the Markan addition "do not defraud" and adds the second great commandment "love your neighbour" from Lev. 19:18, perhaps substituting this for the command not to covet. The man's response seems surprising to us: "I have kept all these. What am I still lacking?" If he has kept these commands, and this is what Jesus says is the way to gain eternal life, then why does he sense he is lacking anything? Is this man being spiritually challenged by Jesus' kingdom teaching and wanting to make sure he will participate in whatever God is doing?

According to Jesus, if this person desires to be complete (cf. 5:48; 6:20) and possess "treasure in heaven" (cf. Matt. 6:18ff), then he needs to get rid of what he has now (lose his life), give it to the poor (use it for God's glory), and follow Jesus. If he does this then he will possess "treasure in heaven," i.e., eternal life (cf. 5:3-6). Selling his property and giving the proceeds to the poor will have no meaning, if he does not follow Jesus (1 Cor. 13:3). The cost is immense, but the reward is greater – he will save his life only by losing it (cf. parables about the pearl and the hid treasure in 13:44-46). The man "hears the word," but it does not take root (13:22). He is terribly upset because of his wealth. We do not know whether he ever becomes a follower of Jesus.

When the man leaves, Jesus makes an observation to his disciples that triggers a significant dialogue (vv. 23- 20:16). "A rich person with difficulty will enter into the kingdom of heaven." Prefacing it with 'amen' makes it a very solemn pronouncement. In chapter 18 Jesus has told them that people must become like a little child in order to enter the Kingdom, i.e., declare their dependence upon God for salvation and life. He suggests that wealthy people have difficulty doing this because they become very self-sufficient. It is hard to "renounce self" and give the priority to God when wealth generates self-sufficiency, power and prestige. In chapter 13 the parable of the soils had listed "the deceitfulness of wealth" as one of the elements in this world that choke the seed of the gospel, preventing it from flourishing and bearing fruit. In his instructions to his disciples in chapter 10 he commanded them not to take money for their mission, but rather to exercise faith in God's provision. The hyperbole Jesus gives in the next verse poetically repeats what he said in v. 23, but emphasizes the problems that wealth creates for Kingdom participation. Treasure on earth gets in the way of establishing treasure in heaven. Mammon is a great idol.

Note here that Matthew uses both Kingdom of Heaven (v. 23) and Kingdom of God (v. 24) apparently without distinction. Or if there is a distinction, Jesus wants to leave no impression that one can enter the one without entering the other.

There is another side to this that must be considered. Jewish theology taught that wealth was a sign of God's blessing. When we read the stories of the patriarchs in the OT, we discover that their obedience often leads to great wealth and prestige. After Job is tested, God blesses him with immense wealth. When this wealthy person came to Jesus and inquired what good thing he should do to possess eternal life, I am sure he expected a different answer than he received. This common theological assumption gives rise to the disciples' consternation expressed in v. 25 – "Who then is able to be saved?" If the wealthy, those who are the object of God's blessing, cannot make it into the Kingdom, then no one stands a chance! But Jesus insists that his observation is correct. No correlation exists between wealth and righteousness. Regardless of a person's wealth or other status, salvation cannot be gained by human effort. Only God can create the salvation, i.e., entrance into the kingdom that human beings need. This in fact is what he is doing in and through Jesus, despite its unusual character and fashion.

Peter again engages Jesus. Perhaps he has been reflecting on Jesus' teaching about discipleship in chapter 16, where he said that a person who desires to be a disciple must renounce self, take up his cross and follow Jesus. As well, Jesus has taught that establishing treasure in heaven is our priority. "Look, we have abandoned everything and followed you. What then shall we have?" We have done what you have taught, Peter declares, so tell us what our treasure or reward will be. Blomberg wonders whether they are bothered by the rich man's question and ask Jesus in essence whether they need to do anything more to ensure their participation in the kingdom.²⁴⁶ Peter comes close to expressing what Jesus had condemned in chapter 6 – giving alms, praying or fasting in order to be considered very religious by other people – such already have their reward and God will give nothing more. How do Jesus' statements in the Beatitudes relate to these principles?

Jesus, using his solemn formula 'amen', quickly assures them that they will participate with him in the Kingdom. He prophesies about the second coming of the Son of Man, when he comes in his glory and sits on his throne, at the restoration of everything (*paliggenesia παλιγγενεσία*), probably the new heaven and new earth (2 Peter 3:10-13- Rev. 21-22). The Twelve will judge the twelve tribes of Israel. Again, the theme of judgment is emphasized. Jesus links the Son of Man and the throne with Daniel 7:13. There may also be reference to Psalm 110:1 – "sit at my right hand." Presumably the throne is a seat of power and judgment. Consider 25:31 where the Son of Man separates the sheep and the goats, which includes all nations, not just Israel. Remember also the words of Jesus in 11:27, that "all things have been

²⁴⁶ Blomberg, 300.

handed over to him by the Father.” Here again we see a different sense of the Messiah concept because in Jewish writings, other than Qumran materials, the Messiah does not fill this role. John the Baptist hints at this already in 3:11. In some sense the choice of the Twelve represented God’s desire to reconstitute Israel so their function in judging the ethnic Israel is appropriate.

The concept of “renewal of all things” (*paliggensia*) is found in the Greco-Roman world, particularly in Stoic philosophy. Some Stoic philosophers taught that the universe was destroyed by fire in periodic cycles and then renewed. They used the term *paliggensia* (*παλιγγενεσία*) to describe this radical change. Philo uses this term to describe the destruction and renewal that occurred during the judgment of the Flood (*Moses* 2.65). In some Christian texts we also see a connection between the flood period and the final judgment (2 Peter 3:5-7). Jesus hints at this kind of cosmic renewal in 5:18 and 24:35, where he describes the passing away of the current world. What does the use of such a word within Jesus’ teaching (at least as Matthew represents it) say about the nature of Jesus’ language (Greek or Aramaic) or his awareness of current concepts used in pagan philosophy? Or had this terminology been absorbed into Jewish-Hellenistic discussions already, as Philo’s writings might suggest?

Jesus addresses specifically the sacrifice that the disciples have made – leaving households, brothers, sisters, father, mother, children or fields (cf. Matthew 10:37) – “for the sake of Jesus’ name.” They have done this in order to follow Jesus and honour his claims. They will receive a blessing that is a 100x greater, as well as inheriting eternal life. There will be an eternal family and dwelling whose capacity far exceeds anything they currently have experienced. Matthew does not have the reference to “this age” or the reference to persecution. Perhaps he thinks the previous sayings of Jesus have already emphasized this sufficiently.

Finally, Jesus gives the principle of reversal. Those who in this life seem to have first place because of wealth, or prestige or family, will in fact end up last, i.e., judged by God and excluded from Kingdom blessing. The last will be first. The parable that follows (20:1-16) provides further commentary on what this statement means.

The parable of the vineyard workers is one of the most elaborate and developed parables that Jesus told. If we presume that the more significant parables were given to emphasize the more important elements of his teaching, then Jesus must have considered this principle of reversal to be one of the key points in his message. In addition, there is no interpretation offered. He regards the sense of the parable to be abundantly clear. All he says to aid our understanding is given in v. 16 – “Thus shall the last be first and the first last.”

Jesus offers this parable in the context of the discussion of rewards when the Son of Man returns in the glory of his kingdom. The message of the parable would then comment on some aspect of this in his discussion with his disciples that continues from chapter 19. Since the key point of the parable seems

to be the will of the landowner to treat each worker equally, no matter how much time they spent labouring in his harvest, presumably Jesus wants his disciples to learn that all those in the Kingdom of God will be rewarded and blessed equally by God. Grace is no respecter of persons. **All can be great in the Kingdom.** The little one is the greatest. Jesus attacks the disciples' preoccupation with greatness and rewards. Essentially he says it is not important. What is critical is their ability to rejoice in God's provision of salvation. There is work for all in the Kingdom, whoever will join the harvest. Whomever God invites and whoever responds, God will reward equally. There are no favourites.

The structure of the parable emphasizes the foundational truth Jesus is teaching. When the labourers are paid, the manager begins with the 'last ones' hired and pays them a denarius, and then works through every group until he arrives at the 'first ones' hired. God is just and treats all his children justly. To think otherwise is to perceive God through an 'evil', perhaps diseased, eye.

In this section we have seen Jesus address issues related to married women and little children, groups that traditionally had little power in Palestine. He emphasizes God's desire through creation ordinances and through the actions of Jesus for these to be treated justly, particularly as they may enter the Kingdom. Human wealth or prestige will not compel God to treat some people in the Kingdom more generously than others. In the end all of us in the Kingdom are recipients of God's rich grace and that should suffice. Even children and women can be great in the Kingdom.

20:17-19 Fourth Passion Prediction (cf. 17:22-23; 17:9-13; 16:21)

Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem at this point. Matthew is quite specific. "In the way" he privately makes another passion prediction. The Son of Man is central again. The chief priests and scribes are identified as the ones who orchestrate the arrest and sentence of death. The nations (gentiles) are the ones who actually "mock, scourge and crucify him." But he will be raised to life – by God. Each of these elements is fulfilled in 27:27-50 and follows normal Roman procedure for execution. The Romans did not give the Jews the right to execute criminals. Things are reaching a climax. In a matter of weeks all these events will have occurred. Jesus for the first time reveals how he will die in Jerusalem, by crucifixion.

20:20-28 Teaching About Greatness – Question of James and John

In 19:28 Jesus had said that the twelve would sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. Probably the mother of James and John was not part of that conversation. If this premise is correct, then James and John probably prompted their mother to make this request of Jesus. Note that Jesus shifts to the second person plural in his response (v. 22) and addresses James and John directly, although their mother asks the question. The request is for James and John to occupy the thrones nearest that of the Son of Man, presumably the thrones that would have the most significance, prestige and power.

Jesus' response again focuses upon the cost the Son of Man pays before regaining his heavenly throne – drinking the cup. In the OT the 'cup' was a metaphor for suffering, often caused by God's wrath (Psalm 75:8; Isaiah 51:17). Jesus asks whether they are prepared to sustain the same kind of suffering in order to occupy these places. Their quick response (v. 22) leads us to wonder whether they truly understand what Jesus is talking about, even though he has just predicted what this 'cup' will entail – a true taking up of the cross. They respond positively to Jesus' question, perhaps thinking that they are willing to make some sacrifices to achieve these positions of glory. Jesus affirms that they will experience suffering as his disciples, but then denies their request because it is beyond his jurisdiction. His Father makes all such decisions. Blomberg²⁴⁷ wonders whether Jesus acknowledges the Father's authority because in fact there are no places of distinction in the kingdom, as the parable of the vineyard workers has just indicated.

It is no struggle to understand the angry response of the ten disciples when they discover what James and John were doing. Jesus addresses the entire group once again about this issue of "becoming great" and "being first," the two key questions that he has been discussing since chapter 18. However, his words in vv. 25-28 must surely be climactic and somewhat final on this subject. Jesus first rejects the models of earthly kingship and governance as the ways that define greatness in his Kingdom. He uses two terms – *diakonos* (διάκονος assistant, servant), *doulos* (δούλος slave) to define the attitudes and responses that define greatness in his Kingdom. The desire to be first will demonstrate itself in the humble attitude of the serving agent and slave. We go back to chapter 18 where greatness is defined in terms of "receiving the child as Jesus himself." Jesus is Lord and we serve our Lord as we serve one another.

It is perhaps also the case that the community has a role to play in determining the great one and the first one. They know who serves and humbly works as slave for their benefit. Discipleship is not a game of one-upmanship, but rather a matter of loving service for the good of the other.

Jesus concludes by using the Son of Man as the ultimate example. The nature of the Son of Man's service is defined by his willingness "to give his life," i.e., to die. His service is both to God, his Father, and to humans. In this he demonstrates his fulfillment of the two great commands. The ransom (*lutron* (λύτρον)) is the price paid for a slave's freedom. Jesus says the Son of Man dies for slaves, to gain their freedom. Those in the Kingdom who would follow Jesus, similarly will give their lives for the benefit of slaves, fellow slaves of God, and those who are still enslaved by Satan.

This is the language of sacrifice – as the Son of Man declares that he will pay the price, acting as our substitute and paying the price by his vicarious death on our behalf and in our place. "The many" would be those who seek forgiveness from God and entrance into the Kingdom on the basis of the

²⁴⁷ Blomberg, 307.

Messiah's actions – death and resurrection. This statement seems to reflect the language of Isaiah 53:10-12. We do know from texts such as 4 Maccabees 6:27-29 that the idea of ransom through sacrifice for the good of others was known in Judaism in the middle of the first century. However, this is for Jewish people, not Gentiles. Jesus here provides some rationale and interpretative framework for his passion, death and resurrection. Further reflection will be provided in 26:26-28.

20:29-34 Healing of Two Blind Men

This segment ends with a request for healing from two blind men outside Jericho, a request that Jesus responds to positively. Matthew notes two men, whereas Mark only notes one and names him Bartimaeus. Matthew uses similar language found in the previous healing of a blind person in 9:27-31 – the plea for mercy and the use of the title “Son of David.” The blind refuse to be cowed by the rebukes for silence from the crowd, who prevent these “little ones” from gaining access to Jesus. Presumably the crowds see them as interfering in Jesus' progression to Jerusalem. The fact that Jesus stops to respond to their need again shows the contrast between the crowds desire to participate in some great event and receive the benefit of that and Jesus' focus on being a servant to people in need, the little ones, and sharing the wonder of the Kingdom reality with those who need it most. There may be an intentional parallel between the request made by James and John and the request made by the two blind men. Why does Jesus reject the one and respond to the other? When they are healed, the men join the crowd following Jesus on his way to Jerusalem.

Jesus in Jerusalem - the First Part of the Week -- Controversy **(Matthew 21-22)**

Jesus has arrived at Jerusalem (21:1-2). In these chapters, Matthew locates Jesus in the temple and once Jesus has made his essential pronouncement about the temple (21:12-13), he engages in a series of controversies with various religious groups -- chief priests and elders, Pharisees, and Sadducees. Matthew includes many parables that Jesus taught in these contexts, but most of them are not related in Mark or Luke. The central issue continues to be the authority of Jesus. He challenges the religious leaders to accept what God is doing through him, otherwise they will be crushed by the stone that God has declared to be chosen and precious. The litany of woes Jesus pronounces in chapter 23 end these controversies on an ominous note. The action becomes intense and fast-paced, as Jesus debates one issue after the other. Every conceivable strategy is employed by the religious leaders to discredit Jesus, but none succeed. At the end "no one dared ask him any more questions" (22:46).

Given everything that Jesus has done and taught in Galilee and the way the religious leaders from Jerusalem have challenged him in that region, we would expect his entrance into Jerusalem to arouse interest and celebratory anticipation. His reception is quite exciting. The crowds continue to be attracted to him. In the temple (21:14) he heals the blind and the lame as he has in Galilee, but apart from the cursing of the fig tree, there is no explicit miracle narrative in this section.

The various segments in this part of Matthew include:

- 21:1-17 The entrance into Jerusalem and Critique of the temple.
- 21:18-46 - 22:1-14 First series of controversies and parables
- 22:15-22 Pharisees and Herodians - Conspiracy and Question
- 22:23-33 Sadducees test Jesus about the Resurrection
- 22:34-40 Pharisees test Jesus about the Law
- 22:41-46 Jesus Questions the Pharisees about the Son of David
- 23:1-36 Jesus denounces the Religious Leaders
- 23:37-39 Jesus' Lament for Jerusalem.

This section contains Jesus' sharpest and most extensive warnings about impending judgment, including the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. It will be followed in chapters 24-25 with a more detailed outline of how this will occur.

21:1-17 The Entrance into Jerusalem and Critique of the Temple

We will not discern the significance of Jesus' actions as he enters Jerusalem and makes announcement about the temple, if we do not estimate correctly how significant these places and institutions were for Judaism. As Messiah Jesus comes to the centre of the Jewish religious society that

should be embracing him, what begins with joy and excitement soon turns to lament and woe. Jesus sets the stage for his entrance. When he comes to Bethphage (1) and Bethany (17), small villages at the eastern entrance to Jerusalem, perhaps on the slopes of the Mount of Olives, he sends two disciples to locate a donkey and its foal as a beast on which he might ride into Jerusalem. These details are important because they coincide with the prophecy given in Zechariah 9:9. How Jesus made these arrangements remains a mystery. He regards himself as their owner (v. 3 "Their owner has need of them"), but in what sense he is their owner is never explained. Does he really own them as another Jewish person would own such animals? Or does he own them in the sense that he is God, their creator, and has the right to their use? Or is he their 'master' because he is the King of the Jews, and as the Jewish king had a claim to use people and animals to carry forward the plans of God for Israel? Regardless, the two disciples go obediently, discover everything is there as Jesus had commanded them, and return with the donkey and its foal. It shows again that Jesus is in charge. He is coming to Jerusalem on his terms.

The quotation in 21:5 could be a conflation of material from Isaiah 62:11,²⁴⁸ which corresponds to 5a and Zechariah 9:9, which corresponds to 5b. What Matthew shows as fulfillment is the approach to Jerusalem, Jesus' royal stature (son of David), the humble approach he makes, and the use of a donkey for his mount. In later, post-NT rabbinic literature, Zechariah 9:9 was interpreted messianically. We have no evidence, as far as I know that it was understood this way prior to Jesus. If Zechariah is the source of Matthew's material, then he omits the middle section of v. 9 which describes this figure as "righteous and having salvation." Why would he omit this? Is it because for Jerusalem Jesus does not bring salvation but judgment?

A huge crowd gathers and as Jesus proceeds, they spread their garments before the animal on the road or cut tree branches (whether Palm trees or not is not expressed in Matthew) to pave the way. Plainly these are actions that honour the person of Jesus. They crowd around him shouting their acclaim and giving voice to their hopes. They address Jesus in messianic, royal terms - son of David, a person authorized by God. The term "Hosanna" means "Yahweh, save us." Its form seems to be Aramaic, not Hebrew. As used here it seems to reflect a form of greeting and as applied to the Son of David would express their desire for his purposes to have success. Presumably as he succeeds, they would benefit. Psalm 118:25-26 is probably the biblical basis for their cries of praise. This Psalm was sung by pilgrims preparing to celebrate a festival in Jerusalem and the temple, particularly those of Passover, and Tabernacles. The reference to "one who comes" could pick up John the Baptist's question in 11:1-3 and

²⁴⁸ Isa.62:11 α εἶπατε τῇ θυγατρὶ Σιών, ἰδοὺ σοὶ ὁ σωτὴρ παργίνεται ἔχων τὸν ἑαυτοῦ μισθόν; "say to daughter Sion, 'See, your Savior comes to you having his own reward'" (NETS). Zech. 9:9 χαῖρε σφόδρα, θύγατερ Σιών· κήρυσσε, θύγατερ Ἰερουσαλήμ· ἰδοὺ ὁ βασιλεὺς σου ἔρχεται σοι, δίκαιος καὶ σφῶζων αὐτός, πραῦς καὶ ἐπιβεβηκὼς ἐπὶ ὑπόζυγιον καὶ πῶλον νέον; "Rejoice greatly, O daughter Sion! Proclaim, O daughter Ierousalem! Behold, your king comes to you, just and salvific is he, meek and riding on a beast of burden and a young foal" (NETS).

his prophecy in 3:11. Whether this term had specific messianic overtones prior to the time of Jesus again is uncertain. Matthew's description of the impact of Jesus' entry is quite emphatic - the whole city was in a commotion. No wonder the religious leaders were concerned about what this all might mean and were afraid to arrest him as they wished (v. 46). The crowd's explanation of Jesus' status (v. 11) conforms to what Matthew has reported in Matthew 16 - "Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee." But they are explicit – he is not Messiah in their view.

In Matthew's account Jesus proceeds the same day to the temple and enters its precinct. He acts to expel the buyers and sellers in the temple and to disrupt the currency exchange and sale of doves. Why does he attack the buyers, as well as the sellers? Are they both responsible for the temple's misuse? These activities were established to enable pilgrims to acquire Tyrian shekels, the currency required to pay the temple tax, and to purchase animals for sacrifice that had already been declared 'unblemished'. With Passover imminent, the extent of the activity was probably at one of its most hectic in the annual cycle. It is possible that the profits being made through such religious commerce were exorbitant and this may partially have triggered Jesus' reaction.

Why did Jesus do this provocative action? Zechariah 14:21 prophesies that one day 'merchants' would be removed from the temple. Jesus himself quotes from Isaiah 56:7 affirming that the purpose of the temple was to encourage and enable all nations to have a relationship with God, but, quoting from Jeremiah 7:11, he charges that the religious leaders had turned the temple into a "cave of robbers" (Matthew 21:13). Debate is divided whether the term *lēistēs* (ληστής) means robber or has more the sense of insurrectionist, as it signifies in 26:55; 27:38, 44. If the former, Jesus is accusing the religious establishment of turning the temple into a crooked and fraudulent operation. If the latter, he is accusing them of turning the temple into a nationalist stronghold that prevents Israel from being a light to the nations, as God intended. Either way, they are not meeting the needs of the ruined and harassed sheep of Israel or fulfilling their mission.

As well, there is debate as to whether Jesus intended to cleanse, purify and restore the temple to its proper order and function, or whether, by this action, he was prophetically announcing its failure and the judgment of God that would lead to its destruction. It may be that he intended the former, hoping still that Israel might repent, but with his crucifixion imminent and as the cursing of the fig tree the next day symbolizes, the judgment will come if there is no repentance. This judgment will include the destruction of the temple.

Jesus welcomes the blind and the lame, healing them and restoring them in the temple (cf. Acts 3-4). It is possible that such people were prevented from entering the sacred precinct because they were regarded as ritually impure. Matthew describes these as "the wonderful things he did." (*thaumasia*

θαυμάσια). This term is only found here in the NT, but often occurs in the LXX to describe God's actions. Deuteronomy 34:12, the final verse of the Pentateuch, is a good example - "the marvellous things... that he did." The children also know more than they realize, as they acclaim "Hosanna to the Son of David." As Jesus has said earlier, God has revealed his wisdom to children and hidden it from the wise. Just as Jesus' disciples sought to prevent the children from coming to Jesus, so too do the religious leaders demand that Jesus silence these children. Again, Jesus quotes from the Old Testament, Psalm 8:3 (LXX version). There may be a connection between Psalm 8:3 and the Exodus song of Moses (15:2). Also, Psalm 118:14 is identical to Exodus 15:2 and this is the Psalm the children's words are taken from. (Cf. Wisdom 10:2 where the writer says that singing of hymns after the Exodus occurred - "wisdom... made the tongue of infants speak clearly.") Jesus claims their worship is appropriate, just as their worship of God is appropriate.

21:18-46 - 22:1-14 First series of controversies and parables

Jesus returned the next morning to the temple. On the way, hungry after the long night, he seeks fruit from a fig tree. Finding none, he curses it. Matthew records that "immediately the tree withered" (21:19). Matthew has a much shorter version than Mark, who situates the action in the temple between the cursing of the fig tree and its withering, one of his numerous narrative "sandwiches." Whether Matthew "improves the style," as Blomberg contends²⁴⁹, I am not sure. Matthew simplifies it and makes the action move more quickly as the withering happens immediately. However, the connection with the temple is not portrayed as clearly or graphically. There are only two destructive miracles done by Jesus, according to the Gospel accounts - this one and that of the drowning of the swine. So it is unusual in its content. It is also the only specific miracle story in Jerusalem that Matthew narrates, apart from the resurrection (although Matthew tells us that Jesus has healed the blind and lame in the temple).

Discussion has occurred about what kind of fruit Jesus might have expected since fig fruit normally appear before the leaves. However, there is considerable evidence that not fully-ripened figs would still be present on a fig tree in this condition and would be edible. When the disciples observe the effect of Jesus' curse, they are astonished and wonder "how the fig tree withered so quickly?" Jesus assures them that if their faith is sufficient, they too can accomplish such things as "casting the Mount of Olives into the sea." What does Jesus mean? Is he teaching that his disciples by faith and prayer can bring forward God's judgment? If there is a reference to Zechariah 14:4 where the mountain is split and each section moves apart, opening up a way of escape, perhaps the prayer of faith that Jesus urges as possible

²⁴⁹ Blomberg, 317.

for his followers relates to the return of the Son of Man. As they proclaim the gospel of the Kingdom, they prepare for his return and the presentation of the way of salvation for human beings.

However, Jesus may also be assuring them that the destruction of the temple does not mean that prayer no longer is possible. In fact God will hear and respond to the prayer of faith wherever a believer may be (cf. Solomon's prayer at the dedication of his temple in 1 Kings 8). No temple is required for the worship of God.

As Jesus enters the temple court, the authorities demand that he reveal the authority that gives him the right to do the things he is doing (v. 23). Behind their question lies their serious intent of seeking his arrest. If he says that he is acting by God's authority, they could declare him to be a blasphemer and arrest him. The entire scope of Matthew's narrative has been designed to give us as readers the answer to this question - his authority comes from God. In response Jesus poses his own question to them. He challenges them to declare the nature of John's authority - from heaven or from men. Jesus plays the game at their level. As Matthew records their private discussion, he also notes their indictment. When they refuse to answer, Jesus similarly refuses to respond to their question. They know the answer to Jesus' question, but refuse to give it because they know it implicates their recognition of Jesus as divinely empowered.

Jesus then responds further by offering a series of three parables, all addressed to the religious leaders. He answers the question of authority in these parables. V. 45 indicates the chief priests and the Pharisees are the primary audience and they know these parables are directed towards them.

The first parable tells the story of a farmer and his two sons²⁵⁰ - this triad is common in Jesus' parables. One son, at the command of his father, agrees to work in the vineyard, but in fact never does. The other son, hearing the same command, says he will not, but then repents and in fact spends the day working. Jesus asks them - which son obeyed and of course they must respond by saying - the one who in fact ended up working in the vineyard. Jesus applies this parable to their recent response to his question about John the Baptist. The tax collectors and prostitutes are preceding these religious leaders into the Kingdom of God (v. 31) because they have responded to John's "way of righteousness" but the religious leaders have not. And even when the religious leaders saw the impact of John's ministry, they still had no concern to believe him. So the religious leaders are like the son who says he will obey, but does not. God commands all people to respond to his message, but not all do, regardless of how they posture themselves. God looks at performance, not protestations of loyalty. Consider again 7:15ff - many will claim relationship to Jesus as Lord, but he will disavow them because they have not done the will of God. Jesus points out their essential hypocrisy.

²⁵⁰ In the OT patriarchal figures have two sons -- Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau.

The second parable again, that of the wicked tenants, also describes workers who have failed to keep their commitments. This parable takes things to another level in that it forecasts that the owner of the vineyard will remove the wicked tenants and give the vineyard to another group entirely.

In the OT Israel is often symbolized by a vineyard, cf. Isaiah 5:1-7. Here in Matthew Jesus has the owner plant a vineyard and nurture it. When he leaves, he puts tenants in charge. He expects to reap the benefits at harvest time. So he sends his slaves to collect the profits. The response of the tenants is quite unexpected and extraordinary. They mistreat them and kill some of them (the reality of persecution). The result is that the owner receives no payment and the tenants are emboldened to seize the land. Hoping they will respect his son, the owner sends his heir. The tenants kill him, mistakenly thinking that this will give them ownership of the vineyard. Perhaps they think that if the son has come, the owner must be dead. At the end Jesus asks his audience what they think the owner will do to these tenants when he shows up? They know what would happen - the wicked people would be destroyed in a wretched way and the vineyard rented to new tenants who would render the appropriate profits to the owner.

Although Jesus agrees with their response, he knows they do not understand the significance of this story. So he quotes from Psalm 118:22-23. He applies this story of the stone to himself. He is the "stone the builders rejected and he has become the head of the corner." While rejection has been occurring through various statements and actions in Matthew's narrative, this is the only time the verb *apedokimasan* (ἀπεδοκίμασαν "they rejected") occurs in Matthew's Gospel. There is a play on words in Aramaic (not Greek) between stone (eben) and son (ben). If the religious leaders do reject Jesus, this does not disqualify him as Messiah. God will vindicate him completely. If he does, they can be assured that "the Lord (Yahweh) has done this" and should regard it as God's miraculous work. The early church used Psalm 118:22-23 as an important text to explain Israel's response to the messianic role of Jesus (Acts 4:11; 1 Peter 2:7).

Jesus concludes that God will remove the kingdom "from you", i.e., the Jewish religious leaders who have abused their leadership, and give it "to a people who will produce its fruits" (v.43). Jesus probably here refers to his disciples who form his messianic community. This 'ethnos' will include both Jews and Gentiles, as Jesus' ministry has already indicated. The people of God are being reconstituted and Jesus still holds open to these leaders the opportunity to participate.

The parable expresses the patient, but persistent manner of God in seeking to involve Israel in his work. Yet, the reality is that God's patience will end, if Israel does not repent and respond, and when he does those who oppose him will be destroyed. However, God will accomplish his work,

through new leaders if necessary. God's son Jesus soon will be killed and this event will trigger a judgment upon the current Jewish leadership who have rejected him.

He concludes with a serious word of judgment, using the image of the stone – *lithoi* (λίθοι). Some argue that v. 44 is borrowed from Luke 20:18 because some textual witnesses (primarily among the so-called Western Text -- D, 33, Old Latin translation manuscripts) omit it here in Matthew. However, the major manuscripts all have it so it is hard to demonstrate that it was not original to Matthew. It also coincides with the theme of judgment that he has been developing consistently within his narrative. The action of "falling against the stone" compares to stumbling, normally rendered in Matthew by the verb *skandalizomai* (σκανδαλίζομαι). Jesus warns the religious leaders through this imagery because they are rejecting Jesus and taking offense at his words and actions. Here Jesus says that those who actively oppose him "will be broken in pieces." The stone is not going to be removed. The second element has the image of a stone falling from some height upon a person and crushing or flattening him. Here the idea is of a person caught unaware, yet fatally harmed. Perhaps, as Blomberg suggests²⁵¹, it defines the person who is not actively opposing Jesus, but still has not responded to his message. There are probably allusions here to Isa. 8:14-15 and Dan. 2:34-35.

The response of the religious leaders reminds us of Jesus' words in Matthew 13 - those who hear, but do not understand. Matthew tells us "they knew that he was speaking concerning them," but instead of taking his message to heart, they intensify their efforts to destroy him. Only their fear of the crowd's reaction to his arrest restrains them. Again, the public's perception that "he is a prophet" dominates. Through this parable Jesus in fact has answered their question about the source of his authority - "this has happened from the Lord," but they are not willing to accept this.

The third parable in this series (22:1-14) again is addressed "to them," i.e., the chief priests and the Pharisees (22:1). Note that Matthew says "he spoke in parables" plural, but only one is recorded. Jesus tells the story of a king who prepared a wedding feast for his son and sends messengers to tell his invited guests that all is ready. "Those called/invited," however, refuse to respond and ignore the information. The king sends a second message, more urgent and more detailed outlining the excellent nature of the banquet, but some ignore it and continue with their own business and the rest actively resist, mistreat and kill the messengers. Jesus says that "the King became very angry and sends his army to destroy the murderers and burn their city" (v. 7). The verb used here *eneprēsen* (ἐνέπρησεν "he burned") only occurs here in the NT, but in the LXX is used to describe the burning of a city and in particular the burning of Jerusalem by the Babylonians (2 Ki. 25:9; 2 Chron. 36:19).

²⁵¹ Blomberg, 325.

The banquet remains ready and so a third time the king sends out his messengers with a new invitation. However, he tells them "those who had been invited were not worthy," so invite anyone you find. Those who respond, both good and bad, fill the wedding feast. The first have become last and the last first.

The parable takes a twist as the king discovers someone in the banquet "who was not wearing wedding clothes" (v. 11). When the man cannot explain how he got in without the appropriate garment, the king orders him bound and "thrown into the outer darkness, there where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth." His lack of clothing shows a lack of care and respect for the king. Without any excuse the man is excluded from the feast and left in eternal judgment. Jesus has used similar imagery at 13:40-42. He transitions from the parable to commentary in his final comments. It seems that Jesus speaks of God in the character of the king.

His conclusion is pointed - "many are invited, but few are chosen" (v.14). The language of 'many ...few' needs to be understood carefully. According to the parable everyone ends up receiving the invitation, but not everyone responds. Yet, the wedding banquet is full - the king's banquet proceeds as he planned. Even within the banquet context, sorting continues - as with the weeds and wheat or the sheep and the goats or the good fish and bad fish. Those who constitute "the elect" will be a surprise. Those who reject God's invitation, whether ignoring it or actively opposing it, will be held accountable for their behaviour. Even if one does respond, one has to respond according to the terms God defines.

The connection between the actions of 'inviting', 'calling' and 'chosen' should be considered carefully in this parable. The behaviour of the guests is outrageous in every respect and the anger of the king is more than justified.

22:15-22 Pharisees and Herodians - Conspiracy and Question

A new episode begins with v. 15. The Pharisees leave in order to develop their plans to "trap him in his words." Once they decide what to do, they send "their disciples" along with "the Herodians" with a new challenge. They raise the question of paying taxes to Caesar. The two groups represented may have had contrasting responses to this question. If the Herodians were a group of Jews who supported the Herod dynasty, then presumably they would have had no problem with issues of taxation. Some within the Pharisee movement would have resented such a requirement.

They begin (v. 16) with a rather flattering statement, acknowledging his prophetic stance. They know Jesus will not compromise his integrity and so they try to take advantage of his integrity by forming this question. The kind of tax discussed here is not the temple tax, but rather the poll tax levied

by the Romans and which supported their oppression. Josephus tells us that Judas of Galilee had previously opposed this tax (*Antiquities 18.1.1*).

Jesus recognizes their 'hypocrisy' and their attempt to 'test him', and Matthew describes it as "their evil intent." His answer amazes them because it avoids their deliberate trap. He acknowledges that God's sovereignty must be recognized, but human government also has a legitimate claim for reasonable support. The fact that they can supply coinage issued by the Roman government indicates that they use the Roman services without compunction. Such coinage would also have some human image on it, often of the emperor.

Blomberg²⁵² notes that the ensuing series of controversies parallel the four questions that formed part of the Passover liturgy: 1) a question regarding a point of law; 2) a question with a note of scoffing; 3) a question by a person of plain piety; 4) a question by the father of the family at his own initiative.

22:23-33 Sadducees test Jesus about the Resurrection

The Pharisees' disciples and the Herodians leave and the Sadducees step up to take their turn. We do not have much information from Matthew's Gospel about the Sadducees as a religious group. They seem to include the chief priests who control the temple and some of the priestly aristocracy. Josephus confirms with the NT that they did not believe in resurrection (*anastasis* (ἀνάστασις) v. 23). In this they contradict Jesus' teaching and the claim in his passion predictions that the Son of Man will be raised (*egeirō* (ἐγείρω)). He also has raised people from the dead, a kind of resurrection, but not the same as he has predicted about the Son of Man. Presumably the teaching about eternal life incorporates some idea about resurrection or else it would be a bodiless existence. Perhaps the Sadducees embraced more of the Hellenistic idea of immortality of the soul that exists apart from body.

Their question to Jesus probably represents a stock-in-trade apologetic they used to support their position. Again they use one part of God's revelation to deny another part of its teaching. Their method is a kind of *reductio ad absurdum*, using the responsibility of levirate marriage to argue their position. When they ask the question at the end - whose wife will she be in the resurrection - they do not think it can be answered with any sense. They assume that resurrection life is the same as life now.

Jesus responds in two ways. He accuses them of error because "they do not know the scriptures nor the power of God" (v. 29). He criticizes their understanding of God's revelation. He then provides new information about what life in the resurrected state will be like. There is no marriage and people will be like angels in this regard. The Sadducees also did not believe in angels and so Jesus may be

²⁵² Blomberg, 330.

attacking another of their core beliefs in his response. Finally, he leads them to understand the implications of God's covenant relationship with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Yahweh's relationship with them did not cease at death. He remains their God for eternity. If God continues, then because of their relationship with him, so must Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God is "God of the living."

Matthew does not tell us the response of the Sadducees to this remarkable answer, but the crowds are blown away with amazement. V. 34 does indicate that they were "silenced" by his answer.

22:34-40 Pharisees test Jesus about the Law

The Pharisees regroup and one of them asks another question, one often debated within the Jewish religious fraternity. Matthew characterizes this again as a 'test' (v. 35). The question does not seem as tricky - "What is the greatest command in the Law?" Jesus answers forthrightly and there is no further discussion. He summarizes the essence of the Law in the two commands to love God (Deut. 6:5) and love neighbour (Lev. 19:18). "The whole law and prophet hangs on these two commands." Perhaps these two commands then are intended to define the actions of Jesus - everything he does demonstrates his love for God and his love for neighbour. Is this true of those who oppose him? In the light of Jesus' response, all aspects of the law must be understood and carried forward in the light of these two principles held in equal tension. Will my obedience to this principle enable me to love God and love my neighbour? If I have to forfeit one of these principles in order to interpret a part of God's revelation, then I have not understood his revelation properly. Nor can I play one off against the other. Cf. Matthew 5:17-18.

22:41-46 Jesus Questions the Pharisees about the Son of David

Now it is Jesus' turn. Having responded to all of their 'tests' and attempts to find evidence on which to accuse him, he gives them a test. He directs their attention to the belief in the Messiah and asks them about the Messiah's ancestry. "Whose son is he?" Their immediate response is "Son of David." Matthew had made this connection in chapter 1:1 with respect to Jesus. Several times in the narrative, most recently during his entry into Jerusalem, people had applied this title to him.

The riddle Jesus poses comes from Psalm 110:1. If the Messiah is purely human in his ancestry, why then does David call him "Lord," i.e., acknowledging that he is his sovereign? The second reference to "Lord" in 110:1 can only be to Messiah, who resides at the place of highest privilege and power - the right hand of God. Those who oppose the Messiah will be subjected to his leadership whether they want to or not. Jesus presses his point. If David calls him Lord, how can he be his son? He does not deny the Davidic ancestry of the Messiah, but he claims that this is not the entire story.

The Messiah is also 'son of God' and the birth story of Jesus in Matthew 1-2 has shown how this dual sonship has occurred.

At this point no one is prepared to engage him with any more questions. His public teaching ministry is done.

Fifth Discourse: Jesus in Jerusalem – the First Part of the Week
Controversy (Matthew 23-25)

Matthew 23 stands out in this narrative because of its strong denunciation of various groups of Jewish religious leaders, particularly scribes and Pharisees. The prophetic tradition of announcing woe or curses (cf. Deut. 27-28) upon the enemies of God and his people stands behind these seven pronouncements by Jesus. In chapters 21-22 Jesus has already indicated that the temple will be destroyed (in my view, his use of Jeremiah 7 material points unequivocally in this direction) and that God is re-constituting his people, based on the foundation that Jesus himself creates. The current Jewish religious leadership that rejects Jesus is being rejected by God. While Jesus may have hoped this strong language would have jolted the religious leaders to a repentant endorsement of him and his message, this does not happen. It is quite possible that Matthew intends the seven woes, which begin Jesus' final discourse, to counter-balance the Beatitudes with which Jesus introduced the SM (5:1-12).

Matthew 23, I think, is part of the final extended discourse that Jesus gives in Matthew's narrative. For the most part the material (apart from some "woes" paralleled in Luke 11) and elements about the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple is special to Matthew's Gospel. It extends from chapter 23 to chapter 25. The first part is public and is addressed to the crowds and the disciples in the temple (23:1) and the second part is private and addressed to Jesus' disciples as they leave the temple (24:1-3). A similar move is found in the parable discourse (13). Either we need to consider Matthew 23 a separate discourse and there are then 6 and not 5 discourses in this narrative or we need to integrate chapter 23 with the next two chapters and consider them as one discourse. Both Blomberg²⁵³ seems to argue for one continuous discourse, not two and Nolland argues that Matthew 23 prepares the way for the discourse in Matthew 24-25.²⁵⁴ If Matthew 23 is part of the longer discourse, then we begin with material generally special to Matthew; then Matthew 24:1-44 largely parallels Mark 13 and Luke 21; and then Matthew 24:45 - 25:46 is again constituted largely of material unique to Matthew.

In Matthew 23 Jesus uses language that is very harsh in his criticism of the various groups of Jewish leaders. Some have considered this language to be anti-Semitic, reflecting attitudes in the early Christian church and its attacks on Jewish groups that are persecuting them. However, there is nothing that Jesus is quoted as saying that we cannot parallel in other Jewish documents from this same general era, wherein one Jewish group is criticizing another Jewish group. In fact this kind of language is the language of intra-Jewish religious conflict. Examples from Qumran, from the Psalms of Solomon and from earlier prophetic literature all bear this out. The response of John the Baptist to the Jewish religious

²⁵³ Blomberg, 338-39.

²⁵⁴ Nolland, 956.

leaders (Matt. 3) similarly is harsh and we have no reason to doubt the authenticity of the Gospel records in this matter. So Jesus' critique in Matthew 23 stands well within the bounds of known rhetoric used within intra-Jewish religious conflict.

This chapter can be analysed in the following way:

23:1-12 Warnings about the behaviour of the Jewish leaders

23:13-36 Warnings about the hypocrisy of the Jewish leaders

23:37-39 Lament over Jerusalem

23:1-12 Warnings about the Behaviour of the Jewish Leaders

Jesus addresses the crowds and the disciples while still in the temple. Whether the Jewish religious leaders are still present is unclear. Jesus has been interacting with various groups of them throughout chapter 22. It would seem unreasonable to think that they suddenly left and paid no further attention to what Jesus might be saying. However, Jesus in his teaching does not address them, but rather Jews in general and his disciples specifically. I am sure Jesus expected the religious leaders to learn what he said.

He begins by acknowledging the expertise that the scribes and Pharisees have in interpreting the teachings of Moses (v. 2). They occupy the teaching positions (i.e., Moses' seat) in the synagogues and help the people make sense of God's revelation through Moses. To the degree that they teach the ways of Moses, Jesus commands the crowds and his followers to listen to them and obey them. However, he warns them not to follow their practices – "do not act in accordance with their works, for they speak and do not act" (v. 3). In 15:14 Jesus had named them "blind guides." Yet in 5:18-19 Jesus had urged his disciples to do and keep what they taught in terms of the law.

In what ways do these religious leaders fail to be models of law-keeping? Perhaps the example Jesus gives in Matthew 15:3-9 is a primary case --- they use one part of God's law to negate or annul another. Similarly in the recent discussion about divorce (Matthew 19) we again see how the plain expectation of God in Genesis 2 is overturned by the allowance given by Moses in Deuteronomy 24:1. These are the ways that the Pharisees teach but do not keep the law.

But Jesus goes further. By their interpretations of the law they create heavy burdens and place them on the shoulders of people to obey. Yet, they make no attempt to help these same people carry the load – shift it around so it can be managed comfortably. So while they teach in essence what Moses required, they provide no help for the people to live righteously. This seems to contrast with Jesus' claim in 11:27-29, where he says his load is easy and his burden light.

In vv. 5 – 7 Jesus lists specific kinds of religious activities that the Pharisees do – wearing the *tepillin* (small leather cases enclosing small fragments of the law and worn on the left hand and forehead (Ex.13:1-10; Deut. 6:4-9)) and long tassels to remind them of elements of the law (Num. 15:37-41). Does

the description in Matt. 9:21 indicate that Jesus wore such a shawl? So they are intent on reminding themselves and others of the law, but what spiritual power or ability do they propose to enable a person to do these things? They “love” the seats of prestige in banquets and the synagogues. They “love” the special greetings of recognition and the term ‘Rabbi’. In all it seems there is an inordinate love of ostentation. Why this should be the case is unclear. Do they do this as a way of calling Israel to account, publicly reminding her of her covenant responsibilities and did this degenerate into something baser? So while they make these claims and demand this respect, in the end did it help Israel respond to God’s program? Mark summarizes many of these issues in 12:38-39. Of course, Jesus has addressed the issue of religious ostentation in Matthew 6.

Jesus seems to turn his attention directly to his disciples in vv. 8-12. Again the theme of greatness protrudes into the discussion – “the one who is greater shall be your servant. Whoever lifts himself up shall be humbled and whoever humbles himself shall be lifted up.” This was the same theme that Jesus emphasized in chapters 18-20. Apparently the use of titles such as ‘rabbi’ (i.e., my great one) or ‘father’ (used of the patriarchs) or ‘tutor’, led those given such titles to make inappropriate assumptions about their worth and similarly encouraged those who applied such titles to assume certain things about their roles and privileges. While Jesus is probably not condemning the appropriate recognition of people in their respective roles (i.e., calling a male parent ‘father’ is fine), he is warning about the inclination of human beings towards pride and egoism, fostered by a sense of elitism and entitlement.

Historically it is unclear when exactly the term ‘rabbi’ came to be used of teachers within Judaism. The evidence that does exist suggests this development was occurring coincidentally with Jesus’ ministry. We should note that the term “Rabbi” comes from the Hebrew/Aramaic meaning “great” (רב) and refers to someone who occupies a high and respected position. The term רבי means “my great one.” Within Jewish circles its use in educational contexts lent it the sense of ‘teacher’.²⁵⁵ In Matthew’s case the disciples never address Jesus as Rabbi, always as κύριε (8:25; 17:4; 20:33) in distinction from Mark’s Gospel. The exception is Judas during the betrayal scene calls Jesus *hrabbi* (ῥαββί 26:25, 49), but even here the other disciples used *kurie* (κύριε 26:22).

Jesus claims for himself the unique role of a disciple’s tutor; God alone is our Father; perhaps the “one who is teacher” is also Jesus. So the Messiah is the clear teacher/tutor of those who constitute his assembly. His followers should use the resources he provides to assist one another, not to assert themselves over others. In v. 12 who is the agent in the passive verbs “shall be humbled” and “shall be lifted up?” Is it God? If so then pursuit of greatness in God’s kingdom comes through self-humbling, paralleling statements made in chapter 18.

²⁵⁵ In the Gospels, apart from Mt. 23:7 and John 3:26 (John the Baptist) only Jesus is addressed as Rabbi, often interchanged with *didaskalos* (διδάσκαλος teacher). Luke used *epistatēs* (ἐπιστάτης master).

23:13-36 Warnings about the Hypocrisy of the Jewish leaders

Jesus has used this woe-form in 11:21ff. This is the language of curse or lament, usually used in the oracles of OT prophets to denounce foreign nations or cities and declare their coming misery at the hand of God. In 11:21ff Jesus had applied this form to Galilean cities. Now he applies it to the upper echelon of the Jewish religious establishment. Their actions, whether deliberately or unintentionally, have placed them in the serious situation of divine condemnation. Jesus laments their impending misery, weeping over Jerusalem. This series of woes contrasts with Jesus' pronouncement of blessing in 5:1-12. The religious leaders have had all of the intervening time and engagement with Jesus to move from the situation of woe, into the context of blessing, but they refuse to do so.

In vv. 13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29 Jesus addresses "the scribes and the Pharisees" with these woes. In v. 16 he calls this group "blind guides." His accusations are rather staggering:

- i. instead of making the way into the Kingdom clear and plain, they do not enter themselves and prevent others from entering (v. 13). They prevent Israel from fulfilling God's program for her;
- ii. they expend great efforts to convert a person to Judaism, but in so doing they prevent such a person from entering the Kingdom (v. 14);
- iii. their casuistry leads people to break the law, not keep it (vv.16-22);
- iv. they neglect the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness (vv. 23-24);
- v. they value ritual purity more than inner purity (vv. 25-26);
- vi. they look righteous, but are unclean, like a whitewashed tomb (vv. 27-28);
- vii. they reject and martyr God's true witnesses (vv. 29-32).

His condemnation is sweeping. V. 36 may be the conclusion to all seven woes. Jesus prophesies that "all this will come upon this generation." V. 33 asks "how shall you escape from the judgment of Gehenna?" The things they will do to "prophets, wisemen and scribes" parallel the things that Jesus prophesies will happen to the Messiah ("you will kill and crucify some of them and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues and hunt from city to city" (v. 34)). This is what Paul himself was involved in prior to his conversion. Jesus emphasizes that the actions of this generation mirror the actions of prior Israelite generations. The implication is that if God judged and punished those previous generations of Jewish people for their sinful rejection of his words and representatives, will he not do it again if they reject His Messiah?

23:37-39 Lament Over Jerusalem

Jesus concludes his public discourse by a direct address to the city of Jerusalem. He enumerates her most serious ways of rebellion – executing the prophets and stoning the ones God sent to her (parable of the tenant farmers in 21:33-41) – and then shares his deep desire to protect “her children,” presumably from coming judgment. He grieves because they reject all of his overtures. He has uttered the judgment, but his heart breaks because he knows that none of it is necessary if they would only respond. His tender concern is compared to the action of a mother hen protecting her chicks (Deut. 32:4; Ps. 36:7). Note the play on words – “I wished” (v. 37), but “you did not wish” (v. 37).

His final pronouncement is desolation – “your house is left to you desolate.” The word of desolation is the same term Jeremiah uses to end his Temple Sermon (Jer. 7:34 “for the land will become desolate”). Why did Jesus pronounce the destruction of the temple?

V. 39 raises many questions. It repeats terminology used when Jesus’ entered Jerusalem (21:9). Is it a statement by Jesus announcing his departure and return at a point when Jewish people will acknowledge him for who he is? Is this a return in judgment or a return in blessing? Does this statement provide hope for a turning of Jewish people to acknowledge Jesus as Messiah, before he returns? Is his return dependent, in a sense, on this turning of Jewish people to Jesus?

Jesus’ Prophecy About Jerusalem and the Return of the Son of Man (Matthew 24-25)

At the beginning of Matthew 24 Jesus announces to his disciples clearly. “You see all these things, don’t you? Truly I say to you, ‘Stone upon stone which shall not be thrown down shall never be left here.’” The language is emphatic and precise. The double-negative in Greek adds to the negative sense. The temple will be destroyed and “all these things” associated with it! This declaration triggers two questions from the disciples:

- a. “When will these things happen?”
- b. “What will be the sign of your return and the end of the age?”

The structure of the Greek indicates that there are only two questions and not three. Apparently they understand these things to be connected. Perhaps 23:39 has led them to consider the Messiah’s return in relation to these events, i.e., the destruction of Jerusalem/Temple and the end of the age. Much of what Jesus says in response is designed to disconnect these two events, i.e., the destruction of Jerusalem/temple and the return of the Son of Man. They will happen, but one does not trigger the other, contrary to what they probably thought. Within the scope of these two chapters Jesus outlines several critical aspects of God’s future plans for Israel, for the world and for the messianic community. His discourse is twice the length of the parallel passage in Mark and most of this additional material is composed of parables. Perhaps we get an insight into Matthew’s focus by considering the themes of these unique materials.

We might analyze this part of the discourse in this way:

24:4-14	General outline of the time between the Messiah's first and second coming. Concern about being deceived.
24:15-31	Review of this same period, but with focus on the destruction of the temple, periods of severe persecution and then the return of the Messiah.
24:32-35	Relationship of these events to the lifetime of the disciples and the return of the Messiah.
24:36-25:30	No one knows when the Messiah will return and so vigilance and preparedness are necessary:
	Parable of the householder and thief 24:43-44
	Parable of faithful and unfaithful servant 24:45-51
	Parable of the ten bridesmaids 25:1-13
	Parable of the talents 25:14-30
25:31-46	Scene of the Son of Man's judgment

Let me make several general comments. As a matter of hermeneutical process, we must start first with the context of Matthew's narrative and seek to make sense of this discourse within that setting, before referring to other texts to seek solution to unresolved issues. Second, we have to make sure that when we do refer to other texts that these texts are in fact referring to the same matters clearly. Thirdly, we need to take Jesus' statement (24:36) seriously, namely, no one knows the hour. I think that Jesus is careful to help his disciples discern that the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem will not trigger the return of the Son of Man, as many might conclude. The interval between the two comings of the Messiah will probably be longer and more complex than any have previously understood. Fourthly, Jesus warns his followers against deception about these matters again and again. He must have known that this aspect of his message would be twisted and distorted to the detriment of his followers more than any other part of his message. Fifthly, he emphasizes the need to be prepared and vigilant.

Today many see the events in Matthew 24-25 as all past history or all future history. Turner suggests that some segments are dealing with the destruction of Jerusalem (past) and some are dealing with the end of the age (future). I tend to agree with Turner's perspective because I think the two questions initially asked by the disciples establish the framework of reference for Jesus' comments.

24:4-14 General outline of the time between the Messiah's first and second coming. Concern about being deceived.

Jesus responds candidly to the questions posed by the disciples. However, the first thing he tells them is to watch "lest someone deceive you" (v.4). We are not told who such deceivers might be. Would

this include the Jewish religious leaders (“blind guides”) that Jesus has just condemned in the previous chapter? V. 5 casts this as a future danger, however and Jesus is probably thinking more in terms of his messianic assembly as it emerges and develops. We know from Paul’s writings how careful he had to be about these matters. Speculation and error became rampant (cf. 2 Thess. 2), even to the point where forged letters were being produced and circulated in Paul’s name pretending to present his views of these matters, but in fact being false documents. Peter has to bring clarification also (2 Peter). Finally, John the Apostle, writes the Apocalypse in response, I am sure, to this kind of continued speculation. I think it is hard to underestimate the impact of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple upon Jewish and Christian eschatological speculation.²⁵⁶

People will claim to speak with the Messiah’s authority on these matters (v. 5) and in fact claim to be the Messiah, deceiving many. Jewish and Church history is replete with examples, many unfortunately, of this very thing. Jesus then notes that history will proceed – with wars, famines, earthquakes – which are just the “beginning of birth pangs” (v. 8). They remind us of what is yet to come, but in themselves are not the end. Notice how Jesus treats specifically the issue of human conflicts – these things must happen and generate great fear, but “not yet is the end” (vv. 6-7). We know again how warfare stimulates speculation about the end times. Our own recent history in North America (World War I and II) can provide many examples of such ideas – sermons preached and books written.

Within history as well, believers will be handed over for persecution and execution. Hatred against Christians will flourish. Within the messianic community this persecution will cause some “to be offended” and they shall respond with animosity and hatred. “False prophets” shall emerge within the church and deceive many. Lawlessness shall increase and the spiritual fervour of many shall weaken – grow cold. Endurance to the end (end of life or end of the age or both?) is the critical factor for salvation. The end will not come until the whole world/Roman Empire are evangelized (v. 14), “as a witness to all the nations.”²⁵⁷ Is Jesus here challenging the power of the Empire, just as he did the “gates of Hades?”

So in this section Jesus gives us a sweeping view of the spiritual struggle that will be occurring during the normal course of history. It is a generic view. His mission will continue “until the end (τέλος) shall come.” Of course, we know from records that all of these different kinds of events occurred prior to 70 CE within the lifetime of some of the disciples.

²⁵⁶ It is no accident that Jewish writings appear in the late 80's and 90's of the first century reflecting upon the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple -- 2 Baruch, 4 Ezra -- alongside of Josephus' writings.

²⁵⁷ The term *oikoumenē* (οἰκουμένη the human world, the organized/civilized world) can also have a more limited sense and refer to the Roman Empire. We probably find this sense in Luke 2:1 where the writer reports Caesar’s command that “a census should be taken of the entire Roman world (*pasan tēn oikoumenēn pāsān tēn oikoumenēn*).” Perhaps this is also the sense in Acts 24:5 where Paul is accused of being a troublemaker, “stirring up riots among the Jews all over the Roman world (*tois kata tēn oikoumenēn τοῖς κατὰ τὴν οἰκουμένην*).”

24:15-31 Review of this same period, but with focus on the destruction of the temple, periods of severe persecution, and then the return of the Messiah.

I would suggest that in these verses Jesus focuses more specifically upon the Jewish context and what will happen to the Jewish nation within history. In this he answers their first question – “when will these things be?”, i.e., the casting down of the stones.

Jesus begins with a generic “whenever” (*hotan* ὅταν) (v.15). The “desolating sacrilege,” i.e., a sacrilege that causes desolation, seems to point to a specific event. Matthew incorporates a specific reference to Daniel’s prophecy as in some sense explaining what this means. “Let the reader understand,” Jesus warns. [Who are the readers? Jesus’ disciples or later Christians, who reflect upon Daniel’s text, or people who are reading Matthew’s Gospel?] Daniel’s prophecy has to be understood in the light of Jesus’ teaching, not the other way around.²⁵⁸ So what is this “desolating sacrilege?” Is it some action taken by the Romans, whether the attempt to place Caligula’s statue in the temple (something that failed because Caligula perished before it could be done), or the destruction of the temple by the Roman armies in AD 70? Neither of these events works very well. The first never happened and the second was the final act of a long grueling war and there is no way the inhabitants of Jerusalem could flee when this finally occurred. The “desolating sacrilege” seems to be an event linked to the temple, but separate from its destruction and indicating that this destruction or desolation is certain to occur and when it does it is the catalyst for this terrible destruction. While in 1 Maccabees 1:54 and 6:7 it refers to the actions of Antiochus Epiphanes to destroy Judaism by profaning the temple and sacrificing swine in the temple, we have no comparable sacrilegious action in the Roman-Jewish war, prior to the actual destruction of the temple, that would correspond.

I would suggest that Jesus borrows this term from the book of Daniel, but warns his followers not to think of it strictly in terms of Daniel’s prophecy and gives new content to it. The only sacrilegious event that occurred in Judea and which sealed the destruction of the temple within a Christian frame of reference is the crucifixion of the Messiah. It is this event that Jesus has just warned in chapter 23 will lead to the desolation of Jerusalem and its house – the killing of the prophets. The sacrilege, I would suggest, is the rejection by the Jewish religious leaders of God’s Messiah and their participation in his

²⁵⁸ Josephus also references Daniel’s prophecy to explain the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

crucifixion. Is the “abomination that causes desolation” another passion prediction (cf. the parable of the tenant farmers in chapter 21:40-44).²⁵⁹

If we understand the execution of Jesus Messiah as the abomination that causes desolation, then we understand why Jesus warns the inhabitants of Jerusalem to flee when they see it occurring. Some might argue that the language of vv. 16-20 suggests an event that will yet occur, but not immediately – it might even be winter. But I think this can be answered if we understand this event to be the trigger that initiates destruction, but that the actual destruction will only occur after some time. The abomination itself is the warning sign that the desolation is soon to occur. No interpretation of this expression is without difficulties. So we struggle to understand what Jesus meant.

A further difficulty occurs in vv. 21-22. “A great *thlipsis* (pressure, oppression, persecution)” will occur. This term defines the application of pressure to something or someone, i.e., difficulty, persecution. Just what is the precise nuance is unclear. The language Jesus uses indicates that its severity is quite unusual within human history. Further, only God’s intervention “shortens those days,” otherwise “no flesh would be saved.” “Flesh” is a term meaning human being. However, God intervenes “for the sake of the elect.” Who are these people? If you believe that this ‘*thlipsis*’ refers to a period of tribulation marking the end of the age, then the elect would be Christians. If, however, Jesus is referring to the events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem and Temple, then the elect might refer to the Jewish people. God acts to prevent them from being eliminated. To be consistent with my interpretation of the abomination that causes desolation I would interpret these verses in the light of destruction caused by the Jewish war and its devastation and the elect as a reference to the Jewish people. I am not in this proposed interpretation ruling out a final period of intense persecution prior to the Messiah’s return, but would not ground it on this passage.

Vv. 23-26 I would suggest relates to the destruction of Jerusalem/temple. Jesus again warns his followers not to be deceived by false messiahs and false prophets who will be active at that time, even if they claim to work great signs and wonders to deceive the Jewish people, i.e., the elect (just as they did in Jeremiah’s day). Jesus has given advanced warning to his followers not to be deceived, even if the ‘elect’ might be, i.e., the Jewish people. Rather, the return of the Messiah will be public and spectacular – like the flashing of lightning. The presence of the Messiah will be as clear and certain as the appearance of a carcass is to vultures. We know from Josephus’ writings that in the midst of the Roman-Jewish war various Jewish factions expected God to intervene to give them the victory. It is almost as if for some the provocation of the war was an attempt to force God’s hand.

²⁵⁹ For a fuller explanation of this interpretation, please see my paper “Mark 13:14 – A Cryptic Prophecy of the Messiah’s Death?” published in 2019 on the website <https://nimer.ca/about/nimer/> under the tab “Ministry Studies: Biblical and Theological Studies. NIMER stands for Northwest Institute for Ministry Education Resources.

Finally, Jesus turns his attention to the return of the Son of Man. A lot hinges on the interpretation of the initial word in v.29 – *eutheōs* (εὐθέως). Usually it is rendered as ‘immediately’, but I wonder whether it might mean ‘suddenly’. If it has this latter nuance, then Jesus would be saying that his return occurs after the events of 70 CE, but suddenly or unexpectedly, rather than immediately. I think this works better with the emphasis in the preceding verses and also Matthew’s focus on the need for vigilance.

The language Jesus uses here is borrowed from the OT. It is the apocalyptic language of cosmic upheaval. The changes that occur with the Son of Man’s return are absolutely stupendous, affecting the entire cosmos. It does not continue as it has. Perhaps there is also association with the demonic and satanic powers, that often were identified with heavenly bodies, and their defeat by the Messiah. What is the “sign of the Son of Man” (v. 30)? Should we read it as “the sign, i.e., the Son of Man himself?” Is it his coming on the clouds that is the sign? If it is not this, then Jesus gives us no hint as to what this sign may be. Rather, he focuses on the effect the appearance of the Son of Man has upon humanity in general. The tribes of the land (or earth) may refer to Israel – they are the tribes referred to previously in Matthew. Their mourning may be in repentance or may be a response of fear, discerning the judgment that is coming (cf. Rev. 1:7). Who are the elect in v. 31? Is it Israel, repentant and saved, or the church? If previous occurrences in the chapter refer to Israel, then we probably need to interpret these verses similarly. There is no specific mention of any rapture-like experience in these verses.

The interpretation I have presented is only one of several that are possible. Most would interpret this section of Jesus’ discourse as referring to the Temple’s destruction, but then see the material that follows in reference to a period of great tribulation just preceding the return of Jesus and the elect as being followers of Jesus. I think my proposal has the advantage of greater consistency within Matthew’s narrative structure and the immediate context, i.e., applying this passage to the future of Judaism and Israel, with the elect referring to the remnant of the Jewish people who will, after Jesus’ death and the destruction of the temple, in the future respond to Jesus as Messiah. The period of great ‘tribulation’ is linked with the destruction of the temple and the terrible devastation that the Jewish people experienced, not only in Palestine but in other parts of the Roman Empire as a result. Perhaps this resonates with Paul’s construction in Romans 11:26-28 where he affirms that “as far as election is concerned they are loved on account of the patriarchs.”

24:32-35 Relationship of these events in the lifetime of the disciples and the return of the Messiah.

Jesus concludes this first part of his discourse with a parable. Using the fig tree as an example, he indicates that when its leaves sprout people in Palestine know that it is summer. Similarly, when his disciples see these things happening, they will know “that it [the abomination that causes desolation or

he, the Son of Man] is near at the doors.” Additionally he affirms that “this generation shall not pass away until all these things have happened” (v. 34). If Jesus by this statement is referring to the return of the Son of Man, then he was mistaken. Further, he contradicts what he says in v. 36ff, namely that no one knows. So it seems clear that this parable warns the disciples to take action when they see certain things happening, i.e., the abomination that causes desolation in place (Jesus’ execution), the destruction of the Temple, and the great pressure brought against the elect. He urges them to act as these signs unfold, lest they be caught up on the terrible events. Perhaps the clause “whenever you see” (v. 15) is picked up in v. 33 “whenever you see all these things you know....”

Alternatively, as others propose, perhaps Jesus is saying that the return of the Son of Man is near, i.e., imminent, but not necessarily happening immediately. All the events have happened that clear the way for the Son’s return. So it could happen at any time. All is ready. However, when it will occur is God’s decision.

24:36-25:30 No one knows when the Messiah will return and so vigilance and preparedness are necessary.

The last part of the discourse builds on the theme introduced in v. 36 – “Concerning that day and hour, no one knows, neither the angels of heaven nor the son, except the Father only.” We know the end is coming, but we do not know when. Four parables underscore this reality.

I think that the expression “that day” picks up a similar phrase in v. 29 “after the pressure of those days.” Jesus says that his followers know a lot. There is also a tremendous amount of false and deceptive teaching abroad that they are also aware of. They discern its falseness because such teaching claims to know when and where the Son of Man, the Messiah has returned. Jesus says that they cannot know this because only the Father knows it and he has not revealed this to anyone, not even the Son. In his incarnation Jesus was not omnipresent nor was he omniscient. There were limitations he accepted to his divine status when he assumed humanity – he emptied himself, to use Paul’s language (Phil 2:5-8). However, note the textual omission in many manuscripts of “nor the son.” This omission may be an attempt to rescue Jesus’ omniscience.

He emphasizes the sudden and unexpected nature of the Messiah’s return by comparing it to the flood in Noah’s day. Life continued normally “until the day Noah entered into the ark” (v. 38). The people in Noah’s day may have heard about his enterprise and even heard his story of what God was about to do, but it made no difference. They carried on as if nothing was going to change. “And they did not know until the flood came and took them all” (v. 39). The suddenness and unexpectedness of it all is the point. Jesus then makes the comparison – “Thus shall be also the return of the Son of Man” – and all its attended implications.

Jesus uses several different images to express the unexpectedness – two workers in the field and one is taken and the other left; two women grinding at the mill, and one is taken and the other left (vv. 40-41). Jesus concludes that believers then must “keep vigilant” because they are not sure when “your Lord comes” (v. 42). The language of “coming” picks up on the terminology of 24:30 and 23:39, perhaps. What does the use of the title “Lord” mean here?

What does Jesus emphasize here? Faithful stewardship? But the people are all engaged in the same activity. So how are they to be distinguished? The distinction has nothing to do with their activities, but rather with their allegiance to the Messiah – your Lord.

24:43-44 Parable of the householder and thief

This short parable expresses the dilemma of the householder as he seeks to secure his goods from the thief. He does not know when the thief will come. Since he failed to provide a guard during all watches of the night, his property became vulnerable to robbery. Christians should not be so ignorant. They know the Son of Man is coming, and their responsibility it to keep vigilant because he will come “at that hour they do not think” (v. 44).

What does vigilance look like for a believer? The following parables attempt to define it. We must conclude that all attempts to define the time when the Son of Man will return to be futile and ill-judged. No one knows.

24:45-51 Parable of faithful and unfaithful servant

Jesus now defines “the faithful and wise slave.” His ‘master/lord’ has given him the task of providing nourishment for all of the household servants at the right time. The language of v. 46 intimates that the master had gone on a journey and left the slave to carry forward this responsibility. The slave does not know when the master will return, but keeps busy, obeying the master’s instructions and so when the master returns and discovers the slave has carried forward his instructions, the master rewards his obedience. He is ‘blessed’ by the master.

An alternative scenario is offered that demonstrated the kind of service that a wicked slave would offer. He would take calculating advantage of the absence of his Lord to abuse his power, mistreat his fellow slaves and use the resources of the household to hold drinking parties for his buddies, rather than feed his fellow slaves. When the master appears unexpectedly, judgment is swift and severe. Whether he is literally dismembered or merely “torn to shreds” through verbal scolding is unclear, but certainly his lot is cast with the hypocrites in the place of fearful punishment.

Vigilance is defined as faithful stewardship conducted in the sure knowledge that the master is returning and accountability will be given. Perhaps the servant of the household is a picture of Jewish

religious leaders and then later Christian leaders and how they be caring for the Messiah's people in his absence.

25:1-13 Parable of the ten bridesmaids

This is a parable unique to Matthew. Using the comparison of a wedding feast, as ten maids wait for the bridegroom to arrive in order to accompany the bride and groom to the groom's home where the wedding feast would occur, Jesus now looks at the opposite scenario – the delay of the Son of Man's return (v. 5 – *chronizontos* (χρονίζοντος)). He also marks the action of the five maids who take additional oil as 'wise' (*phronimos* (φρόνιμος), cf. 7:24; 24:45). The emphasis is upon the preparations or lack thereof of the respective groups of maids.

When the bridegroom finally arrives at midnight, the ten maids waken. Five of them have lamps that have failed because they run out of oil. They press the other five to lend them oil, but they refuse. While they go to buy more oil, the bridegroom arrives, the procession sets off and they enter the feast, shutting the doors. When the other five maids arrive, they discover the doors shut and no entrance to the wedding feast is permitted.

What is unusual in the parable is the action of the bridegroom. He refuses to acknowledge the five tardy maids, and refuses to admit them (cf. 7:21). Preparedness is the key and this spiritual preparedness cannot be shared. There is probably no specific significance to the oil. The entrance into the bridegroom's house and feast is seen as the desirable outcome. Jesus concludes – “Be vigilant because you do not know the day or the hour.” Some who seem to be friends of the bridegroom are not. They look like it, but they are not prepared. In the OT God is often portrayed as the bridegroom of Israel. Jesus once before in Matthew has used this metaphor (9:15f).

25:14-30 Parable of the talents

This parable emphasizes the other aspect of the slave in 24:45 – faithfulness. This one is like the slave in 24:45-51 – slaves given work to do in the absence of the master. They are expected to be productive with what the master has given them. The master is gracious with the division of his resources and gives a great amount of time and opportunity for something to be done in order to gain him profit. The excuse given by the “worthless slave” is that the master is unfair and capricious. So what is the use of even trying, since he claimed he had no idea what the master would do when he returned, a claim that the actions of the other two slaves shows to be false. However, the actions of the master prove him to be principled and generous to those who have made wise use of the gifts he has given to them.

The focus of this parable seems to be that God, the master, has given to human beings resources to expend for enlarging his glory and his kingdom. Those who love the master and devote their allegiance

to him will indeed strive to add glory to the reputation of the master and prove to be good stewards of the master's resources. The master acknowledges the good, faithful work of those slaves who have doubled their portion for the benefit of the master. Their reward is the same, note. The worthless slave has his talent repossessed and he is cast "into outer darkness," the place of unimaginable punishment. When the Son of Man returns there will be accountability required from all.

25:31-46 Scene of the Son of Man's judgment

The final segment summarizes what will happen when the Son of Man comes "in his glory and all his angels with him" (v. 31). He will sit on the throne of his glory – i.e., he will be exalted and his power and authority recognized by all. The judgment scene is universal with "all nations" appearing before him (v. 32). He is cast in the role of shepherd, separating sheep and goats. The sheep represent those who have lived in loyalty to the Messiah and the goats represent those who have not. This is often classified as a parable, but apart from the simile in vv. 32-33 of shepherd, sheep and goats, the discourse describes a scene of future judgment.

We discern here what faithfulness, good stewardship, and wise living mean in the previous parables, as Jesus outlines what a vigilant life looks like. The language Jesus uses is that of caring for and assisting the least of the disciples in Jesus' name (cf. Matthew 18). These terms (*episkopō*, *diakonein* (ἐπισκοπῶ, διακονεῖν) vv. 36, 43, 44) are used elsewhere in the NT to define the kind of spiritual oversight leaders in the church are to exercise. These people are surprised to discern the many ways in which they have served their Messiah, often unawares. Loving one's neighbour flows from a love for God. "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (v. 40; 18:5). While some might want to see "least of these brothers of mine" as referring to any human being, the way this terminology is used by Jesus in Matthew's Gospel would suggest that he is referring to the least significant disciple (10:42), i.e., Jesus' follower. There are many other passages in Scripture that speak to the Christian's responsibility to help any one in need. Jesus here defines the kind of 'righteousness' that counts in the Kingdom.

The sheep inherit the blessings of the kingdom, i.e., eternal life (v. 46); the goats are sent into "eternal punishment" (v. 46). We have seen throughout Matthew's narrative a very strong interest in the theme of judgment. What does this interest tell us about the context to which or from which he is writing? If he is developing this Gospel narrative primarily for Jewish Christians, why would such an emphasis be important for them to hear? How does this then resonate in our world today? Is Matthew's Gospel, with all its emphasis upon judgment, for the Postmodern generation?

Passion, Crucifixion and Resurrection
(Matthew 26-28)

Matthew marks the end of Jesus' eschatological discourse with his normal formula (26:1), but inserts the word "all." Jesus, however, continues to address his disciples in the same place. A fifth passion prediction is given, with the new statement that his crucifixion will occur within two days (26:2). Jesus links the Celebration of Passover with his Crucifixion. The scene suddenly shifts (26.3ff) to the palace of the high priest, where we discover the Jewish religious leaders gathered in order to plot Jesus' arrest so that they can execute him (cf. 12:13-14). They recognize, however, the tense situation that the Passover Feast presents and so would like to do it either before or after Passover, because they are afraid of what the people might do (26:3-5). A *thorubos* (θόρυβος v. 5) would be a disturbance or uproar that would motivate Roman intervention.

Events move quickly. The remainder of chapter 26 narrates the events that lead up to Jesus' death, ending with his Jewish trial. Chapter 27 outlines the Roman trial and sentence and his execution and burial. Chapter 28 records his resurrection and final commands to the Eleven. Note how time is compressed.

Thursday	Chapter 26
Friday	Chapter 27
Sunday	Chapter 28.

Carter²⁶⁰ suggests that we consider the following elements that Matthew emphasizes in relation to Jesus' death:

- ❑ It is the work of his opponents
- ❑ It is God's will
- ❑ It is Jesus' Self-giving
- ❑ It is a Model for Discipleship
- ❑ It is accomplished for others
- ❑ It provides Salvation from Sin as
 - Jesus is faithful to his commission
 - Jesus offers sacrifice on behalf of and for the benefit of the sins of others
 - Jesus in his death bears punishment "For Many," the judgment for the sin of all
 - Jesus, Son of God, now becomes 'the temple of God' where people encounter God's forgiving presence and atonement for sin

²⁶⁰ Warren Carter, *Matthew: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist*, p. 186ff.

- ❑ Jesus unites believing Jews and Gentiles as the People of God
- ❑ Jesus inaugurates the Beginning of the New Age through his death and resurrection.

Matthew has a lot to say about the significance of Jesus' death in these chapters. Much of this comes through his incorporation of OT materials that serve to define what Jesus is doing and why.

26:1-75 The last day with his disciples

While the religious leaders are plotting, Jesus continues to minister among his followers. The first half of the chapter (vv. 1-46) narrates various venues in which he continues to interact with them, ending in the Garden of Gethsemane. After his arrest, Jesus experiences the Jewish judicial trial, while Peter denies any relationship with Jesus (vv. 47-75). Each of these stories is related in some way to Jesus' imminent death.

Jesus' fifth passion prediction (vv. 1-2) is immediately followed by its fulfillment in the action of the high priests and elders of the people (vv. 3-5), who gather to implement their conspiracy to kill Jesus.

The next sequence of stories begins with Jesus' interaction with a female disciple, at the home of Simon the Leper (v. 6). Presumably Simon was a healed leper, restored by Jesus' actions. The woman is anonymous, but seems to have some wealth and she gives perhaps her greatest treasure to honour Jesus. He interprets this as a preparation for his burial, a prophetic action foretelling his death (v. 12). Although the other disciples are upset at this apparent waste, Jesus commends her, prophesying that her act will be remembered "wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world" (v. 13). Why are his disciples so indignant? Does this express once more their failure to understand who he is, even though the woman seems to discern this with clarity and anoints him as if he is already dead? Again, his language (v. 13) reflects elements of the Great Commission in 28:19-20 and indicates to his disciples that something great is about to occur, something described as "this good news." Jesus used this same expression in 24:14. Always in Matthew it is Jesus who uses this term (4:23; 9:35). The universal implications of Jesus' activity are being emphasized. The juxtaposition of the religious leaders' conspiracy, Judas' betrayal, and the woman's generous act to honour Jesus should be noted with all of the attendant irony.

Why does Judas take this action? Perhaps he finally has understood that Jesus' passion predictions will be fulfilled. Since Judaism has no concept of a dying Messiah, this must mean that Jesus is a false messiah and so he should be destroyed.

After Judas makes his arrangement with the high priests for betraying Jesus, we move into the Passover Scene (17-25). Note that Judas begins to seek *eukairia* (εὐκαιρία favourable time, v. 16) to betray Jesus, even as Jesus acknowledges that "my time (*kairos καιρός*) is near" (v. 18). Judas' arrangement is known to Jesus (v. 25), but Matthew does not say when Judas left the Passover meal to complete his arrangements with the Jewish authorities. Perhaps he expects the reader to assume that this

occurs while Jesus is praying in Gethsemane (v. 36). Judas next is mentioned explicitly in the arrest scene (vv. 47-56). Matthew also records the death of Judas (27:3-10) in fulfillment of a prophecy in Jeremiah (32:6-9; cf. Zech. 11:12-13). While his death is self-inflicted, it comes as a result of remorse²⁶¹ (27:3) when he recognizes he has betrayed “innocent blood” (v. 4) and by this admission is guilty of murder.²⁶² Judas recognized his error, perhaps remembering Jesus’ words in v. 24, but the Jewish religious leaders would not recognize theirs.

The disciples know that Jesus has come to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover (vv. 17-18) and Jesus has already made the arrangements because “my opportune time is near” (v. 18). Jesus links the Passover with his imminent death in a very purposeful manner. During this sacred meal he reveals the treachery that is afoot, but he seems quite settled because everything is happening “according as it stands written” (v. 24) with reference to “the Son of Man.” The revelation about this treachery is expressed as an ‘*amen*’ statement (v. 21). Jesus identifies Judas as the culprit (v. 25). The meal continues and Jesus takes advantage of the normal ritual in the Passover meal to explain to his disciples the significance of what he is about to do. The Passover meal becomes a participatory parable revealing the mysterious, sacred implications of his death. The linkage with the Passover Meal imbues Jesus’ death with ideas of redemption, salvation, deliverance, and sacrifice. In the Exodus story God kills Pharaoh’s firstborn in order to deliver his own firstborn, i.e., Israel. In the gospel story, God sacrifices his beloved son in order that his people and the rest of humanity might access salvation. His son becomes the new Passover sacrifice, whose execution is instigated by the Jewish leaders to eradicate a deceiver, not to gain deliverance. The ironies are multiple.

Jesus’ language needs careful consideration (v. 28). His death will create a “covenant.” It will be established through his violent death (blood poured out – language used in Greek Jeremiah). “Many” will receive benefit, namely “the forgiveness of sins.” In the OT covenants often are established in the context of a sacrifice. How this sacrifice generates forgiveness of sins is not explained, but it is affirmed (cf. 1:21; 3:6). Although Jesus speaks clearly about his death, he also indicates that this is not the final act. His statement about drinking wine again “with you” assures them that he will survive this ordeal and will have further relationship with them, all in the context of his father’s reign (v. 29). Given earlier references to the eschatological meal (cf. 8:11-13), Jesus presumably is referencing this event.

As they walk towards the Mount of Olives, Jesus makes another startling announcement. His death will create a significant obstacle for them all “in this night” (v. 31). They will all “be offended” (*skandalisthēsesthe* σκανδαλισθήσεσθε “stumble or made to stumble”), which encompasses Judas’

²⁶¹ Matthew used this word *metamelomai* (μεταμέλομαι) at 21:29, 32, where he scolds the religious leaders for refusing to change although they acknowledge John as prophet and heard his message.

²⁶² Pilate at 27:24 claims that he is “innocent from this blood” after he acquiesces to the crowd’s insistence that Jesus be crucified.

betrayal, Peter's denial, and the general desertion by the Twelve. Jesus considers this a fulfillment of prophecy (Zech. 13:7). But he expects his words to be a comfort, demonstrating that God is the One who will "smite the shepherd." Again, Jesus moves to assure his disciples that this is not the end. "I shall be raised and go ahead of you into Galilee" (v. 32). Somehow Jesus' death fulfills God's program, even though the Jewish religious leaders and Pilate are the immediate agents. The impact of this event on Jesus' followers is devastating – they, the shepherd's sheep, will all be scattered. We have started to see the consequences of this in Judas' action. Peter will be next. Despite his protestations, Peter learns that he, the Rock, will "deny Jesus," something he and his fellows vigorously deny will ever happen. Jesus, much to their discomfort, insists that it will happen "in this night" (v. 34). We cannot overlook Jesus' ironic use of this verb "deny", the very one he used in chapter 16 to describe the disciple as one who denies self for Christ's sake.

The Gethsemane episode stands as the transition point between Jesus' preparation for his imminent death and various notices about this in the first part of chapter 26, and his trial and death that ensue in the last part of chapters 26-27. In Gethsemane Jesus speaks about his ordeal and its implications. While he invites the same three disciples who experienced his transfiguration to hold vigil with him, all of the attention in the pericope is on Jesus and his interaction with his father. Matthew sets the stage, noting that Jesus "began to be grieved and distressed" (37), confessing that "my soul is deeply grieved until death" (38). What is the cause of this grief? Is it his awareness that paying the penalty for humanity's sin will affect his relationship with God? Is it concern about the suffering that he is about to experience? Is it grief for Israel whose collective action to reject him will result in terrible judgment (cf. 23:37-39)? Jesus' personal sacrifice was not an easy thing.

Many questions swirl around the significance of Jesus' request to his father (39). Jesus has known for some time that his life will end in death, terrible death, to be followed by resurrection, and he has prophesied about it numerous times. Yet here he acknowledges God's power to change things – if he should so will it. Conversely, he submits himself to whatever God does decide. Jesus' will does not represent a conflict with the Father, but knowing the pain and difficulty of what the next hours will bring to himself, as well as the terrible implications for Israel, he expresses a desire that another way might be found. Of course, another way is what Satan offered in Matthew 4, but Jesus rejected it. No alternative, like a ram in bush, comes. God's plan proceeds, despite the costly consequences for his son and for Israel. Is God, the Father, in this uncaring or somehow abusive? I do not think so. Jesus knows why he dies, he submits voluntarily (v. 42) to this death, and understands the benefits that accrue to those he loves through his pain and suffering. And so, knowing that "the hour has come" he strides forward to meet the betrayer (vv. 45-46). He embraces and fulfills his mission (20:26-28).

As noted, Jesus' concern in Gethsemane may not be solely with himself, but may extend to those who will suffer the implications of his rejection and death, i.e., the inhabitants of Jerusalem. He has prophesied repeatedly that their rejection of him will result in the destruction of the Temple and the city and the death of many. At the end of Matthew 23:37-39 we have discerned his grief at their failure to respond to him, with the result that their city is left "desolate." Is this a significant cause of Jesus' grief and distress?

The interaction with the three disciples in this episode highlights once again their failure to engage in the spiritual mission because they rely on their own strength. Jesus' statement to them (v. 41) probably reflects the essence of his own struggle. He will not be tempted, because "the Spirit" is strong, even though his flesh shrinks from embracing the cross. Is the reference to "the Spirit" a note that the Holy Spirit is the One Who is leading Jesus into the crucifixion, just as he led him into the inaugural testing (4:1)? He shows to his disciples how to deal with such situations and remain spiritually strong by relying on this Spirit. Their sleeping exemplifies the difficulty human disciples have in "watching", i.e., remaining spiritually vigilant (cf. chapter 25).

The signal of a kiss that Judas used stresses the treacherous nature of his act.²⁶³ If the compound verb in v. 49 means "kiss effusively," then perhaps Jesus' response in v. 50 means "Friend, what do you mean [by such an effusive display of affection]?", knowing full well his perfidy. However, there are many different ways to read Jesus' response (cf. Davies and Allison's Commentary). Jesus takes no action in this episode, he only speaks. And yet, he seems to be the one controlling the action. He does not resist Judas. He orders his followers not to resist, though some do (v. 51). He reveals there are significant resources at his disposal which he chooses not to use to protect himself (v.53 – more than 12 legions (72,000) of angels), similar to the heavenly army mentioned in 2 Kings 6:17. At his second coming these heavenly resources will be displayed with their full power and fully used. It is important to note what Jesus says. His father would provide these angels and protect his son, if Jesus asked (note again the linkage with 4:5-7 and the Temptation narrative). God would do it straightway. Only Jesus' commitment to his Father's plans and his love for those he will save restrains him. Scriptures must be fulfilled (v. 54). The statement "in that hour" (v. 55) picks up Jesus' affirmation in v. 45 that "the hour has come near." Jesus affirms that these events are in full accord with scripture. The religious leaders could have challenged him any time in the temple, but they are afraid to do so. Jesus challenges them about this and tells them they are fulfilling scripture by their conspiratorial actions (v. 56). They treat him as an

²⁶³ In v. 48 Matthew used *philēsō* (φιλήσω) and in v. 49 *katephilēsen* (κατεφίλησεν). Often in Greek the use of the compound verb indicates some amplification or intensification of the action. However, it is not clear if this is the case in this instance.

“insurrectionist” (*lēistēs* (ληστής v. 55), a term he had used to criticize the actions of the religious leaders in the temple (21:13).

Jesus’ refusal to permit his followers to fight for him with swords is explained by the statement “all who take a sword by a sword will perish” (v. 52). Perhaps Jesus seeks consistency with his earlier injunction to love one’s enemies (5:47). Perhaps more difficult is the statement of retribution that it bears. Who brings this judgment against such violent people – God or human? The story ends with “all his disciples, leaving him, fled” (v. 56). Is this part of the scriptural fulfillment?

The trial of Jesus before the Jewish authorities (vv. 57-68) proceeds at night, with some unusual elements. Despite great efforts and “many false witnesses,” finally they get two to agree on their testimony. They claim that Jesus said “I am able to destroy the temple of God and in three days to build it” (v. 61). We find no such claim linked with any Messianic speculation prior to Jesus. Rather in the OT God is both the destroyer of the temple (Jer. 7) and its rebuilder (Ezek. 40ff). These witnesses testify that Jesus made such a claim. Exactly what Jesus said and what he meant by it is understood in various ways, as you compare the Synoptic parallels.

When Jesus says nothing in response to all of this, the high priest asks him directly (v. 63), to swear an oath before the living God and tell them, “are you the Messiah, the son of God?” Presumably because the High Priest has named God’s name, Jesus feels compelled to answer. Jesus’ response again has some ambiguity – You have said, but I am saying to you....” I think we have to take both elements together, but contrasting. Jesus does not affirm directly here what the high priest says nor does he identify himself explicitly as the Son of Man. However, the indirectness of his initial answer is clarified when Jesus identifies himself as Son of Man linked intimately with God on his throne, (Psalm 110:1) and also coming once again in glory, as Daniel prophesied (Dan. 7:13). By tearing his clothes the high priest demonstrates that Jesus is claiming some sort of equality with Yahweh and his authority. Jesus does not reveal when these religious leaders will see these things happen. Perhaps it will occur when all humanity sees him (24:30). Note how the three key titles this writer uses in reference to Jesus are brought together in this interchange – son of man, son of God, and Messiah.

The high priest describes Jesus’ answer as blasphemy. Just what in Jesus’ response leads to this accusation is debated. Many claimed to be Messiah but were not accused of blasphemy as far as we can tell. Probably it is his identification as the Son of Man with the throne of Yahweh, i.e., Yahweh’s authority and glory, that generates this outcry and accusation. They all, in Matthew’s narrative, determine that “He is guilty of death” (v. 66). The victimization of Jesus that ensues is rather grotesque. The high priest’s house has been discovered in Jerusalem and excavated. You can see underground cisterns associated with it that probably served as prison chambers for Jesus during this period.

The focus now shifts to Peter. Matthew had noted that while the disciples all fled, Peter “followed from afar” and entered the courtyard of the high priest’s residence “to see the outcome” (v. 58). The narrator picks up the thread of Jesus’ previous prophecy of Peter’s denial and shows how this is fulfilled in the threefold rejection by Peter of any association with Jesus. The repeated verb “he denied” (70, 72, 75) echoes the words of Jesus’ prophecy. What denial means gets defined in v. 74. Peter is said to invoke curses and to swear in order to convince others that he has no association with Jesus. The irony of his response “I do not know the person” should not be overlooked, given Peter’s previous confession, “You are the Messiah, the son of God.” The immediacy of the rooster’s cry adds drama to the episode. Peter’s remorse is deep and desolating.

Matthew 27 – Second trial, execution and burial.

Matthew summarizes the results of the Jewish religious leaders actions (vv. 1-2) that produce the decision to execute Jesus. To accomplish this, however, will require the agreement of Pilate, the Roman governor. Decisions to execute could only be made by the Roman authorities. The trial scene before Pilate (vv. 11-26) begins with personal interaction between Pilate and Jesus. The governor asks the key question “are you the king of the Jews,” expressing the issue in slightly different terms, but using political language understood by the Roman authorities. It places the issue into a political framework and not just a religious framework. Jesus’ answer again is ambiguous, “you say.” Jesus says nothing more, despite what the religious leaders accuse him of (v. 14).

Judas’ remorse, his return of the “blood money, and his suicide are recounted in vv. 3-10. The duplicity of the Jewish religious leaders seems to be revealed again. Their action to use the money to purchase a burial place “for strangers” is said to fulfill prophecy (Jer. 32:6-9 and Zech. 11:12-13).

The narrative then considers the custom of the Roman governor to release a Jewish prisoner during the Passover. Pilate has recourse to this practice as a way to release Jesus. The crowd would make the selection in some manner. The other prisoner under consideration is introduced as “a notorious prisoner named [Jesus] Barabbas” (v. 16). Whether “Barabbas” is his formal name or a nickname is unclear. It is an Aramaic expression meaning “son of the father.” Also, the textual tradition is divided as to whether the name “Jesus” was part of his name in the original narrative. If it was original, then we have this irony – two prisoners, one named Jesus, son of God/son of man, and one named Jesus, father’s son. Pilate contrasts Jesus Barabbas with Jesus Christos (v. 17). Matthew says that Pilate used this ploy because “he knew that because of envy Jesus was handed over to him” (v. 18). What the nature of this envy was we have to discern from his narrative. Further, Matthew reports the warning from Pilate’s wife (v. 19). Her dreams have in some way indicated to her that Jesus Christos is trouble and Pilate needs to take great care (remember the use of dreams in Matt. 1-2). Yet, despite Pilate’s clever ploy, the high

priests and elders persuaded the people to “destroy Jesus” (cf. 12:14 – their original desire). The cry “crucify” now fills his ears. He can do nothing to dissuade them and so washes his hands publicly before them “to be innocent of this person’s blood.” He retreats from responsibility of murdering an innocent person. They accept responsibility (v. 25).

They take “innocent blood” upon themselves, just as Jesus warned in 23:35. They agree that the consequences will also affect their children (cf. 23:36). Pilate released Barabbas and handed Jesus over, after scourging, to be crucified. Judas was also aware that he had betrayed innocent blood (27:4-5).

The Roman soldiers now take over the action and accomplish the crucifixion (vv. 27-56). After the mocking and abuse scene (vv. 27-31), they lead him out to be crucified. The parody of kingship – robe, rod, crown – and the various kinds of abuse are designed to demean, humiliate, and weaken the prisoner.

The actual crucifixion is narrated rather sparsely (vv. 32-37). Jesus refuses any narcotic to blunt the pain. He is crucified between two *lēistai* (ληισταί), i.e., insurrectionists or robbers (v. 38). Matthew recounts how the Jewish religious leaders continue to heap scorn upon Jesus (vv. 39-44). The assumption behind their slander is that the Messiah would never tolerate such suffering and indignity. He would use his power “to save himself” (v. 42). If he can “destroy the temple and build it in three days,” why can he not use such power to deal with the Roman authorities? If he will get off the cross, then “we will put confidence in him” (v. 42). This is the kind of “sign” that will convince them of Jesus’ messianic credentials. Further, if he claims to put confidence in God, then God, if it his will, can save him (v. 43). But if God does not save him, obviously he cannot be the Messiah. This is the same temptation Satan employed in Matt. 4. Again they assume that God would never allow his Messiah to be treated in this manner. However, as Jesus acknowledged in Gethsemane, it is God’s will that places him on the cross. What should cause absolute astonishment generates nothing but scorn. Even the two “insurrectionists” join in abusing Jesus. Perhaps they thought he might include them in his miraculous escape!

Matthew, as Mark, devotes a special section to the actual death of Jesus (vv. 45-56). We are told what he did and said at the moment of death and who witnessed this event. As well Matthew notes the cosmic and religious phenomena that occur concurrent with Jesus’ death. Cosmic phenomena include the darkness from 12 noon to 3pm, the earthquake, and rocks splitting (v. 51). Religious phenomena include the tearing of the temple veil, from top to bottom (v. 51), tombs were opened, bodies of ‘holy ones’ were raised (v. 52), and those raised entered the holy city, appearing to many people (v. 53). These proto-eschatological events indicate the significance of Jesus’ death and anticipate its future consequences. The tearing of the veil has been understood in various ways, but I would link it with Jesus’ prophecies about the temple’s destruction.

The description of Jesus' death is quite unusual – “crying with a loud voice he released the spirit” (v. 50). Parallels are found in texts such as Genesis 35:18 and Wisdom 16:14. Jesus still is in charge. He does not die in weakness, but with vigour and purpose. The speculations regarding Elijah are probably tied to the prophecy in Malachi that Elijah would appear as the great day of Yahweh dawned. If Jesus is Messiah, their eschatological timetable would expect Elijah next. However, they are uncertain as to Elijah's precise relationship to the Messiah, particularly a dying Messiah. They are probably prompted by Jesus' use of Psalm 22:1 in which the term “*ēli* (Ηλι),” the transliteration of the Hebrew terms “my God,” is confused with the name of Elijah.

One of the witnesses is the centurion, but Matthew also includes the other soldiers in the unit (v. 54). As they observe these various phenomenon, particularly the earthquake and the darkness, terror seizes them and they conclude “Truly this person was son of God” (v. 54). Romans were particularly attuned to natural phenomena as indicators of divine direction. Are their assumptions about “son of God” based in the taunts they heard from the Jewish religious leaders (v. 43)? What would these soldiers mean by this expression? Is it a statement about Jesus' political/religious significance, since the Roman emperor was also “son of God” (*filius dei*)?

Some female disciples of Jesus were present, at least at a discrete distance, observing these things too (vv. 55-56). These are the women who will be significant as resurrection witnesses and assistants in Jesus' burial.

Matthew emphasizes two significant elements about Jesus' burial. First, it was accomplished by one “who considered himself to be a disciple of Jesus” (v. 57). Apart from his wealth and that he had a tomb already prepared, we learn nothing else about Joseph, other than his home town – Arimathea. What prompts Joseph to act, when none of the eleven will not dare to do this is not stated. But he dares to request directly from Pilate permission to bury Jesus – the act of a pious Jew to prevent the land from being desecrated by an unburied body. It was still Passover – probably Friday. Several women assist him.

The next day, i.e., Sabbath, the religious leaders tidy up some loose ends, particularly anticipating some problems about resurrection speculation. They do not believe Jesus will rise again, but want to prevent his followers from stealing the body and making this claim. So they ask Pilate to post a guard and officially to seal the tomb until after the third day. Matthew used a Latin loan word “*custodia* (κουστωδία) to describe this guard. While Pilate makes the religious leaders responsible, he seems to put at their disposal some Roman military resources (cf. 28:14). They have his permission to make it “as safe as they know how” (v. 65).

There is no doubt that Jesus dies. All the indications make this very clear. He is buried, according to normal Jewish process, with his body wrapped in cloth and anointed with aromatic ointments.

Does anyone really expect that Jesus will rise from the dead? His disciples have fled and are nowhere to be found. His body is entombed with no sense that it is done in any way to facilitate resurrection. His enemies take every precaution to prevent grave tampering – a common occurrence in antiquity. Roman resources and authority support their efforts. Jesus’ resurrection catches everyone by surprise. For all concerned the end of chapter 27 is the end of the story of Jesus, a fitting end for one who has created “deception” (v. 64). What happens Sunday is a complete surprise, even though Jesus has prophesied it would happen numerous times.

Matthew 28 – Resurrection, Restoration, and Commissioning

Matthew 28 has three segments:

- vv. 1-10 The account of the Resurrection
- vv. 11-15 The Soldiers explanation for the empty tomb
- vv. 16-20 Jesus’ resurrection appearance to his followers and final commands.

Resurrection (vv. 1-10)

Sabbath ends at sundown on Saturday. The women arrive very early on Sunday morning to complete the burial arrangements – Mary Magdalene and the “Other Mary.” Whether the earthquake occurs as they are on the way to the tomb or previous to this, they encounter a divine messenger (angel of the Lord; cf. 1:20) who opens the tomb (v. 2). The description of the messenger’s clothes (v. 3) is similar to the transfiguration description of Jesus in Matthew 17. This spiritual being is visible to the soldiers guarding the tomb – they see him in action and are petrified with fear.

When the women arrive, they observe this scene and the divine messenger acts to moderate their fearful response (v. 5). He announces to them that Jesus, the crucified one (perfect participle), now “has been raised just as he said” and so is not present (v. 6). They are commanded to take this news to the disciples (v. 7). As well they are to remind the disciples that “he goes before you into Galilee, there you will see him.” This references an earlier prophecy in Matthew 26:32.

Their response is different from that recorded in Mark’s gospel (16:8). They are fearful, but also filled with joy and immediately obey the messenger (28:8). On the way Jesus appears; they recognize and worship him; he reaffirms the instructions of the divine messenger (28:10). He calls his disciples “my brothers.”

The Guards (28:11-15)

As the women are busy following their instructions, the guards run into the city to let the high priests know what has happened (28:11). More conspiring occurs (28:12) as a strategic response is

worked out. More silver passes palms and a story is fabricated – they spin the message as we would say. The Jewish leaders efforts to prevent claims of resurrection (sealing the tomb, establishing a Roman guard) would be vain if his disciples succeeded in stealing the body (28:13-14). Matthew notes that this same false report still is circulating in his day (28:15).

Final Resurrection Appearance and Command (28:16-20)

This pericope is divided into two sections. First there is the report of Jesus' post-resurrection meeting with the Eleven (vv. 16-18). The Eleven have returned to Galilee as Jesus commanded. When Jesus appears, "they worshiped but some doubted" (v. 17). What does this imply? Why the doubts? Perhaps the verb describes uncertainty as to what they have experienced and its implications for their future.

The second part is Jesus' response to their uncertainty (vv. 18-20) in the form of several commands and declarations:

1. Jesus now exercises "all authority in heaven and on earth" – this was how God was defined in Matthew 6:9-10. The "Kingdom of Heaven", i.e., the powerful rule of God is now being exercised through the risen Jesus (v. 18). This is Matthew's final comment about the source and nature of Jesus' authority.
2. Jesus commands them "make disciples/recruit learners" (v. 19). Discipleship formation has been a primary theme of Matthew's Gospel and here we see its culmination. "All nations" are the scope of their mission. This is to occur "as they go" about their normal business.
3. The elements of this disciple-making are twofold – baptism and teaching. Why this order and why these elements? Teaching correlates to the role of a "learner" (disciple). The content of the teaching is "keeping all of the commands of the Messiah." This is not just a communication of knowledge, but it is a transformation of life – keeping, preserving, guarding. Faithful, active vigilance is required.
4. The act of immersion/purification signals a person's repentant response to their witness and a desire to be purified for participation in the Messiah's community. Its Trinitarian focus reflects Jesus' baptismal act in 3:13-17 which also involved the Father, Son and Spirit at the inauguration of Jesus' mission. Such people live and act in the name of God (as in Matthew 10 and 18).
5. We end with another declaration of divine presence "to the end of the age." The "Emmanuel" ("God with us") prophecy in Matthew 1:23 is taken up and reiterated. Bodily absence does not mean spiritual absenteeism.

These are Jesus' "great commandments" which form the essence of the new covenant life and service. Part of their teaching role will entail assisting people to interpret correctly the Jewish scriptures in the light of Jesus Messiah, using his framework of interpretation.

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