

# The Gospel of Matthew and Judaic Traditions

*A Relevance-based Commentary*



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*Herbert W. Basser with Marsha B. Cohen*

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# The Gospel of Matthew and Judaic Traditions

*A Relevance-based Commentary*

*By*

Herbert W. Basser with Marsha B. Cohen



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# Preface

I like to think my thought processes require others to drop all of their preconceptions about the topic at hand in order to enter the domain of my current views. I even try to do this myself when rethinking matters about which I had once been convinced otherwise. Peter Zaas put it this way:

Basser's own thought-world can occasionally be difficult to penetrate, but those who have persevered have been more-than-amply rewarded.<sup>1</sup>

Michele Murray encapsulates my enterprise as

... expertly highlighting similarities and parallels between Matthew's Gospel and other pieces of Jewish literature in their interpretations of biblical verses, use of idiom and motif, and theologies. In so doing, he persuasively demonstrates the degree to which the earliest layer of the Gospel of Matthew originally derives from a Palestinian Jewish matrix. The result is a contribution that offers a richer and generally more nuanced understanding of the Gospel material.<sup>2</sup>

The present work comprises a commentary to the complete Gospel of Matthew as I now read it, having reworked many details in my thinking of the last 10 years. My 2009 book, *The Mind behind the Gospels: a Commentary to Matthew 1–14*, covered the first half of the Gospel. From that work I learned much about writing commentaries on Matthew. If you do not fall, you do not learn to walk. I discovered from that experience the necessity of proofreading more carefully. Among the many typos was the omission of the little word “not” from one sentence that completely reversed the intended meaning. Furthermore (and this is even more embarrassing), an insight I mistakenly believed to be original, and claimed as my own, had been previously published by someone else in the 1920s; criticism of it had appeared in the 1960s. Only by studying journal articles on Matthean research did I finally realize that I was re-inventing a wobbly wheel. The authors of articles that disputed my retroversion apparently overlooked the fact that I was not the first to have made certain claims. I also changed my mind on a number of issues. For all of these reasons, Marsha B. Cohen, my old friend and new collaborator, and I decided

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Zaas, “Review of *The Jewish Jesus*” (2012).

<sup>2</sup> Michele Murray, “(Review) *The Mind Behind the Gospels*” (2012), 164–167.

to revise that book and integrate it into this one, a commentary on all twenty-eight chapters of Matthew's Gospel.

My present subtitle derives from the novel insight of Rivka Ulmer who correctly explained my method as based on *relevance theory*. Although I was unaware of this term, this label accurately defines my approach to reading the Gospel of Matthew. She wrote:

From a methodological point of view Basser appears to be working with relevance theory. Precluding endless compilations and comparisons of materials, relevance theory as explained by Stephen Pattemore is a combination of the following citation methods in the analysis of ancient texts: cotextual (from the same text), contextual (from the same socio-cultural and political environment) and intertextual (from other texts). B[asser] in my opinion formidably applies this approach.<sup>3</sup>

In this short paragraph Ulmer convinced me that I was like Molière's character, M. Jourdain, who discovered to his delight that he was adept in speaking prose although he had no idea he was able to do so and in fact had been doing it for a long time. "Well, what do you know about that? These forty years now, I've been speaking in prose without knowing it! How grateful am I to you for teaching me that!"<sup>4</sup> This is why this work is subtitled *A Relevance Based Commentary*.

I was much encouraged by the helpful reviews of Michael Cook,<sup>5</sup> Robert Gundry<sup>6</sup> and Timothy Howell,<sup>7</sup> who pointed out areas of weakness in my prior work as well as its strengths. Ben Viviano's review helped me see arguments in my work open to misunderstanding because I had not explained myself sufficiently or clearly.<sup>8</sup> The present work takes into account their critiques

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3 Rivka Ulmer "(Review) *The Mind Behind the Gospels: A Commentary to Matthew 1–14* (2010)," 823–24.

4 Molière (Jean-Baptiste Poquelin), *The Bourgeois Gentleman*, Act 11, Scene 4.

5 Michael Cook, "Review of Basser, Herbert W., *The Mind behind the Gospels: A Commentary to Matthew 1–14*" (2010).

6 Robert Gundry, "Review of Herbert Basser, *The Mind Behind the Gospels: A Commentary to Matthew 1–14*" (2011).

7 Timothy Howell, "Review of Herbert Basser, *The Mind Behind the Gospels: A Commentary to Matthew 1–14*" (2011).

8 Benedict Viviano's review of *The Mind Behind the Gospels* (2011) claims that my use of the Epistle of James in that book is nothing new. He misses the judicial setting inherent in the James passage. This passage was also addressed in "Blind Injustice: Jesus' Prophetic Warning against Unjust Judging (Matthew 7:1–5)," the Ph.D. dissertation of Christopher N. Chandler to the University of St. Andrews in 2010, the year after my book appeared. It cites a rabbinic parallel that is not quite as close to James' words as the one I cited (*Midrash Tannaim* to Deut 16:19) but emphasizes the same point.

and advice. I have reworked much of the material they reviewed of *The Mind behind the Gospels*<sup>9</sup> and incorporated the revised content into the early chapters of the present work.

A challenge to my own thoughts of remarkable congruencies between what I took as solid Jewish tradition referenced in New Testament writings is found in Morton Smith's critique of B. Gerhardssohn's *Memory and Manuscript*.<sup>10</sup> Smith shows that the faces of Gospel and Talmudic literature are quite different in presentation and format as finished products but he fails to argue that the cultural idiom of rabbinic literature and Gospels are not shared—the fact is they are shared. In this same journal where Smith has his piece I found a critical note by Louis H. Silberman.<sup>11</sup> The late Lou Silberman was my PhD supervisor and guided me at my special request although I was at the University of Toronto and he was in Tucson Arizona; I was his last PhD student. So I was interested in whatever he might have to say about anything. In his note, Silberman argued that not only did Rev. 3:14 share the midrashic understanding of Prov. 8:30 but it cites the Hebrew in its original within its midrashic contextual meaning. In his typically thorough style he argued the case to preclude all reasonable objections. I concur with him, contra Smith, that the facts of the details of the idiom and message speak for themselves.

Beyond narrow questions that revolve around discerning “parallels” and identifying borrowed motifs lies the revelation of irrefutable evidence that there exists an entire literature, spanning the ages, through which the Jewish imagination has constructed vivid images to express profoundly Jewish sentiments. These expressions still exist and are preserved as part of the legacy of the Jewish “sea of learning” and provide a prism for viewing Matthew’s imagery. They need not be reinvented. Furthermore, it is superfluous to concoct hypothetical interpretations of these images when uncontrived real ones actually exist, although some have been altered or “updated” in their retelling.

Change can be very slow, even inadvertent, in Jewish tradition. Present-day academies of Talmudic scholarship have much more in common with their medieval precursors than with modern educational systems. The core of the practices of religious Jews is not very different from those of their ancestors, nor is their religious vocabulary very different. It is extraordinary indeed how the words of the Hebrew Bible have exhibited such consistency through the ages. Once thought to be later than the parent texts of the Septuagint,

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<sup>9</sup> Academic Studies Press, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Morton Smith, “A Comparison of Early Christian and Early Rabbinic Tradition” (1963), 169–176.

<sup>11</sup> Lou Silberman, “Farewell to ὁ ἀμήν” (1963), 213–215.

the Masoretic type of the Torah text can now be seen to be of the same, if not of an earlier, date.<sup>12</sup>

This is the case because of the endeavors of Jewish teachers through whom these traditions have been handed down. It was their job both to recite what they had heard and to progressively systematize the body of law and lore, integrating accretions into the formation of a seemingly seamless and organic whole—*the tradition* (singular). It is for this reason that the core of the tradition has held firm within the same forms and often in the same words from one generation to the next.<sup>13</sup> Otherwise, the great bulk of “the tradition” would have been too diverse and confusing to have been of any use. This process of systematization continues to this day, with new questions being asked concerning the fixed tradition and new theories being propounded in response to them. *Ex nihilo nihil fit.* The stories told in Midrash and the Talmuds and passed down by them did not come out of nowhere. They had to have had antecedents, perhaps from a variety of sources. This is also the case with the material found in the Gospel of Matthew. Its author organized and wrote down what he had previously heard and read. Certainly he added things here and there but in no way can it be said that he invented his Gospel. Preservation is not invention.

The relationship of the Gospel of Matthew to the literature of the Talmuds and various commentaries at the core of Judaic traditions introduces a number of questions. The most pressing one for me is, “What mindset framed the life of Jews in Matthew’s day?” It has become increasingly fashionable to speak of “competing Judaisms,” “proto-rabbinism,” “Temple-centric Judaism.” These and many other approaches to the systematic study Second Temple Judaism dismiss Talmudic and midrashic writings as being too late to tell us anything useful about Jewish life in Matthew’s day. Professor Steven Fine has observed to me privately that perhaps all of these terms derive from some kind of scholarly reconstruction of history based on Protestant views of the development of Christianity that became dominant in academia over the past century and a half. For these scholars, Catholicism broke away from some more pluralistic foundation as Catholic Fathers strove to consolidate power and authority for their form of Christianity. There was a gradual “catholicizing” that

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<sup>12</sup> Eugene Ulrich, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Origins of the Bible* (1999).

<sup>13</sup> David Flusser, *Jewish Sources in Early Christianity* (1989), 63: “The literature of the Sages began to be collected in the generation following the destruction of the Temple. Thus we can find parallels to New Testament Midrashim [HB: Flusser’s designation] only in very late collections.”

eventually won the day. Consequently, Fine suggests, we have a “protestantization” of Jewish history.<sup>14</sup>

Some of what I consider to be the most useful and meaningful source material, essential for understanding the Gospel of Matthew, has been previously pointed out by others. Yet the real import of these sources has generally been overlooked, and the sources themselves have been overwhelmed and obfuscated when they are swallowed up by other materials of little worth. While Strack and Billerbeck’s *Kommentar* can be useful, it is so cluttered with irrelevancies that it overburdens the reader to seek out the one or two worthy comments in every ten pages of this densely printed work.<sup>15</sup> Generally speaking, Talmudic scholars from Montefiore to Flusser give us much less of what is irrelevant than their “Old Testament” and/or “intertestamental” colleagues do. Nevertheless, their focus on parallel content in Jewish literature usually distracts them from the importance of parallel style, form, and structure.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See Steven Fine, *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World* (2005), 55. Also see pp. 47–81 and especially the third chapter, “Archeology and the Search for ‘Non-Rabbinic Judaism’” (33–46). I thank Professor Fine for making these materials available to me.

<sup>15</sup> Hermann Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* (1922). Besides reporting a great deal of irrelevant material, some of their comments are misleading. Their comments, pp. 533, 538 and p. 544, reference *b. B. Bat.* 10b in their commentary to vol. IV, Luke 10:25–37 (parable of the Good Samaritan). Walter Grundmann (1959) putatively trying to show the malevolent nature of Jews, notes the contrast between the loving Samaritan and the hating Jew (p. 90). This passage was cited verbatim by Eberhard Juengel, *Jesus und Paulus* (2004), 172, and he notes the reference in Strack and Billerbeck. Grundmann had claimed, on this basis, a teacher held that if a Jew were to accept aid from non-Jews (*nichtjuden*), the redemption of Israel would be delayed. In his book on parables, Klyne Snodgrass (1998, 696 n. 52) properly notes this misuse of *b. B. Bat.* 10b in relation to the parable of the Good Samaritan. As for Grundmann, Susannah Heschel has a lot to say about his rabid Nazism and hatred of Jews, and his denial that Jesus was a Jew. See her study of Grundmann in *The Aryan Jesus* (2008), especially p. 155. Of course S/B tells us nothing about the parable of the Samaritan in their citation.

The Talmud notes a difference in attitudes between two 4th century Rabbis concerning Rabbis accepting donations for charity from idolaters. However—and this is key—as for Jews giving charity to needy idolaters together with deserving Jews the same Talmudic passage makes it clear that no one disputed the long standing practice of doing so in order to maintain good relations with them.

<sup>16</sup> Israel Jacob Yuval, in *Two Nations in Your Womb* (2006), 23 n. 33, incorrectly avers that works such as the present one show a one-sided influence of New Testament on Talmud and Midrash. Detailed analysis of both literatures shows, at best, a common well-spring of unique Jewish culture. His proofs hold no substance. What serves as proof is his mistaken idea that the Talmudic assertion that “Pentecost (Shavuot) celebrates the day the law was given at Sinai” was taken from the appearance of the Holy Spirit to the Apostles

A list of those who wrote works collecting rabbinic parallels to the New Testament is found in the appendix to a doctoral dissertation completed in 1986 at Dropsie College, Philadelphia, titled *Paul Billerbeck as Student of Rabbinic Literature: A Description and Analysis of His Interpretive Methodology*, by Daniel John Rettberg. The literature is substantial. For my part, I do not suggest I am doing much more than bringing the sense of Matthew to life by selecting materials to show what an informed reader would derive from reflection on these materials. I do not claim anything more than is reasonable. What exists in Jewish literature, from any time period where heirs to the cultural norms of *aggadah* (lesson-driven *Tanakh* interpretation) and *halakhah* (legal-driven interpretation) dug profoundly into their learning, can be more helpful in uncovering deep meaning in the New Testament than the works of modern-day scholars who speculate upon what might have been in Matthew's mind. At least my material is not invented to fit my view of what I need Matthew to say. I do not merely present parallels, as many of my predecessors do, but try to show what these parallels teach us about the meaning of the Gospel verse at hand. In short, I have selected, from the original Hebrew and Aramaic sources at my disposal, those pertinent Jewish teachings that solved difficulties in interpretation to my satisfaction. I have tried to indicate what we can learn from the material to give us a better handle on the Gospel tradition.

This volume does more than replace the classic but narrow conventions and perspective of Strack-Billerbeck by showing Jewish forms of thinking that lie behind much of the Gospel. I have tried to show the relevance of these Jewish understandings and the importance of understanding them if one is to fully discern the intent and meaning of the Matthew's Gospel. Nevertheless, my objectives closely align with their stated goals. Their Introduction (p. vi) to their work suggests they did not claim they were presenting a clear, definitive exegesis of the New Testament. Rather, they seem to suggest that their ultimate aim was to present an understanding of the New Testament, which the reader would derive from reflection upon the material found in the Talmud and the Midrash. This summarizes my overall objective as well.

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in Acts 2, fifty days after the Crucifixion, is as weak as his other arguments. M.D. Herr, in "The Calendar" (1976) has already shown that a pre-Christian source, *Jubilees*, alludes to the substance of the Talmudic assertion. Yet, on p. 116 Yuval, in a full turnaround, claims the link between Shavuot and the revelation at Sinai is assured after the second century bce, if not earlier, and supplies scholarly references to that effect. Furthermore, Yuval's claim (*Two Nations*, 29) that Christians were completely aware of the practices and beliefs of contemporary Jews in the Middle Ages is disproved by a close reading of Church Fathers and schoolmen on Jews as shown in my work, "What Makes a Commentary Jewish or Christian?" (Basser 2006).

In explanation of the materials I use, the reader should not become alarmed that there will be times when I cite late medieval sources and prayers even where Talmudic sources of a much earlier period are sufficiently available to make the same point. The reader's eyebrows may rise several inches when noting such things: "Basser, are you nuts? In chapter 14 you cite Rashi's eleventh-century commentary to a Talmudic passages to make the point those very early Talmudic passages have already made!" I answer: "My preference is to use a credible course that dramatizes a familiar scenario, from rabbinic times to the present, in a way that portrays the *realia* of the Gospel's picture." The same picture, in Rashi and Matthew, of the Master blessing, breaking, and distributing bread, shows us a shared culture that finds meaning in the same details. That very image of distributing bread, in every detail, is still common practice today for many Jews. I will also argue throughout the book that, in many instances where we have such close literary matches between Gospel and Talmud, we cannot easily escape the conclusion we deal with more than a shared mindset; we deal with an articulated tradition that predates both our Gospel and Talmudic sources. At times we have sister traditions, while at other times we have traditions that are more distantly related. Nor would it be incorrect to use the term "genetic" to describe the source of certain shared assumptions even if the channels of transmission from Jewish Oral lore to Christian Gospel are too circuitous to even contemplate uncovering. The internal evidence for such transmission of shared mind and shared content is sharp and clear.

Perhaps the point might be made that the Gospel of Matthew seems to be too early for it to contain any evidence of the "rabbinic" forms and contents that I argue it does. Nonetheless, I contend that were we to try to construct a precursor to rabbinic oral tradition in literary form, we could not have done much better than a text like the Gospel of Matthew. The legal arrangements and forms of argumentation in Matthew are well within the range of full-fledged "rabbinism," as I have shown elsewhere.<sup>17</sup> The sermons in Matthew are likewise composed of interpretations current in the rabbinic literature of his time period; they are centered on the very same biblical verses and share the same interpretive idiom. Since Jewish sources from the second through the fifteenth centuries preserve ancient oral and written traditions intertwined with new ones, as far as I am concerned, whatever from these sources helps us to better understand Matthew's text is relevant and ought to be welcome.

Insofar as I am able to, I generally use, but not always, the earliest material available to me to shed light on the Gospel. I do not shy away from using

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<sup>17</sup> "The Gospels Would Have Been Greek to Jesus" (Basser 2001).

material from later compilations whose original provenance is unknown. Nor do I have any qualms about using literary formulations of later date if they are useful. The forms of literature generally dictate the choice of the materials I cite. I am sensitive to the forms of exegesis that fit fixed, known rhetorical methods. In any given case, the attribution of Matthew's method to the appropriate category of form, visible in rabbinic tradition, helps us find the intended meaning of his rhetoric. So when I recognize congruent forms in Matthew and in other Jewish texts, I cautiously use the latter to illuminate the former. Even if it turns out that some of this material was somehow influenced by pre-Pauline Christian sources, I would argue that such material is still a most valuable tool to unpack Matthew's earlier models. We need offer no excuse for using the Talmudic traditions at our disposal when they appear to match or share a style and structure similar to that of Matthew's text. Those who sneer at using rabbinic materials to help interpret the Gospel must either invent convoluted interpretations of their own, or else turn to, and rely upon, Jewish traditions from the inter-testamental literature that may not be nearly as close to Matthew's formulations as are the rabbinic formulations.

My method is this: I read the Matthean verse. If and when it suggests something else I've learned, I argue that there is a connection. I speculate how everything might fit together. If I like it, I write it; if not, I go on. If we find that others before me have said something similar, I either provide a citation to their work or (more likely) we discard what I have written. In general, we have tried to avoid restating what others have said, for not everything bears repeating. I have not made the work easy but I have pointed to some lingering crumbs along the hidden path to help the lost reader travel through this Gospel.

As a rule, I will not bore the reader with every account in Jewish literature of an angel announcing an impending birth or a king decreeing the persecution and destruction of Jewish children. Nor is it necessary for me to point out the long list of Jewish sources that confirm the wickedness of Herod, or each and every Hebrew Bible verse that seems to corroborate Matthew's mode of thinking. In most cases, one or two examples will suffice. I do not think it necessary to expand upon the Gospel's presentation of Jesus as a new Moses or Herod as a new Pharaoh, although some may find inter-texts that would enable them to read some theological message into such an argument to be of interest. I am not concerned, for the most part, with the historical accuracy of the information found in Gospel text. Instead, I am interested in understanding the models upon which the author of Matthew and his sources have based the rhetoric, and explaining the reasons why the sentences in Matthew's work follow one another in the way they do. My own work has very little to do with theorizing about the Gospels' influence on one another. Although it is sometimes

useful to compare the phrasings in one document with those in another, or to scrutinize the manuscript variants within a single Gospel, I have tried to keep such discussions to a minimum.

I prefer to read Matthew, as I do all the Gospels—as a retelling of a basic story-line passed down through time. Matthew’s author, more than others involved in the transmission process, lets us see his cards on occasion. Even when he repeats what others also know, his presentation is often more dramatic, more highlighted, more brilliant. Time and again in my work, I have tried to show that existing records found in *midrashim* (Jewish homiletic interpretations), from whatever sources they are now available, inform and are informed by the culture upon which the presynoptic stories in Matthew’s sources are predicated. Thus we account for some of the odd details in them.<sup>18</sup> All this, again, I hope to demonstrate in the work that follows.

While the present commentary subscribes to this larger picture, as did my earlier work published in 2009, I have rethought substantial portions of the earlier details in the commentary to warrant publishing it as part of a full commentary to Matthew which corrects earlier shortcomings in analysis, errors in judgment and flaws in presentation. I include as my co-author Marsha B. Cohen, an independent scholar, writer and wordsmith with a broad background in biblical and New Testament studies, history and philosophy, with recognized expertise in the role of religion in contemporary world affairs. With her encouragement I did not leave Jesus hanging in suspense at the end of chapter 14 but saw him through to the resurrection in chapter 28. She clarified and corrected chapters 15–28 as I wrote them, then reconfigured and reworded much of the chapters comprising the first half of this volume. At her suggestion I added examples and citations to clarify certain passages, and deleted others that seemed redundant or superfluous. Her candid comments and criticisms were always astute and perceptive, and her good-natured humor guided us through some very rough spots. More than a mere proofreader or editor, she reworked the text and references for precision, clarity and readability. Although the book is written in the first person (mine), her revisions, clarifications and criticisms are an integral part of this book. I am grateful to her for her four years of work on the manuscript and for consenting to have her name on it as my worthy collaborator.

I received generous help from colleagues: Peter Zaas allowed me to use his Matthew translation which I tweaked here and there as I saw fit, Dale C. Allison shared his insights on enigmatic Greek phrases and larger passages. Amy-Jill

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<sup>18</sup> See, for example, “The Jewish Roots of the Transfiguration” (Basser 1988) and “Matthew 21:12: Trading Words, Turning the Tables, Timing the End” (Basser 2004).

Levine inspired the entire work and mentored me. Jacob Neusner had initially intimated I do such a book in concert with his and Chilton's work on Mark. Zev Garber gave me space in his volumes on the Jewish Jesus and invited me to conferences on the topic to express my views on Matthew. To David Malone, Howard Adelman, Jacob Basser, Judy Young, Carl E. Pace, Steven Fine and others I owe a debt of profound thanks.

To accept a work of this size and complexity is not a simple decision for a publishing house. It requires recognition of the years of love and dedication that authors invest. Alan Avery Peck, as always, proved to be a very special editor with both vision and steadfast commitment. Marsha Cohen and I found his enthusiastic encouragement of our work provided us with renewed energy to complete the final stages of this book in the Brill series he edits. We cannot thank him enough for his enthusiastic support. For many months Brill's very capable Katelyn Chin worked with us as the manuscript's midwife, placing it into the hands of readers and getting it out again, along with their critiques to advising us on all aspects of the editorial issues. She facilitated the technical and contractual procedures necessary to bring our work to light with patience, efficiency and good will. We also thank Assistant Editor Meghan Connolly for bringing our book into production, and are honored to have Brill's imprimatur on our book.

*Herbert W. Basser*  
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*Marsha B. Cohen*

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## List of Abbreviations

<i>'Abod. Zar.</i>	<i>Avodah Zarah</i>
<i>'Abot</i>	<i>Avot</i>
<i>'Abot R. Nat.</i>	<i>'Abot of Rabbi Nathan</i>
<i>Ag. Ap.</i>	<i>Josephus, Against Apion</i>
<i>Ann.</i>	<i>Tacitus, Annales</i>
<i>Ant.</i>	<i>Josephus, Antiquities</i>
<i>'Arak.</i>	<i>Arakhin</i>
<i>b.</i>	<i>Bavli</i> —Babylonian Talmud
<i>B. Bat.</i>	<i>Bava Batra</i>
<i>B. Meṣ.</i>	<i>Bava Meṣi'a</i>
<i>B. Qam.</i>	<i>Bava Qamma</i>
<i>Ber.</i>	<i>Berakhot</i>
<i>Bek.</i>	<i>Bekhorot</i>
<i>CD</i>	Damascus Document
Chron (1–2)	Chronicles 1–2
Col	Colossians
Cor 1–2	Corinthians 1–2
Dan	Daniel
Deut	Deuteronomy
<i>Deut. Rabb.</i>	Deuteronomy Rabbah
DSS	Dead Sea Scrolls
Eccl.	Ecclesiastes
<i>'Ed.</i>	<i>'Eduyyot</i>
<i>'Eruv.</i>	<i>'Eruvin</i>
Esth	Esther
Exod	Exodus
<i>Exod. Rab.</i>	<i>Exodus Rabbah</i>
Ezek	Ezekiel
Gal	Galatians
Gen	Genesis
<i>Gen. Rab.</i>	Genesis Rabbah
<i>Git.</i>	<i>Gittin</i>
Hab	Habakkuk
<i>Haer.</i>	<i>Irenaeus, Against Heresies</i>
Hag	Haggai
<i>Hag.</i>	<i>Hagigah</i>
<i>Hist.</i>	<i>Tacitus, Historiae</i>

<i>Hist. eccl.</i>	Eusebius, <i>Ecclesiastical History</i>
Hos	Hosea
<i>Hul.</i>	<i>Hullin</i>
Isa	Isaiah
Jer	Jeremiah
Jos.	Josephus
Josh	Joshua
Judg	Judges
<i>Kallah Rab.</i>	<i>Kallah Rabbati</i>
<i>Ker.</i>	<i>Keritot</i>
<i>Ketub.</i>	<i>Ketubbot</i>
Kgs (1–2)	Kings 1–2
Lam	Lamentations
Lev	Leviticus
<i>Lev. Rab.</i>	<i>Leviticus Rabbah</i>
LXX	Septuagint
<i>m.</i>	Mishnah
<i>Ma'as.</i>	<i>Ma'aserot</i>
<i>Mak.</i>	<i>Makkot</i>
Mal	Malachi
Matt	Matthew
<i>Meg.</i>	<i>Megillah</i>
<i>Me'il.</i>	<i>Me'illah</i>
<i>Mek.</i>	<i>Mekhilta</i>
<i>Mek. R. Yish.</i>	<i>Mekhilta of Rabbi Yishmael</i>
<i>Menaḥ.</i>	<i>Menaḥot</i>
<i>Midr.</i>	Midrash
<i>Midr. Rab.</i>	<i>Midrash Rabbah</i>
<i>Mo'ed Qat.</i>	<i>Mo'ed Qatan</i>
MT	Masoretic Text
<i>Naz.</i>	<i>Nazir</i>
<i>Ned.</i>	<i>Nedarim</i>
Neh	Nehemiah
NT	New Testament
Num	Numbers
<i>Num Rab.</i>	<i>Numbers Rabbah</i>
Obad	Obadiah
<i>Pesah.</i>	<i>Pesahim</i>
<i>Pesiq. Rab Kah.</i>	<i>Pesiqta of Rab Kahana</i>
<i>Pirqe R. El.</i>	<i>Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer</i>

Prov	Proverbs
Ps/Pss	Psalm(s)
<i>Ps.-Clem</i>	Pseudo-Clementines
Rab.	Rabbah
Rom	Romans
<i>Qidd.</i>	<i>Qiddushin</i>
Rev	Revelation
<i>Roš Haš.</i>	<i>Rosh Hashanah</i>
<i>Šabb.</i>	<i>Shabbat</i>
Sam (1–2)	Samuel (1–2)
<i>Sanh.</i>	<i>Sanhedrin</i>
<i>Šeb.</i>	<i>Shevi'it</i>
<i>Šebu.</i>	<i>Shevu'ot</i>
<i>Sem.</i>	<i>Semaḥot</i>
<i>Šeqal.</i>	<i>Sheqalim</i>
<i>Sipre</i>	<i>Sifre</i>
<i>Sipra</i>	<i>Sifra</i>
Song	Song of Songs (Song of Solomon; Canticles)
<i>Sop.</i>	<i>Sopherim</i>
<i>Sot.</i>	<i>Soṭah</i>
<i>t.</i>	Tosefta
<i>T. Iss.</i>	<i>Testament of Issachar</i>
<i>T. Jud.</i>	<i>Testament of Judah</i>
<i>T. Levi</i>	<i>Testament of Levi</i>
<i>T. Sol.</i>	<i>Testament of Solomon</i>
<i>Ta'an.</i>	<i>Ta'anit</i>
<i>Tanh.</i>	<i>Midrash Tanhuma</i>
<i>Ter.</i>	<i>Terumot</i>
<i>Tg. Ps. J.</i>	<i>Targum Pseudo-Jonathan</i>
<i>Vesp.</i>	Suetonius, Vespasian ( <i>Vespanianus</i> )
<i>Vita</i>	Josephus, <i>The Life</i>
<i>War</i>	Josephus, <i>Jewish War</i>
<i>y.</i>	<i>Yerushalmi</i> (Jerusalem Talmud; Talmud of the Land of Israel)
<i>Yad.</i>	<i>Yadayim</i>
<i>Yebam.</i>	<i>Yevamot</i>
Zech	Zechariah
Zeph	Zephaniah
<i>Zebah.</i>	<i>Zebahim</i>

# General Introduction

The purpose of the Gospel of Matthew is to tell the story of Jesus' life and death and his subsequent resurrection. Matthew—a proper noun that I use to collectively denote the various authors responsible for the Gospel bearing that name which forms the first narrative section of the Christian Bible (although Marcan texts likely preceded it)—seems to have written his work to educate and shape the mindset of the Christian communities in the time and place during which he lived. As I stated in my earlier volume, the predominant, although not exclusive, approach of my inquiry into the Jewish rhetoric found in Matthew's Gospel presupposes that its author, most likely a succession of author/editors, selectively drew upon various oral and/or written materials, that he/they had at their disposal.

My thesis, in this volume as in my previous work, is that immediately after the death of Jesus, storytellers began to relate and circulate stories of the miracles of Jesus and his core teachings. These raconteurs spread these Jesus stories, likely in Hebrew and/or Aramaic, before the earliest written Gospels were composed in their present form.<sup>1</sup> The training of these raconteurs—Jewish[-Christian] students of traditions current in what is generally known as the Apostolic Church—was, I suspect, placed in the hands of the earliest documenters of Christian teaching.<sup>2</sup> They preached the news of salvation through

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<sup>1</sup> The Mishnah and Dead Sea Scrolls show a preference for Hebrew. Aramaic sayings are also found in them and are found in the Gospels. The Gospels retain some popular Aramaic transliterated into Greek. Josephus mentions conversing in both languages. The Late professor S. Morag told me he was convinced that Hebrew remained a spoken language from Biblical times and throughout the early medieval period. Jews maintained evolved Hebrew forms in their modern parlance suggesting the languages continued to develop orally into relatively late periods. The parables likely only existed in Hebrew as fixed expressions such as "flesh and blood" are known commonly only in Hebrew. See also Riesner 1981, 18–96.

<sup>2</sup> I use "disciples" as the first Christians would have: first, as the immediate students of Jesus who told his story to celebrate their experience of him and second, as more general followers who pass down legal and narrative traditions they have been taught. Luke 1:1–4 mentions that Luke himself had inherited traditions, both oral and written. Some of these disciples may have become missionary-raconteurs spreading the story to attract followers to their sect. I do not go so far as Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, to suggest we always have eyewitness accounts behind the stories in the Gospel rather than literary compositions, but I do grant that the earliest history of gospel production could have been, and likely was, based (at least in part) on eyewitness testimony. Issues of sources and relationships of Matthew to other Gospels are discussed in Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, ix–xxvii. These questions are not my issues here and I note that many have speculated on these relationships on which I

faith in Jesus the Christ to the lost sheep of Israel. These missionaries, who also seem to have been faith healers (Matt 10:1), shared the same cultural outlook, the same written and oral traditions, the same “mind” (love of God, love of Torah and its duties, love of Land) as all Jews in the Land of Israel, for indeed, prior to Paul at least, “the directors of the Apostolic Church” were Jews in the Land of Israel (Gal 2:1). It follows that they shared the same communities as did other Jews and understood matters much as they all did. If the community had fault lines of division, so did they. What each said was intelligible to the other: agree or disagree as they might. The idiom and thought pattern of this common mind-set informs, to a large extent, the backdrops of the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. And it is the erudite imagination of this culture (at times generative, at other times associative) that is the focus of my commentary.

Among these are early stories told by the followers of Jesus, both during his lifetime and shortly after his death, that reflect the stories as well as the cultural context of prevailing trends in Second Temple Judaism as they were understood by that Jesus community. The plan of Matthew’s Gospel, to my mind, is shaped by a staunch Bible reading Christ follower living in the latter part of the first century who had little sympathy with Jews and anticipated their eventual fadeout from the world-stage. Nevertheless, knowing that Jesus was a Jew, and likely a fully observant one at that, he preserved in the final version of his work accurate traditions of the times and views of Jews that had been part of the Jesus saga in the earlier half of the first century.

Remnants of Second Temple Jewish trends and traditions now lie scattered in bits and pieces in various works of the Jewish corpus. In the process of transmission, they have been constantly remolded and reshaped, added to and subtracted from, by Jewish scribes and scholars from the Second Temple period through the fifteenth century. If Matthew’s author dwells on matters such as Jesus’ disputes with the Pharisees or with the circumstances surrounding his birth and subsequent flight into Egypt, I assume, along with R.T. France, that

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largely remain silent; it might well be that we lack the literary evidence to make more definite judgments with any degree of certainty. Matthew, living in the subsequent Gentile phase of the Church’s leadership, sees Jesus as the replacement for the Law. He puts “Make disciples of all the nations” into the mouth of Jesus (28:19). In doing so he rephrases the central directive of *m. Abot* 1:1 to set it into a Gentile context: [Moses received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua; Joshua to the elders; the elders to the prophets; and the prophets handed it down to the men of the Great Assembly. They said three things: Be deliberate in judgment,] *raise up many disciples*, [and make a fence around the Torah].

it is because his sources dwell on them.<sup>3</sup> The sudden breaks in the structure of the narrative confirm for me France's notion that the author of Matthew used presynoptic material as a source for his Gospel.

Later rifts between the Jewish and Jesus communities shaped a narrative, likely ahistorical, whereby Jesus and the Jews part ways. This early material is most clearly discernible in the midrashic forms, the legal formats and formulae, and the frequent allusions to the prophetic literature that are found in Matthew. This is why Matthew's author, who can express such vehement anger toward the Jewish leaders, the Jewish people, and the Jewish Temple, can also write so movingly in his Gospel about concepts that profoundly resonate within Jewish culture.<sup>4</sup> The former tone reflects an angry Christian Jesus who blames his failures to save his flock on the deafness of the Jews to his message, the latter reflects profound Jewish teachings Jesus illuminated in his preaching. Matthew's skill comes to the fore in the unified tapestry he weaves from these apparent clashing threads.

Although his study dates to 1980 and so much more has been written on the topic to date, Schuyler Brown wrote a piece that deserves close scrutiny because it is typical in many ways of the studies that followed it. Essentially, he argues that once the Temple was destroyed, the gradual process of separation raced ahead into an inevitable separation. Jews needed to define themselves and their belief system to draw tight boundaries around communities that were no longer held together by the central Temple, and Christian communities needed to give way to the predominance of Gentiles within their communities and break with Jewish ceremonial rituals. For Brown, this very ambiguity is the substance of Matthew's Gospel. He says that Matthew, on the one hand, could not oppose the Jewish mandate of his community, which was set by Peter's authority, while, on the other, this same evangelist wanted to move the community into the gentile camp to heal divisions. The destruction and subsequent exile have been understood to show that Jews are no longer the chosen of God and the church was free to operate outside of "Jewish territory." Brown transfers his own problem with historical reconstruction to the substance of Matthew's problem that, for Brown, the Evangelist needs to work out in the final scenes of the First Gospel. To date, no theory of the parting of the ways suffices to address all the problems. And it has even been

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<sup>3</sup> See R.T. France's introduction in *The Gospel According to Matthew: an Introduction and Commentary* (1985), 78.

<sup>4</sup> Basser, "Gospel and Talmud," in *The Historical Jesus in Context* (Levine, Allison and Crossan 2006), 285–95.

suggested that the ways never parted for many centuries and hence no need to become muddled in the conflicting pieces of evidence.<sup>5</sup>

While I dispute that Matthew is responsible for the Jewish content in his Gospel and dispute that this content is largely post-70 CE<sup>6</sup> and that Jesus himself abrogated kosher laws,<sup>7</sup> I accept that the break for the Gospel writers occurred, likely within two decades after 70 CE, and that Matthew, writing from a gentile perspective, is clear on this position. However, I would argue that even after a break, there need not have been a total abandonment of Jewish law in all churches. Therefore the ambiguity and contradictions within present-day reconstructions of “the parting of the communities” actually reflect the contradictions and ambiguity that ensued in the post-70 era in various locations. Acts 24:5 uses the term *Nazoraīōn* (Hebrew *Notzrim*) for Christians as a separate group (implying they are not Jews) as do the Talmudic Rabbis (*b. ‘Abod. Zar.* 7b).

In *Birkat haMinim: Jews and Christians in Conflict in the Ancient World*, Yaakov Teppler provides a review of both Christian and Jewish material pertinent to this discussion. Both Justin Martyr who flourished around 140 in Caesarea, in his *Dialogue with Trypho* [is this Rabbi Tarfon?], and Talmudic sources record a ban on Jews talking to Christians.<sup>8</sup> *B. Šabb.* 116a–b refers to this ambiguity of observance of Jewish law in the period following the destruction of the Temple and the ensuing exile of many Jews. *B. Šabb.* 116a–b also refers to the need to eradicate the Gospels and avoid Christian places of worship at all costs. It has become clear to me that the break was precipitated more by the rejection of scribal law and interpretations, leading to the entire abrogation of the Torah’s rituals than by ideological and theological “heresies.”

All evidence suggests to me that Matthew wrote his work during the latter part of the first Christian century. I have no idea where these communities might have been. Nor can I speak with certainty about the social milieu(s) of these communities except for what may reasonably be inferred from Matthew’s literary hints. Judging from the similarities and differences between Matthew and other Gospels, Matthean authors drew upon a variety of sources familiar with Jewish cultural and legal literatures and their methods as well as

<sup>5</sup> Schuyler Brown, “The Matthean Community and the Gentile Mission” (1980), 213; 215. See the extensive Bibliography in *The Ways That Never Parted* (Becker and Reed 2007) for the various positions on the conflicting pieces of evidence.

<sup>6</sup> S. Brown, “The Matthean Community,” 214.

<sup>7</sup> S. Brown, “The Matthean Community,” 195; 198

<sup>8</sup> Yaakov Yanki Teppler, *Birkat haMinim: Jews and Christians in Conflict in the Ancient World* (2007), 126–27, 252.

critiques of them. We cannot tell whether these sources were oral or written; most likely they were mixed. Some things, however, are certain. One of them is that the bulk of the Gospel relating to the reported speeches and activities of Jesus shares its idiom with the shape of Jewish rhetoric known from Jewish sources that have survived from various time periods. Consider for example, Rashi's commentary on Song of Songs 2:11–13:

For, lo, the *winter is past*, the rain is over and gone; The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land; The fig tree *sends out her green buds*, and the vines with the tender grape give a good smell. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.

Rashi paraphrases Song 2:12 it as “*The days of summer draw near when the trees send out their buds* and travelers delight to see them.” On 2:13 he comments on the symbolism of redemptive motifs: “The time of offering first ripe fruits has arrived when you are to enter the land.” Remarkably Matt 24:32 quotes Jesus as saying:

Understand the parable of the fig tree. *Whenever its branch becomes tender and it sends out its leaves, you know that summer draws near* (Matt 24:32).

It is noteworthy how reflective of one another Rashi's words and those attributed to Jesus are, although they are separated by a thousand years. Both Rashi and Matthew both understand the blossoming of the fig tree as referring to the *approach of summer*, of which no mention is made in Solomon's Song; the Song speaks only of the passing of winter. Yet nowhere in the Gospel is the message of the parable made clear. Remarkably, Jewish sources offer the requisite understanding. The key to interpreting Jesus' parable is provided by Rashi and his sources: a fig tree blossoming as summer approaches signifies the onset of redemption. This literary phenomenon has a number of explanations that I will spell out in chapter 24.<sup>9</sup>

It seems beyond coincidence that Rashi and the Matthew's Jesus would present the allegory of the fig tree in almost identical terms. Where Scripture itself declares that “winter is past,” Matthew's Jesus and Rashi say that “summer draws near,” which they both understand to be a poetic coded reference—

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<sup>9</sup> I thank my nephew Jacob Basser for drawing my attention to this remarkable parallel in Rashi and Matthew.

Jesus obliquely and Rashi quite openly—to redemption itself being on the way. It is impossible to know for certain whether this similarity is mere happenstance, unlikely as that might seem, or is evidence of some very early shared tradition (like that preserved in the medieval *Midrash* to Song of Songs) that lurks in shadows behind their sources. One might even wonder about the possibility that Rashi copied a Gospel tradition into his commentary (a very difficult proposition given Rashi's animus towards Christianity and his penchant for anti-Christian polemic). This and hundreds more instances of Jewish and Christian sources complementing and supplementing one another present us with perplexing enigmas that invite exploration.

Among the inculcated values in this culture that is important in the Gospels are those related to the term “faith,” and we should now spend some time investigating the usage of this term in Jewish sources and practice (even contemporary practice). One of the most puzzling riddles in these literatures is the mystery of “faith”—what Matthew and Matthew’s Jesus mean by this word. “Faith” seems to mean many things in varying contexts: trust, belief, affirmation. Yet, in sum, one can boil down its sense to two scenarios: one philosophic and one experiential. Our literary sources suspect when Israelites saw miraculous plagues being sent upon their Egyptian tormentors or were astonished by food falling from the heavens or witnessed miraculous victories, they concluded that a greater power, God’s power, was favoring them. The writings suggest that Jews understood habitual acts of salvation at critical points in Israel’s sacred history could upon reflection suggest God’s promises to Israel’s ancestors were now being kept. God was keeping faith with his people and they in turn saw reason to keep faith with him by obeying his will. They interpreted their present experiences in light of prior promises that were now affirmed in fact. This interpretation of events formed a belief in the relationship between God and Israel.

Faith statements require some experience of first hand evidence or tradition of such evidence justifying reasonable expectation for present and future. Indeed the cognitive acceptance of such reports, leading to expectation and hope, itself constitutes an act of faith; conjecture made plausible by prior experience and story. This is one usage of the word “faith” which depends on a mental process of mediated inductive reasoning. And this is basic to the unique witnessing and professions 1) of Judaism—a knowledge of the truth told by God through Moses his servant as recorded in the Torah, 2) of Christianity concerning the sonship of Jesus as recorded in Christian Scriptures, and 3) of Islam the truth of God and Mohammed his prophet as recorded in the *Qur'an*.

The other usage of “faith” is that which depends on unmediated primary experience alone. Usually this is a solitary experience of an individual or

mystic. The mystic's belief in the transcendent and the ineffable overrides logical processes—the experience is the evidence. This “belief” lacks any processed cognition or “ergo” reasoning and relies on direct immediate experience. Often, these two modes of knowing intertwine. Intense faith in received tradition leads to direct faith experience of the divine in unmediated interaction between the divine realm and earthly realm—only through the ecstatic narrative of the faith events can we discern the double faith experience, the one leading to the other. It is this helix intertwining of “faiths” that Matthew refers to as faith in Jesus' healing scenes.

The Rabbis accepted communal experience as confirmed by traditions as paramount, but did not make light of reports of holy men whose stories they passed down. For now let us see how Jewish tradition handles Exodus 14:31, which recounts how the Israelites, as they fled from the pursuing Egyptians, witnessed direct acts of salvation which are noted to be the experience of faith in God and Moses. Later reflection, when reciting these experiences communally, recalls mystical events and allows for re-enactments and even dialogue with the covenantal God of promise and fulfillment. Right after this awesome experience, a kind of terrifying encounter with the hitherto inexperienced, we find ecstatic release in an emotional communal response.

And when the Israelites saw the mighty hand the Lord displayed against the Egyptians, the people held the Lord in awe and they had faith in the Lord and in Moses his servant. (Exod 14:31)

And the very next verse (Exod 15:1) records an ecstatic outburst of song:

Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord: “I will sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted. The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea.”

There are many rabbinic reworkings of these themes. According to the midrash the people, including the lowest strata of society, beheld the Lord himself—both here and at Mount Sinai.

So *Leqah Tov* (Byzantine) to Exod 15 and *Mekhilta of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai* to Exod 15:2 comments:

“This is my God and I will extol Him (Exod 15:2)” Rabbi Eliezer says, from where do people say that the maid-servant at the (splitting) Sea event experienced what [even] Isaiah and Ezekiel never saw? From what Scripture states: *This is my God and I will extol Him*...They all

collectively experienced transcendence and recited “This is my God and I will extol Him.”

Emil Fackenheim, in *God’s Presence in History*, writes:

Vision is not a root experience in Judaism. It is the experience of an isolated individual and may legislate to isolated individuals after him—those few to whom the heavens are accessible. At the Red Sea however the whole people saw, the lowly maid-servants included, and what occurred before their own eyes ...<sup>10</sup>

For Fackenheim, belief is a function of root experience invested in the community as a whole, leading to expectation and hope in the One who promises and can work miracles. Fackenheim and following midrash from the *Mekhilta of Rabbi Yishmael, Beshalah, Vayehi parasha 6*, complement one another:

Great is faith—for Israel had faith in the One (in their tradition) who brought the Universe into existence through his Word—and as reward for Israel’s faith in God, the Holy Spirit resided upon them as they declared (their experience in) Song. Scripture indicates that “they had faith in God and Moses His servant” (Exod 15:31) and then immediately “then Moses and the Israelites sang...” (Exod 16:1)

Ps. 106:12 has a similar understanding: “Then they believed His promises and sang His praise.” The same phenomenon occurs in *Mekhilta of Rabbi Yishmael, Yitro, Bahodesh, parasha 3*:

“To the witness of all the nation”—this teaches us that at the moment (of revelation at Sinai), they experienced [even] what Isaiah and Ezekiel never saw.

Prophets have lonely visions but this was a direct experience of the whole people.

The lesson is poetically enacted in the morning and evening Jewish prayer services.<sup>11</sup> Prayer encounter depends upon the recollection of Israel’s prime faith experiences and should follow it. *B. Ber. 4b* notes that the last verse Ps 19

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<sup>10</sup> Emil Fackenheim. *God’s Presence in History: Jewish Affirmations and Philosophical Reflections* (1970), 10.

<sup>11</sup> For early variants and the history of these passages see Ismar Elbogen, “Studies in the Jewish Liturgy 1” (1907), 45–247.

speaks of the redemption and the first verse of Ps 20 speaks of God's answer to the hopes. The lesson is that prayer is best juxtaposed to the enactment of Israel's experience and Song at the Sea. The rule is that prayer should follow the verses recalling Israel's redemption at the Sea as a catalyst for firm belief in future redemption. The traditional present-day evening *ma'ariv* prayer obeys this advice:

And His children saw his Power, praised and glorified His name and accepted His kingdom upon themselves. Moses and the children of Israel sang to You with great joy, and they *all* said—"Who is like You . . .?" Your kingdom, Your children saw, splitting the sea before Moses, "This is my God," they sang and declared. "The Lord reigns forever and ever." Blessed are you, Israel's Savior.

It would seem "Your kingdom" simply means "You (God)" in much the same way as people say "the White House" to mean the President of the United States.

The traditional present-day *shacharit* morning service is almost the same:

Moses and the children of Israel sang to you with great joy and they all said—"Who is like You . . .?" The redeemed ones on the sea shore extolled Your name together; all of them gave thanks. They proclaimed Your kingdom and declared, "The Lord reigns forever and ever." Blessed are you, Israel's Savior.

In sum, faith and salvation are bundled concepts and when Jesus refers to those of faith, he means those who deserve salvation because they have committed the mighty acts of God (or Jesus) to their very being.

I now need to address my notions concerning the literature I use to illuminate the images preserved in Matthew's writings. This literature derives from a group of teachers, we now term "rabbinic." It preserves many old traditions (attested by Josephus and the New Testament) and shows us developments in the manner of biblical exegesis and reformulation and systemization of inherited legal materials. These "Rabbis," for all intents and purposes, subscribe to the very practices that the New Testament writers and Josephus identify as those of Pharisees. I prefer the term "Talmudic Rabbis" as I see these people as major figures in a large corpus of works that I lump together under the name "Talmudic" (expressive of an approach to law and lore exemplified in the Talmuds) for convenience rather than for precise accuracy. Throughout this book, the term "Rabbis" should be understood as referring to those masters of Jewish tradition whose literary formulations expound the documents they

commonly called “Talmud Torah.” They are not meant to be designated as a religious group sharply set apart from pre-70 CE teachers,<sup>12</sup> from their later interpreters (post-500 CE) or even from the majority of their contemporaries.

The literary purpose of the Talmuds and subsequent documents is, to a large extent, to systematize materials passed down from teacher to student into a coherent whole through finely argued discussions of masters and students of Jewish legal traditions. The process of this systemization continues into modern times, using the same categories of thought and reference as did the Talmudic rabbis of early times. This process is described by Harry Wolfson.<sup>13</sup>

In this method the starting point is the principle that any text that is deemed worthy of serious study must be assumed to have been written with such care and precision that every term, expression generalization or exception is significant not so much for what it states as for what it implies. The contents of ideas as well as the diction and phraseology in which they are clothed are to enter into the reasoning. This attitude toward texts had its necessary concomitant in what may again be called the Talmudic hypothetico-deductive method of text interpretation. Confronted with a statement on any subject, the Talmudic student will proceed to raise a series of questions before he satisfies himself of having understood its full meaning. If the statement is not clear enough, he will ask, “What does the author intend to say here?” If it is too obvious, he will again ask, “It is too plain, why then expressly say it?” If it is a statement of fact or concrete instance he will then ask, “What underlying principle does it involve?” If it is a broad generalization he will want to know exactly how much it is to include; and if it is an exception to a general rule, he will want to know exactly how much it is to exclude. He will furthermore want to know all the circumstances under which a certain statement is true, and what qualifications are permissible. Statements apparently contradictory to each other will be reconciled by the discovery of some subtle distinction, and statements apparently irrelevant to each other will be subtly analyzed into their ultimate elements and shown to contain some common underlying principle.

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<sup>12</sup> In *Life* 9, Josephus says he engaged in sophisticated legal discussions with the ranking scholars of his day: presumably requiring the same Talmudic-style analysis that we find in the legal debates in the Gospels.

<sup>13</sup> Harry Austryn Wolfson, *Crescas' Critique of Aristotle* (1929), 24–27.

The harmonization of apparent contradictions and the interlinking of apparent irrelevancies are the characteristic features of the Talmudic method of text study. And any attempt to answer these questions calls for ingenuity and skill, the power of analysis and association, and the ability to set up hypotheses—and all these must be bolstered up by a wealth of accurate information and the use of good judgment. And there is a logic underlying this method of reasoning. It is the very same kind of logic which underlies any sort of scientific research, and by which one is enabled to form hypotheses, to test them and to formulate general laws. Just as the scientist proceeds on the assumption that there is a uniformity and continuity in nature so the Talmudic student proceeds on the assumption that there is a uniformity and continuity in human reasoning. Now, this method of text interpretation is sometimes derogatorily referred to as Talmudic quibbling. In truth it is nothing but the application of the scientific method to the study of texts.

Should we inquire how the tradition inherent in the Mishnah and Talmuds came to be, we might adopt one of three possible hypotheses to serve as our models:

- 1) Early Israelites practiced a biblical religion that became outmoded as social and political changes occurred and new forms of practices and beliefs formed in response to Hellenism and new political realities, the major one being the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE;
- 2) Jewish tradition unfolded naturally through intellectuals, or learned judges, working the material and refining it as time progressed;
- 3) There existed traditions tied to written phrases in the Hebrew Bible as well as, and alongside them, purely oral traditions (with no connections to any written scriptures) which provided specific details of what had once been obvious to the people who cared about the Torah's injunctions.<sup>14</sup>

Each of these positions has its proponents. Some mixture of the models may be closer to the mark than any single one. It should be noted that a large corpus of law, custom, and local practice developed over time that I refer to, somewhat anachronistically, as "scribal" or "rabbinic" laws in my work. There also existed,

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<sup>14</sup> See my "Review of Jacob Neusner, *Four Stages of Rabbinic Judaism*" (Basser 2000), 203–6.

in the first century if not earlier,<sup>15</sup> a discrete and fixed body of ordinances and practices called the “tradition of the Fathers (or Elders),” which was transmitted through a chain of teachings throughout the generations. The first-century author Josephus assures us that the Pharisees of his time are experts in the numerous ancestral laws handed down that are not recorded in the Law of Moses; the Jewish masses support them (*Ant.* 13:294–97; *Wars* 2:162). Some of these laws that Josephus enumerates accord, almost verbatim, with the laws which the Talmuds and Midrashim record in the name of authorities spanning the years 135 to 500 CE.<sup>16</sup>

Josephus boasts that he himself is the foremost scholar of Jewish law and exegesis in his time, of which there are less than a handful like him, speaking of his knowledge of Law (*nomos*) and interpretation of Holy Writings (*hermeneusai hieruōn grammatōn*). Chaim Milikowsky identifies these two enterprises (in *Ant.* 20:264–66) as referring to matters in the categories of what the Talmudic rabbis respectively referred to as “Mishnah” and “Midrash.”<sup>17</sup> Josephus tells us in his *Life* (9) that he had studied Jewish teachings and shown a talent both for *memorizing* and *comprehending* legal points, about which elders of the community consulted him when he was as young as fourteen years old. Talmudic rabbis record these two aspects study (*b. Sukkah* 28b): *girsa* (memory work), and *iyun* (understanding, wisdom). In hyperbolic praise (*b. Ber.* 64a) they used terms like “Sinai” [memory of the tradition] and “uprooting mountains” [understanding] to refer to different types of scholars who had mastered a particular one of these modes. If the corpus of these materials is so ancient, why is the literature of the Talmudic rabbis so cohesive and self-referential? On the surface this literature appears to be the product of self-contained culture of academic intellectuals, accepted on its own merits and without much reference to legal antecedents dating to back to the first century or earlier. The apparent originality of these documents is evident in the legal arguments with their own points of reference, citing as their basis the opinions and rulings of authorities primarily from the second century onward, but next to nothing

<sup>15</sup> See A.I. Baumgarten, “The Pharisaic Paradosis” (1987), an article that helps us push back the sense of masoret (meaning “oral law,” or nonscriptural law), even if anachronistic, into pre-Christian Pharisaic times. Also see Steve Mason’s considerations of oral form versus written form in *Flavius Josephus on the Pharisees* (1991), 241–43.

<sup>16</sup> See the listings in Louis H. Feldman and Gōhei Hata, *Josephus, Judaism, and Christianity* (1987), 37–40. See further Louis H. Feldman and Meyer Reinhold, *Jewish Life and Thought Among Greeks and Romans* (1986), 402:17.

<sup>17</sup> See Milikowsky, “Josephus: Between Rabbinic Culture and Hellenistic Historiography,” in *Shem in the Tents of Japhet: Essays on the Encounter of Judaism and Hellenism* (Kugel 2002), 159–200.

from before that. What is it that this literature does that is new and exciting that shaped Judaism for two millennia?

It seems to me that a great deal is taken for granted by the framers of Mishnah and Midrash. The “traditions” of the first century and earlier (one of them concerning vows mentioned in Matt 15:1–2) were summarily cited as anonymous law by consensus dating from antiquity. The Talmudic Rabbis stated legal positions that were the subjects of debates, not of unanimous agreement, allowing for abundant speculation on the fine points that had given rise to these disputed positions.<sup>18</sup> These debates produced theories of legal consistency. The Mishnah, with its listings of positions and counter-positions, served as the core of a new enterprise that consisted of weighing arguments and counter-arguments and developing a coherent and cohesive body of law. To this day, however, many points are still debatable and debated, allowing for the continuation of a process affording intellectual satisfaction and religious experience through the exploration of the halakhic universe of the Talmuds.

While we have some scant evidence of legal reasoning and controversies in earlier periods from both Josephus and the New Testament, as already noted, the explanation and celebration of controversies, as far as our evidence allows, was not viewed as the goal of study but rather a means to reach definitive and expert opinion on a legal point.<sup>19</sup> Consensus was seen as strength.

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18 Matthew 15:1–2: “Then the Scribes and Pharisees who were from Jerusalem came to Jesus, saying, ‘Why do your disciples transgress the *Tradition of the Elders*? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.’ *B. Hul.* 33b discusses the rationale for the hand-washing rules and *m. Ed.* 5:6 mentions excommunication as a sanction against one that treated the matter lightly. The *Tradition of the Elders* is part of the legacy of the Talmudic Rabbis. Again, in 15:5–6, “But you say, ‘whosoever shall say to his father or his mother, ‘whatever [I have] with which you might have been benefited by me is given to God’; he shall be absolved from honoring his father’—and so you have abrogated God’s word for the sake of your *tradition*. ” *M. Ned.* 5:6 records an event in Beth Choron (in which the existence of the Temple is assumed, so the story likely dates from before 70), about a father who through a vow [i.e., “giving to God”] would be forbidden to enjoy anything of benefit from the son. In the story, a friend of the son actually wants to give to the Temple things the son tries to give the father through him. Rabbi Nissim Gerondi (to *b. Ned.* 48a) interprets *m. Ned.* 5:6 to mean that the son had taken a vow forbidding his father all access to benefit from his property. The upshot is that the Gospel (15:5–6) is likely citing an actual clause from the pre-70 *Tradition of the Elders* which was still operative for the Talmudic Rabbis: “Whosoever shall say to his father or his mother, ‘whatever [I have] with which you might have been benefited by me is given to God; [a standard vow formula]’ he shall be absolved from honoring his father.”

19 See Moshe Bernstein and Shlomo Koyfman, “The Interpretation of Biblical Law in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” in *Biblical Interpretation at Qumran* (Henze 2005), 61–87. On p. 68 they discuss the harmonization at Qumran of Lev 19:1–2 and Deut 14:1–2 (11QT 48:7–11) but

Debate was inter-party, not intra-party.<sup>20</sup> What also seems to be different is the function and style of biblical exegesis, to which scholars—the “Sages” and “Rabbis” who created and codified Jewish jurisprudence and Judaic tradition—appealed in order to scripturally justify precepts and practices dating from the Second Temple period. Talmudic Rabbis employed innovative hermeneutical approaches which allowed these traditions to flourish and evolve.<sup>21</sup> The Rabbis understood the Torah to have been designed from its transmission at Sinai to allow authorized Sages in each generation to infer new insights that they could employ in their interpretation and application to new situations as they might arise.<sup>22</sup>

One would be hard pressed to argue that such had not been the view of rulings among the pre-70 teachers as well, but Talmudic rabbis tended to stress and acknowledge their own creativity in claiming that the results of their exegesis should be more beloved to scholars than the received dry word of unprocessed scripture.<sup>23</sup> It was their particular genius to catalogue concrete laws through fine analysis in order to extrapolate their essential abstract principles. These principles could be, and still are, applied to concrete cases requiring new and creative solutions in the religious, ethical, and social realms.

The Gospels in our hands seem to have originated from an older tradition no longer known. From it their authors skillfully developed a new narrative, a new tradition and new approach to old questions with a fresh voice. This realization of adjustment of older materials requires a sophisticated reader. The New Testament takes for granted, but does not cite at length, those oral

they do not mention that the Talmud *b. Mak.* 20a cites a *baraita* in standard rabbinic form to accomplish much the same results. The Qumran law is not precisely the same as that of the Rabbis.

<sup>20</sup> See Hannah K. Harrington, “Holiness in the Laws of 4QMMT” in *Legal Texts and Legal Issues* (Bernstein, Garcia Martinez and Kampen 1997), 109–128, particularly her comments on pp. 110 and 128.

<sup>21</sup> In 1987 I spent a pleasant evening with Prof. Yaakov Zussman, the celebrated scholar of Talmud at Hebrew University, at his home in Jerusalem, telling him of places I had discovered in *halakhic midrashim* that accorded with Second Temple pseudepigraphic sources. He then showed me the extensive marginalia, in copies of the midrashim he had annotated, which indicated the very sources I had alluded to earlier. I was then working on “Matching Patterns at the Seams: A Literary Study,” for publication in *From Ancient Israel to Modern Judaism: Intellect in Quest of Understanding*, (Neusner, Frerichs and Sarna, 1989) II, 95–118, which includes some of these discoveries.

<sup>22</sup> See *Sipre Deut.* 313 (ed. Finkelstein, 335) and for the idea that each generation’s leader has authority like Moses to interpret and legislate see *b. Roš Haš.* 25b.

<sup>23</sup> *Y. Sanh.* 11:4; *y. Pe’ah* 2:4; *b. B. Bat.* 108b; *b. Naz.* 2b; *b.’Erub.* 21b.

materials that would become embedded in classical Jewish literature after the formulation of the New Testament. Generally, Jewish sources explicitly cite Hebrew Scripture and then follow the citation with an interpretation. In the case of Matthew, the biblical proofs and interpretive frameworks are often hidden from the Gospel reader, but once the guiding source is located, many passages take on new dimensions. The arguments that have been made for the preponderance in the Gospel of Greek rhetoric and Hellenistic imagery are undermined when the close correspondence of their idioms and motifs to those found in Jewish texts is recognized. It is essential for the reader of the New Testament to recover the interpretive triggers that lie behind the statements and stories of the New Testament. To my mind, the Christian traditions Matthew inherited were deeply steeped in Jewish interpretive strategies and methodologies, resonant in almost all of the key issues at their most basic strata. I do not believe that the author of Matthew was himself a master of *derash* (a technique for substantiating a Jewish theology into the words of Scripture by re-punctuating or re-vocalizing or utilizing other creative literary mechanisms), or that he was interested in *halakhah* (Jewish law). Rather, Matthew's author relied upon sources whose complexities he at times did not fully comprehend, and followed them to the letter.

Matthew was also a gifted writer who interpolated his own ideas into the received narratives into his Gospel. True storytellers never tell, they show. Michael Riffaterre uses the concept of “fictional truth” and “truthful novels” to reveal how competent storytellers create worlds for the reader to enter into by building upon images they or others have used in previous works.<sup>24</sup> Recognizing this allows us to judge the level of artistry in any narrative work, whether fiction, history, or sacred text. It is left to the reader to draw conclusions based upon the descriptive images the storyteller evokes. These images have both immediate lexical and also wide narrative import that is at once self-referential and also “library” referential that is, the images the storyteller creates in one work connect with and/or reflect images he or she has created in other works. For Riffaterre, a story never stands alone, but always fits into a wider context. This method of storytelling is used throughout the whole body of Jewish literature from the Bible onward, in which God is seen as the primary author of Israel’s story and history.

My literary model for the transmission of the Jesus stories are the materials concerning the *Besht* (Israel Baal Shem Tov, 1698–1760) who flourished in the first half of the eighteenth century. These contain the bodies of literature that purportedly record the oral stories of the miracles, faith-healings,

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<sup>24</sup> Michael Riffaterre, *Fictional Truth* (1989).

establishment-criticisms, and teachings to disciples of Israel Ba'al Shem Tov. One might consult *In Praise of the Ba'al Shem Tov* for illumination. These tales (*Shivhei Habesht* in Hebrew, first edition 1815), having circulated orally for a time, were formally transcribed about fifty-five years after the Ba'al Shem Tov's death. The recent opening of archives in Poland and Russia now allows scholars to make historical evaluations, based upon the clues these stories provide about the settings in which they were produced and reproduced, of the various ways in which they were told and retold.<sup>25</sup> A charismatic faith-healer, exorcist, seer, and story-teller, the *Besht* preached to the simple and downtrodden. His disciples established his teachings, founding a popular sect, notwithstanding the fact that hasidism had been banned by some official Jewish leaders. Jews suffered *pogroms* and he offered them hope through his engaging biblical interpretations and original style of prayer. In the "Beelzebul Controversy," J. Marcus (p. 272 n. 82), building on S. Dubnow (*Beginnings*, 31f), has already highlighted major similarities.

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<sup>25</sup> See Yehoshua Mondshine, ed., *Sefer Shivhei Habesht* (1982), 14 and M. Rosman's "History of a Historical Source" [*Le-Toledotov Shel Mekor Histori*] (1993), 183–84. Chapter 9 of Rosman's book, *Founder of Hasidism* (1996) casts doubt on the historicity of the stories, which have much in common with stories told of Rabbi Isaac Luria. Although I make no claim to the historicity of the Gospels, since they provide no method of verification, I am open to seeing them as based, at least in part, on some actual reports by believing eyewitnesses to Jesus' paranormal faith-healings, exorcisms, and prognostications, together with eyewitness reports of Jesus' style of preaching. On the other hand, like those of the Ba'al Shem Tov (i.e., *Besht*), the stories of his legendary birth and attendant revelations are undoubtedly later additions to the core stories. I. Etkes, in *The Besht* (2004), 229, quotes from Elchanan Reiner's 1994 paper, "In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov: Transmission, Editing, Printing" (in Hebrew), presented at the Eleventh World Congress of Jewish Studies. "The transmission of [the hero's] praise is part of the ritual of this public." On p. 233, Etkes also quotes Rosman (1996): "Hagiography is primarily concerned with turning the exemplary life into a proof text for a position advocated in the present." Also citing Rosman he remarks, "and [additions that] describe the *Besht*'s parents, his childhood, and the manner in which he acquired his esoteric knowledge, are all linked to the *Besht*'s future role as a leader." Etkes, using historical documents, letters and written accounts found in both *Besht*'s supporters and opponents, is prepared to acknowledge that much of the reported wonderworking in the tales was based on actual occurrences of some kind, taken at face value by the *Besht* and those who were his devotees (223, 258). Unwittingly, the historical *Besht* brought to an end the long period of past faith-healing techniques. Through his teaching, through his actions, and through his stories his students found a new method of seeing divinity in the world. In a short time his students attributed to him the creation of a new Jewish sect, *Hasidism*. In reality, this sect was a continuation of an older sect. What was new was the founding of new types of rabbi-shamans who came to lead communities of this sect. This innovation immediately aroused the ire of the official rabbinic establishment for a considerable period of time.

I now illustrate my above account of the stages in which the early Christian communities of the first century understood, as a matter of course, the idiom of Jewish teachings that was an integral part of their culture, embracing many of them in Aramaic formulations ascribed, correctly or incorrectly, to Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>26</sup> My portrayal is predicated on the recognition that the Gentiles required Greek Gospels, since Jewish idioms were not fully understood by them. Older Hebrew/Aramaic traditions served as raw material out of which to fashion the new compositions. To appreciate the shifts in tone and tenor moving from the Aramaic stories to the Greek ones, we need to realize that it is advisable in rare instances to translate, that is, to retrovert passages back into a conjectured Hebrew/Aramaic idiom.<sup>27</sup> This is most suitable where the Greek texts fail to do justice to the inherent logic required to understand the passage. In moving from the Hebrew/Aramaic to the Greek, more than language shifts; a simultaneous bias against the Jews creeps in. I offer Matt 12:11–12 as an illustration of this point. Jesus is called upon to defend his healing of someone's withered arm on the Sabbath.

He said to them, “Which person from among you who has a single sheep, would not grasp it and lift it out, should it fall into a pit on the Sabbath? Now, how greatly does a human being surpass a sheep! So it is permitted to do good on the Sabbath.”

Unassailable logic should argue—but does not do so here—that since one is permitted on the Sabbath to ease the pain of a sheep caught in a pit, one should certainly be permitted to ease the suffering of a human being, whose importance on the scale of Creation is much greater than that of an animal. The necessary conclusion of such an argument would be that one may benefit people who are in pain on the Sabbath. But this is not what Matthew tells us. His words imply that it is acceptable to set aside Sabbath prohibitions whenever human interests are at stake. The owner is worried about harm coming to his property. But unless we speak of a sick human being serving the interests of the healer more than an endangered sheep would, the logic of the passage as given in the Greek is faulty.

<sup>26</sup> Steven T. Katz's objections to this train of thought ("Methodology in Basser's Studies") and my response ("Katz's Agenda, Chilton's Agenda, Basser's Agenda") were published in *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 4, no. 2 (2001), 320–343.

<sup>27</sup> See David M. Goldenberg's criteria for judging the value of retroversions in "Retroversion to Jesus' Ipsissima Verba and the Vocabulary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic" (1996). His criteria strike me as reasonable but not definitive.

Matthew, most likely following his source, confuses the issue by speaking of a single sheep. Here is what Kevin P. Edgecomb wrote me in private correspondence:

The language in Mt 12.11 additionally indicates that the hypothetical man only “has one sheep” (*exei probaton hen*),<sup>28</sup> which I would think is also a very important point. To be so poor as to have only one sheep, the milk and wool of which would be more precious for that man’s livelihood than if it were one of hundreds; [the] loss of the sheep would be a loss of not just property but livelihood. It’s likely that this understanding lies behind the Mt passage, rather than the loss of one out of many sheep.

Now I agree that this is precisely what Matthew’s text is telling us. Yet this scenario defeats the argument that leads us to conclude that a human deserves care, too. What gets lost in the argument is the Jewish legal principle of “relieving pain of living creatures”—if permissible for an animal, how much more so for a human! The issue could not have been about the self-interest of the man—it had to be about the interest of the sheep. The sheep would likely survive until after the Sabbath in a pit but it would suffer. Now it follows that the interest of a sick person is of greater consequence and, even if he will survive the Sabbath, his suffering can be lawfully alleviated. This must have been the logic for nothing else makes any sense. We cannot prove a legal point from those who transgress it. It had to be the understanding that Jesus speaks of alleviating pain, and nothing self-serving, which is evident in the conclusion of the argument: “So it is permitted to do good on the Sabbath.” In this case, Matthew has an old source that he used to castigate Jews. “Isn’t your law stupid since everyone breaks it?” This is not an impressive argument and it does not fit in with what he says at the end of it. His conclusion is that you need to help sick people. This is a valid argument only if he has established it is legal to help distressed animals on the Sabbath; if you relieve an animal from its pain how much more you need to help a human. We must suggest Matthew likely altered his source to make Jews look devious.

The above example teaches us two more things. Where Matthew’s Gospel has material that no other Gospel mentions, he may have an older source for it, which he follows nearly slavishly but might also alter it. Also, there is strong reason to accept that Aramaic and Hebrew forms of the Gospels circulated at early times. A report by Church Fathers actually says a Gospel called Matthew was composed in one of these languages. In Annette Reed’s wording (paper

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<sup>28</sup> In Matthew *hen* is always used in the sense of “one,” “the one.” Nevertheless, “*heis*,” “*mia*,” “*hen*” seem to be available in rare instances as an indefinite article in “Koine.”

on Matthew): Papias in Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.39: “Matthew put together the oracles [of the Lord] in the Hebrew language, and each one interpreted them as best he could.” Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.1.1: “Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome, and laying the foundations of the Church.”<sup>29</sup>

Matthew’s Gospel lacks the dominant themes of Talmudic literature: love of Israel, love of the land, love of Torah. To my mind, the Gospels are aimed at Gentiles.<sup>30</sup> This raises the question of when we should argue Jewish-Christians no longer considered themselves, and were no longer considered by others, to be Jews. When did the communities part ways? Our best evidence from the writings of Paul and Luke (namely, the Book of Acts) suggests that in the Diaspora, the Jewish elements within Christianity were being challenged, while everywhere in Jewish circles Christian preachers who were Jews, like Paul, were not welcome. Within a very few years, the Jewish(-Christian) Gospels were readjusted by adding pro-gentile and anti-Jewish sentiments, if not by cutting out natural Jewish references to the centrality of Torah study and the Land. By such methods these Gospels were tailored to suit the growing numbers of gentile adherents, first in the churches of the Diaspora, and apparently later in the Land of Israel itself.<sup>31</sup> Gradually, in the decades close to the time of the destruction of the Temple in 70, vehement anti-Jewish tones and polemics were seeping into the earlier accounts of the raconteurs, whose final tones came to match the gut-felt revulsion of many Jewish leaders and Christian teachers toward one other soon after the year 70.

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<sup>29</sup> Annette Yoshiko Reed sent me her essay, “Jewish Christian Evidence for the Rabbinization of Roman Palestine?” I also thank her for making her paper “The Gospel of Matthew and / as Judaism” available to me.

<sup>30</sup> Matthew 21:42–43 quotes Jesus saying: “Did you never see in the Writings, ‘the stone which the builders put on one side, the same has been made the chief stone of the building: this was the Lord’s doing, and it is a wonder in our eyes (Ps. 118:22)?’ For this reason I say to you, *The kingdom of God will be taken away from you, and will be given to a nation producing the fruits of it*” (emphasis added in italics). The “chief stone” refers to the gentile nations here which replace Israel, whereas in Mark 12:10, Luke 20:17, Acts 4:11, Eph. 2:20, and 1 Peter 2:7, this stone is taken to mean Jesus. Throughout the commentary we indicate at the relevant places that Matthew distances Jesus from Jews, and so himself from the Jewish community. A-J Levine lists passages like Matt 4:13; 9:35; 12:9; 13:54; 10:17; 28:15; 8:12; 21:41 to show Matthew’s gentile bias in “Jesus Talks Back” in *A Legacy of Learning: Essays in Honor of Jacob Neusner* Alan J. Avery Peck, Bruce Chilton, William Scott Green, and Gary G. Porton eds. (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2014) 286.

<sup>31</sup> There seems to be the common knowledge informing the story about one of these raconteurs in b. *Sabb.* 116b. This source also preserves a Gospel text similar to Matt 5:17 in Aramaic.

The canonical Gospels, in varying degrees, reflect this growing hostility. The Gospel we call Matthew has both Jewish and anti-Jewish layers brilliantly enmeshed within it. The Jewish material is thoroughly the Jewish mindset of the early missionaries; the anti-Jewish material is thoroughly the mindset of preachers who needed to drive a wedge between the two communities. I am well aware that other scholars see the development of the Gospel tradition and Christian split with Judaism in a radically different light than I do, and find reasons for dating the bifurcation, in many places, between Judaism and Christianity to the second century or later. If taken at face value, their readings of the situation would seriously impair some of my interpretations.<sup>32</sup> I do not see the Gospels' anti-Jewish material as in-house sectarian quibbling between Jews of different outlooks. For me, there is too much praise of the gentile ethic and condemnation of Jewish leaders and their customs in Matthew to regard this as in-house banter.<sup>33</sup> In my commentary I draw attention to these passages.

The Jewish layer of the Gospel tradition was not eradicated but was instead placed into a setting in which much of its original shine became dulled and tarnished. What I try to recover is not the notion of Jewish/Gospel parallels as much as an idea of a Jewish mind and a Jewish approach to life that lies buried beneath words and episodes in the Gospel of Matthew—a mind that I have already suggested the Gospel writer does not share. I therefore conclude that what looks Jewish in spirit is arguably genuinely Jewish since the Gospel writers hardly celebrate it. I'm not sure why it is there unless perhaps the early Church was genuinely a Jewish movement whose early material was preserved, even if subsequently cast into anti-Pharisaic polemic (which I do not think it was originally). The Gospels' use of Jewish tradition mirrors what William Scott Green claimed about the use of Scripture for Talmudic Rabbis: that "rabbis did not so much write about or within Scripture as they wrote with it, making it speak with their voice, in their idiom, and in their behalf. The rabbinic interpretation of Scripture, therefore, was anything but indeterminate or equivocal." This is, to my mind, an apt description of how the Gospel tradition appropriates Jewish tradition and also misappropriates it, for its own purposes. The process is natural, and responsible Jewish teachers of all times have appropriated but not misappropriated it. They never deny basic values and rooted

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<sup>32</sup> A variety of opinions can be found in *The Ways That Never Parted* (Becker and Reed 2007).

<sup>33</sup> See the debate over whether Matthew was a Jew or Gentile" *Matthew 1–7* (Davies and Allison, 2004), 7–30. While the authors argue against those who see Matthew as a Gentile, I myself lean toward seeing Matthew as either a Gentile or perhaps a Jew turned Christian.

identity markers of Israel and their laws in reinterpreting their own traditions, not only their Scriptures, to address contemporary issues and needs.<sup>34</sup>

By writing this commentary to Matthew 1–28, scene by scene, and tracing the idiom, motif, and theology, through the Jewish mind, we rediscover and expose the latent message of each passage's background material. Our intention is to present to the reader an in-depth study that systematically presents the Gospel of Matthew as part of a complex of Jewish ideas that pervaded the cultural matrix of the early Jewish, Galilean, and Judean Christian communities. Within Judaism (as evidenced in core chapters in *b. Sanhedrin*), these ideas, in the ensuing centuries, gave rise to a philosophy of human legislative responsibility within a system of divinely given commandments.<sup>35</sup>

In the following study, we base my reading of the Gospel of Matthew upon this image, connecting and/or image-reflecting understanding. A careful reader of the Gospel is able to uncover the author's motives and intentions while at the same time making connections between the images in the Gospel with other images, or "truths," presented in the Talmudic "library." Since Matthew and the rabbinic traditions sometimes depart from common early sources or derive from a shared understanding, I see no reason why these two traditions, in such cases, cannot be read together. Within each there is a common rhythm, as it were, that creates the harmonies or the constructs of the counterpoints found between them.

My hope is that readers will not merely glance or skim this work, or even passively read it page after page. To really see into the text of Matthew using my approach, the reader must study each comment slowly and carefully until the connection between verse and comment becomes crystal clear. Only by wrestling with the rabbinic materials in conjunction with the Gospel will the reader discover that there is far more in the Matthean text than could reasonably be set down in a volume. The reader is our partner in this study and the insights in the book we write together will be celebrated in the reader's appreciation of the relevance of Matthew to the study of Judaic traditions as well as what Judaic tradition has to teach us about Matthew's narrative.

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34 See William Scott Green, "Romancing the Tome: Rabbinic Hermeneutics and the Theory of Literature" (1987), 147–168.

35 See Devora Steinmetz, *Punishment and Freedom: The Rabbinic Construction of Criminal Law* (2008). The entire book is a convincing exposition of this thesis.

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

At the outset of his Gospel, Matthew seeks to convince his audience that Jesus was the messianic savior Israel had long been expecting. He demonstrates, by means of a theory of recurring patterns in Israel's religious history, that the years when Jesus lived marked the terminus of a chronological sequence of high points and low points. That demonstration, necessary but insufficient, does not "prove" that Jesus was the Messiah—just that someone in those days should have been.

How can Matthew be so certain that Jesus was the very Messiah and savior for whom Israel was waiting? Certain prophetic signs at the time of his birth (and throughout his life) which fulfilled ancient prophecies "proved" Jesus was the divine messenger of redemption.

### *Tripartite Periodization of World History*

Matthew divides Israelite history from the time of Abraham into three periods:

*Thus all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the Babylonian Exile were fourteen generations, and from the Babylonian Exile to the Christ, fourteen generations (1:17).*

A symmetrical tripartite chronology emerges. Although Matthew does not give explicit meaning to the sequential pattern he develops, Jewish texts present relevant parallels which offer insight into Matthew's chronology.

In the Talmud, *b. ‘Abod. Zar.* 9a also divides Jewish history into three equal periods. Each is comprised of two millennia, based on the understanding of the duration of world history as totalling 6000 years. After the first period, which in reference to the pre-formation and thus "formless" (*tohu*) world of Gen 1:2 that the Rabbis call "Chaos," the advent of Abraham marks the beginning of the second period. Rabbinic literature understands Abraham to mark a new phase in human history, following the initial phase that had been characterized by dysfunctional development. In the midrashic work *Gen. Rab.* 2:3, immediately following the flood God again set in motion a plan built into nature for the onset of a new creation. Abraham's appearance in history is understood to be analogous to the moment when primal light made its first appearance in the created world (Gen 1:2), as the wind of God hovered over the watery abyss.

This wind (*ruah*) was also thought to be the same wind that calmed the waters at the close of the flood.

"And God brought to pass a wind upon the earth" (Gen 8:1). God had said, How long must the world be mired in darkness? (See Gen 1:2). May light come! For God had said, "Let there be *light!*" (Gen 1:3). Of course this referred to Abraham, as Isaiah intimated, "Who has enlightened the righteous one from the East [enlighten: *heh-ayin-yod-resh*], [calling him to follow Him?]" (Isa 41:2), but he really meant to say "caused him to radiate light" [radiate light: *heh-aleph-yod-resh*].

According to the Rabbis, Abraham is the new primordial light that illuminates the darkness by distinguishing good from evil and truth from falsehood. He is the transitional figure whose appearance marks the beginning of messianic history. In another striking passage from *Genesis Rabbah* (42:8), Rabbi Judah (second century) makes plain his understanding that Abraham was just such a figure and that his separateness was enshrined in his name.

"And it was told to Abraham the *Ivri*" (Gen 14:13).... Rabbi Judah explained "*IVRī*" to mean that the whole world was across from him on one side and he was across from them on the other side (*eIVeR*).<sup>1</sup>

For the Rabbis expounding this midrash, Abraham had been chosen, selected from among all others, for a unique mission in God's historical plan. His role was to father a nation, embodying the divine presence and initiating the process of enlightenment for all humankind. The Rabbis saw as the final movement of Abraham's mission the integration of all Israelite and Jewish history, which is also the goal and end of history, in the advent of the messianic age.<sup>2</sup> For Matthew, this messianic age was already being realized in the first

<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Judah's etymology of *ivri* as one from beyond or from the other side is in accord with *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Driver, Briggs and Brown 1907, 720).

<sup>2</sup> The Rabbis relate that Abraham's historic mission was to bring God's presence down so as to eventually dwell in the Temple (*t. Ber.* 1:15). In obeying God, Abraham divided himself from others whom he left at the foot of the mountain to offer his child to God. The place of that offering, in turn, was chosen as the site *par excellence* for God's lower residence. However, the place was laid waste to its foundations by those on the other side of the divide—the enemies of Abraham's children. At this point, the mountain (read: Israel) began a process of shaking up its foundations until, throughout the course of many years of desolation, it continually reforms. Finally the rabbinic passage concludes: In the future *eschaton*,

century. For the Rabbis, the eschatological age had not begun even in the third or fourth century. Matthew's pattern of generations was likely composed under the influences of biblical tradition and Judaic traditions that shape later Jewish speculation about redemptive end-time. If this were not the case, why would he have put forward such a pattern?

In a rabbinic tradition preserved in the Mishnah and elaborated upon in the Tosefta, end-time (*qetz*) divisions are measured in generations. The Hebrew word *qetz*, which literally means “end” or “limit,” signifies the close of a period of oppression, which is destined to end at a predetermined time. The term *qetz* is also found in the Bible, where it has eschatological connotations. For example, in Amos 8:2, Lamentations 4:18 and Ezekiel 7:2, *qetz* refers to an end of Israel’s suffering and the day of tribulation for Israel’s enemies. In Dan 9:21, 11:16, 12:11, and 14:24 it refers to a predetermined period of time, marked by an end point and followed by another period of time.

In both Mishnah *'Eduyyot* and Tosefta *'Eduyyot*, the brief excursus concerning *qetz* times is interpolated into a discussion of another, seemingly unrelated, matter. In the Mishnah the excursus is absorbed into a list of things with which a father is supposed to endow his son. It is perhaps because “length of years” is included in this list that the excursus is found therein. *M. 'Ed.* 2:10 (MSS Kaufman and Vienna) is enigmatic in its own right, and the proof-text puzzles rather than illuminates:

[A]nd with the number of generations before Him, and this is the *qetz*. As Scripture says, “He called the generations from the beginning” (Isa 41:4). Even though Scripture says, “And they shall serve them; and they shall oppress them four hundred years” (Gen 15:13), [yet] it says, “And the fourth generation shall return here.”

*T. 'Ed.* 1:14 clarifies the point of “generations being before Him,” elaborating on the elliptical phrasing of the Mishnah:

“And the number of generations are before Him [at] the *qetz*.—Even though the days and hours are reckoned by God with hair-like precision, in point of fact He counts [to the *qetz*] by generations, as Isaiah says: “He called the generations from the beginning” (41:4). And even though Scripture says: ‘And they shall serve them; and they shall oppress them

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when it will be formed into a perfect mountain, then God's Presence will alight at the site for all time.

for four hundred years' (Gen 15:13), and [yet] it says: 'And the fourth generation shall return here' (Gen 15:16)."

According to Gen 15:13–16, cited in both texts, Israel's oppression in Egypt was to be measured in years (four centuries), and redemption was to occur to a specific generation (the fourth). Another rabbinic reading of a midrash recited in the popular version of the Passover *Haggadah* states that God did indeed fulfill the *qetz* (*vehishav et haqetz*) in the generation that returned to the Land after four hundred years of servitude had ended. The *Haggadah* understands the oppression leading to Israel's dramatic redemption to have begun with events leading to Israel's initial sojourn in Egypt, in conformity with the Word of Genesis 15:13 (*dibur*). Israel's oppression and redemption follows a divine script, history unfolding according to the preordained pattern of *qetz* determination. In no generation have the Jews been entirely wiped out. The *Haggadah* affirms that God has and will always interfere with every tyrant's plan (*matzileynu meyadam*) to annihilate the Jews.

The underlying assumption in these rabbinic texts discussing biblical hints of Israel's final redemption, known as *qetz* times, is that Israel's history is divided into discrete periods, culminating in a final period of redemption. God has predetermined these periods, but only after the final period of redemption has come—the period of *qetz*—will the blueprint for that periodization, in hindsight, become evident. Speculation about these periods and their duration are most often found in apocalyptic literature, calculated in various units of time: hours (*Apoc. Ab.* chap. 30); generations (Gen 15:15); seven year periods called "weeks" (Dan 9:24–27; *1 En* 93:1–10); fifty year periods called *Jubilee* units (*Book of Jubilees* 4:18–19); or even in two thousand year periods (*b. 'Abod. Zar.* 9a). Apocalyptic thought lays out Israel's history in such a way that every period of time, however measured, concludes with a divinely ordained event ushering in a new era—sometimes of decline, sometimes of ascent. The connection between the rabbinic tradition and Matthew's genealogy becomes clear. Because Matthew understands that the coming of Jesus means the coming of the final end point of history—the *qetz*—his genealogy stops with him. Jesus represents the last generation, the generation of the *qetz*.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> It might be noted that such reckonings of *qetz* times are not always precise or consistent. *Jubilees* uses a forty-nine-year jubilee count in general but sometimes it is fifty. Rabbinic counting of generations may count a *qetz* time twice, once as the end of a period and again as the first of the next period. Matthew's count is also not precise but that need not detain us here.

### *Prophecy and Fulfillment*

Matthew associates numerous verses from the Hebrew Prophets with unexpected turns in the Gospel narrative in order to underscore that a divine hand has been guiding these turns. The uses of these prophetic texts can be divided into two forms that are closely related although not identical.<sup>4</sup> When the words of the prophecy and the events fulfilling them are closely and clearly related, Matthew uses these verses straightforwardly, in much the same way as does the *Tanakh* (Hebrew Bible). At other times, when the prophetic text and the Gospel's account of its fulfillment appear artificially strained, Matthew's usage of these verses requires some further understanding of what prophetic fulfillment entails for him. Let us consider these two types of usage in some depth.

In the Hebrew Bible, the fulfillment of a prophecy is often confirmed by the phrase “according to the word of the Lord,” to which the statement is sometimes added that the prophecy had come “through the hand of His servant, etc.” (e.g. 2 Kgs 14:25). On the occasions when these fulfillment passages from the Prophets were read aloud in some synagogues, both the reader and the congregation would respond, “Blessed is He who fulfills His word” (*Kallah Rab.* 4:11, which likely dates to the fourth century).<sup>5</sup> Recognizing that a prophecy

4 For a source critical view of the role and structure of these verses see Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (1999), 97–105.

5 The full text of *Kallah Rab.* 4:11 is as follows:

“When good is done to you [you must offer praise]” (*Kallah 1:29*).

How do we know this? Scripture states, “and you shall eat and you shall be satisfied and you shall bless [the Lord . . .] (Deut 8:17). But how we know [we must offer praise] even if we eat and are not satisfied? Scripture writes [and tradition records praise was offered]—*Give the people and they will eat [for thus says the Lord—eat and leave over]*” (2 Kgs 4:44). And then it says “*and he gave it to them and they ate and they left over—“According to the word of the Lord”* [which oral tradition assumes to be the text of their praise and that we should emulate them]. A series of objections [from three verses in the Book of Kings] was raised [to the assertion that the people who got the food but did not fill themselves, offered thanksgiving praises]: “According to the word of the Lord the God of Israel who spoke through His servant” (2 Kgs 14:25). In this case also [assuming all cases of promises happening are of the same nature], a praise [formula] is customarily offered [when they read it]. Come hear another objection: “According to the word of the Lord that He spoke to Elijah (2 Kgs 2:17) . . .” In this case also the readers say [a liturgical formula]: “*Blessed is the One who fulfills His word.*” Come hear another objection: “According to the word of the Lord that he spoke through His servant, Ahiyah the Shilonite” (1 Kgs 15:29). [And likewise the formula is said when it is read, so we can raise a string of objections to the notion that the people in the stories gave praise for their food.] Now if you think that the case of 2 Kgs 4:44 (“and they left over according to the word of the Lord”) means praise is offered only when one reads the fulfillment of this

had been fulfilled was itself a form of praise, and the Passover *Haggadah* preserves a blessing of similar form, “Blessed is the one who keeps his promise” (Hebrew: *Barukh shomer havtaḥo*). Rabbinic liturgy prescribes that the reader of the prophetic lesson should say: “Even one of your prophecies shall not be left behind to return empty (compare Isa 55:11), for you are a trustworthy God” (*Sop.* 13:10). It is following in this biblical tradition of noting prophecy fulfillment that Matthew incorporates prophetic texts into his Gospel. We can summarize this usage of fulfillment of a prophetic sign in two ways.

### *Type 1 Usage of Fulfillment Prophecy*

The first way in which Matthew uses fulfillment prophecy has a long tradition. We first meet an example of this type of usage in Matt 2:17, “the slaughter of the innocents.” We recognize this type when Matthew inserts into the narrative the prophecy that has been fulfilled through an event he has just mentioned. The characters experiencing the event are unaware of the fulfillment. As I have said, this formulation is not much different from what is found in the Hebrew Scriptures (e.g., 1 Kgs 13:26, 14:18, 15:29, 16:12, 17:16, 22:38; 2 Kgs 1:17, 4:44, 7:16), or in the Talmud (*b. Ber.* 59b states that even the appearance of hurricanes is a fulfillment of Nahum 1:9).

However, Matthew claims prophetic signs have been fulfilled even when the words of Scripture look to be addressing issues far removed from the Jesus narrative. For instance, Matthew will find that “from Egypt I called my son” (Hos 11:1–2) is a messianic sign that was fulfilled in the life of Jesus. The original Hosean context of this verse is that Israel is not a good “son”; “son” is used to highlight that Israel (despite God’s special love for him) is a “rebellious son,” for the passage goes on to list Israel’s heinous crimes. However, “my son” and “out of Egypt” are sufficient signs for Matthew to claim that this verse shows that God intentionally engineered the whole flight and return of Jesus’ family to fulfill necessary conditions for Jesus to be the Messiah. The signs are being fulfilled, one by one. We now summarize the more complex, second way that Matthew utilizes fulfillment Scriptures.

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promise (but the people on the spot did not offer praise)—[consider a crucial difference]. In the case where we offer praise during the reading of the passage, those verses refer explicitly to the narrative in which the divine word had been delivered through a prophet (and offering the praise is just custom, not generated by any text). In the case of 2 Kings 4:44 there is no such qualification [to prevent us from understanding “according to the word of the Lord” refers to the very text of the praise offered on the spot].

### *Type 2 Usage of Fulfillment Prophecy*

In the second usage of showing fulfillment of a prophecy, Matthew makes clear that an intentional effort was made by a character to fulfill a biblical verse by closely attending to its wording. An unusual meaning is assigned to the verse and it is this meaning that Matthew intends us to see. Accordingly, Matthew in 2:15 notes that the angel of God acted *in order to fulfill* to its fullest detail a prophecy entailing an unusual understanding of “virgin” (a possible sense of the verse in Greek, as in LXX Gen 34:3–4, and possibly in ancient Hebrew as well). This type of fulfillment is exemplified for us in *b. Ber.* 57b: a certain rabbi upon entering Babylon took dirt up into his turban and then threw it aside, in order to fulfill Isa 14:23 (“I will sweep her with the broom of destruction,” declares the Lord Almighty”). *B. Šabb.* 150a states that Nebuchadnezzar, while riding on a lion, tied a serpent to its head, in order to fulfill Jer 27:6 (“Now I will hand all your countries over to my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon; I will make even the wild animals subject to him”). *B. Yoma* 38ah insists that clean bread was never served to the family of those who baked the Temple show-bread (one might suspect them of having stolen some of it for personal use); the practice literally fulfills Num 32:22, which speaks of being clean (an idiom for free from obligation) before God (“and the land is subdued before the Lord; then after that you shall return and be *clean* of obligation to the Lord and to Israel, and this land shall be your possession before the Lord”). The Talmuds record many such fulfillments performed in strange ways by characters who read certain words hyperliterally. To fulfill a verse according to its every nuance was considered an act of piety.

A text from *y. Šeqal.* 6:3 reveals that “fulfill” (Hebrew: *leqayyem*) often refers to a hyperliteral reading of a scriptural rule or prophecy. The passage describes how King Solomon melted a thousand gold talents to make one very large single bar of gold from which to make the vessels for the Temple. He did this in order to fulfill Exod 25:39, which, can be understood literally to mean that all the vessels in the Temple had to be made from a single ingot of gold: “It shall be made, with all these utensils, out of a talent of pure gold.”<sup>6</sup>

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6 The Hebrew reads: *Kikar zahav tahor ya'aseh otah et kol hakelim ha-eleh.*

## Commentary

*The book of generations of Jesus Christ,<sup>7</sup> the son of David,<sup>8</sup> the son of Abraham.* (v. 1)

Matthew 1:1 briefly outlines the genealogy that follows as well as introduces the subject of that genealogy through its most prominent figures: Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham. Matthew understands that the name “Jesus Christ” is also a title—“Jesus, the Christ”—as the conclusion of his genealogy makes clear (1:17). The term *Christos* is the Greek translation of the Hebrew *mashiah*, which means “anointed one” or “Messiah” (LXX Dan 9:25–26). The Qumran scroll *nQMelch.* (ii:9–13) speaks of “the anointed of the Spirit [*mashuaḥ haruāḥ*], of whom Daniel spoke.”

The term *mashiah*, referring to a redeemer understood to have been foretold by the Hebrew Prophets, is exclusively and unequivocally found in literature postdating the Hebrew Scriptures. Although these Scriptures never refer to any future redeemer by the single term “the Messiah,” for the Gospels as for the Talmudic Rabbis, the term (with no further added qualification) is already well known as a title. Its sense of “anointed” became subsumed by connotations of redemption. Rabbinic notions of Israel’s messianic redeemer are roughly the same as Matthew’s. Indeed, both the Rabbis and Matthew prefer the title “son of David” to describe the Messiah, and both also understand that a redeemer had been foretold by prophecy.<sup>9</sup>

The genealogy’s structure duplicates biblical language and form. “Book of Generations”—in Greek, *biblos geneseos*—signifies an account of an important genealogy. Although *geneseos* is singular in form, the Septuagint (LXX) translates as *biblos geneseos* the Hebrew *sefer toledot* (plural) of Gen 5:1 (compare 2:4), which introduces Adam’s genealogy. But whereas in Genesis what follows *sefer toledot* is a list of the descendants of Adam, what follows *biblos geneseos* in Matthew is a list of Jesus’ ancestors. Matthew’s genealogy employs the pattern of the brief genealogy of Isaac (Gen 25:19), which lists only ancestors (or in this case one ancestor, Abraham).

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<sup>7</sup> The culmination of generations and the apex of history. A Jewish work mocking the story of the Gospels, a kind of counter-gospel, which dates from a time after Matthew became known as *Sefer Toldot Yeshu* (*The Book of the Generations of Jesus*). See H. Newman, “The Death of Jesus in the *Toledot Yeshu* Literature” (1999).

<sup>8</sup> The next highest point in the messianic lineage.

<sup>9</sup> See also Josephus, *Jewish War* 6:312–13.

“Jesus” is the anglicized form of the Greek *Iesous*. In the Septuagint (e.g., Deut 32:44 and numerous other places) Yehoshua (Joshua) is called Iesous. In uncensored versions of Sanhedrin 107a–b in the Babylonian Talmud, Jesus is called *Yeshu*. It is difficult to know if this designation is based simply on the dropping of the final “s” from the Greek name, or if the name was shortened (scribally by dropping the final *ayin*) from more original Hebrew/Aramaic texts that called Jesus *Yeshua*.<sup>10</sup> For the name “Yeshua” see Neh 8:7.

Beginning the genealogy with Abraham, Matthew suggests that what came before was of little account. The Talmudic Rabbis would agree. *M. Abot* 5:2 states that the ten generations between Adam and Noah, and also the ten generations between Noah and Abraham, “provoked [God] continually,” so that He withheld his bounty from these generations and instead bestowed it on Abraham. Rabbinic comments on Gen 37:1 suggest that they understood the biblical listing of genealogies to be analogous to searching for jewels in sand. Each “pile” of generations is sifted until the jewel is found, and then the rest is discarded. The story of the sifting for the “jewel” begins in this way in *Tanh. Gen.*, *Vayeshev* 1:

The child reading the Bible gulps the ten generations from Adam to Noah all at once then afterwards gulps the next ten generations at once. When he gets to the pearls of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob he begins to explain the story in detail.

Matthew’s genealogy opens with the notice: “The book of the generation(s) of Jesus Christ” (1:1), and concludes: “[A]nd Jacob was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, from whom Jesus, the one called Christ, was born” (1:16). That is, after organizing the generations into equal units of time, Matthew at last has located his jewel and can now explain the life of this jewel—Jesus Christ—in detail.

If one purpose of the genealogy is to show how God’s plan is revealed in history, then by beginning with Abraham Matthew indicates not only that God has intervened in history for Abraham’s sake, but also that Abraham’s appearance has cosmic significance: he represents an ontological shift, visible in the

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<sup>10</sup> This spelling (final “ayin”) is that of the Syriac Peshitta. Shamma Friedman wrote me that the very reliable Yad Harav Herzog MS (Sanhedrin) has “Yeshua” with “ayin.” at the end. It has also been suggested that the name Joshua was likely pronounced in the Galilee as “Yeshu” as a truncated form of “Yeshua.” Galilean names can often drop the letters “ayn,” “heh,” and “aleph.” See further David Flusser, *Jesus in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten* (1968), 13–14.

unfolding of God's plan to illuminate the world. Indeed, the Abrahamic covenant, in which God tells Abraham of the coming persecution and eventual redemption of his descendants, marks the beginning of Israel's redemptive history (Gen 15:13–16).

*Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac was the father of Jacob, and Jacob was the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez was the father of Hezron, and Hezron was the father of Aram, and Aram was the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab was the father of Nachshon, and Nachshon was the father of Salmon, and Salmon was the father of Boaz by Rachab, and Boaz was the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed was the father of Jesse, and Jesse was the father of David the King. And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, and Solomon was the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam was the father of Abijah, and Abijah was the father of Asaph, and Asaph was the father of Jehosaphat, and Jehosaphat was the father of Joram, and Joram was the father of Uzziah, and Uzziah was the father of Joatham, and Joatham was the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz was the father of Hezekiah, and Hezekiah was the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh was the father of Amos, and Amos was the father of Josiah, and Josiah was the father of Jechoniah and his brothers at the time of the Babylonian exile. After the Babylonian exile, Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel was the father of Zerubbabel, and Zerubbabel was the father of Abioud, and Abioud was the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim was the father of Azor, and Azor was the father of Zadok, and Zadok was the father of Achim, and Achim was the father of Eliud, and Eliud was the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar was the father of Matthan, and Matthan was the father of Jacob, and Jacob was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, from whom Jesus, the one called Christ, was born. Thus all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the Babylonian Exile were fourteen generations, and from the Babylonian Exile to the Christ, fourteen generations. (vv. 2–17)*

The opening verses, as noted in the introduction to this chapter, introduced the idea of patterns of sacred history whereby the end-time is calculated by a discerned division of time into three units. The threefold pattern of fourteen generations makes sense in relation to rabbinic traditions that speak of the cycle of the moon. Just as the lunar cycle has twenty-eight nights (the cycle ends at dusk on the twenty-ninth day), so the night of the fourteenth–fifteenth signals the full moon at midmonth. We can now discern

that Matthew's genealogy rises to the height, or fullness, with David in the fourteenth generation, after which, starting with Solomon, the genealogy descends through fourteen more generations to the lowest point, or the darkness of moonless nights, that is the Exile. And fourteen generations after the darkness of the Exile, like the moon in its nightly waxing, the genealogy again rises to the height, or fullness, which is Jesus. According to this scenario, both David and Jesus are at "full moon" positions in a complete fourteen/fifteen generation-repeating cycle.

Judaic traditions also view human history as patterned on generational cycles, with the end point open pending messianic redemption, since for Jews, the Messiah has not come. Some Jews were anticipating the advent of the Messiah in the first century, and Josephus refers to Vespasian as a possible savior.<sup>11</sup> Conversely, the Rabbis use 70 CE, the date of the destruction of the Temple, as the beginning of the final messianic period of history. Unlike Matthew, for them the final countdown did not begin with the destruction of the First Temple and subsequent exile, but with that of the Second Temple (*y. Ber. 2:4*).

Some rabbinic genealogies patterned on the lunar cycle begin with Abraham. In *Pesiq. Rab Kah. 5.12*, Rabbi Berekhiah (late third century) speaks of a genealogy whose pattern follows that of the cycle of the moon (cf. *Exod. Rab. 15:26*).<sup>12</sup> Commenting on Exodus 12, "This month shall be unto you . . .," and referring also to Ps 89:38, "David's seed . . . shall be established for ever as the moon," he states that during the period from Abraham through Solomon Israel was worthy before God, and so those days waxed "like the moon's waxing to the full." However, because from Solomon's son Rehoboam to Zedekiah, the last king of Judah before the Exile, Israel was not worthy before God. Those

<sup>11</sup> "Now this prophecy certainly referred to the government of Vespasian, who was appointed emperor in Judea" (Josephus, *Jewish War* 6.312–313). "This mysterious prophecy really referred to Vespasian and Titus" (Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.13). "This prediction, referring to the emperor of Rome—as afterwards appeared from the event—the people of Judea took to themselves" (Suetonius, *Vesp.* 4.5).

<sup>12</sup> In *Exodus Rabbah* the count of fifteen generations until Solomon is duly noted, but the further count of another fifteen generations is perhaps adduced but not noted since the number of generations is in fact sixteen. The number fifteen may have originally been there and been removed by an astute copyist. Likewise, in the Matthean genealogy some names are missing and others are botched (Asaf instead of Asa). The Matthean genealogy follows Ruth 4:18–22 precisely as far it goes, whereas the later names follow 1Chron 3:1–19. Matthew's list in sum jumps three generations listed in 1 Chron 3:11–12. Errors often occur, whether by intention or otherwise, when trying to conflate traditions or to solve textual problems or create patterns.

days therefore waned just as “the moon wanes into darkness.” This genealogy begins with Abraham, as does Matthew’s, depicting Abraham in the position of the new moon preceding the first day of the new month, after which the genealogy is said to rise.<sup>13</sup>

In contrast to Matthew’s genealogy, whose apex or fullness is reached with David, the rabbinic apex is David’s son Solomon. For the Talmudic Rabbis, the wane of Jewish fortunes begins with Rehoboam, Solomon’s son, and devolves, as in Matthew, into the utter darkness of Exile. In the rabbinic genealogy above, in the waxing period of ascent, David is the fourteenth name. (A variant reading from *Exodus Rabbah* 15:26 lists fifteen generations from Abraham to Solomon.) In the waning period of decline, Zedekiah—who is not mentioned in the Matthean genealogy—represents the new moon of the following month. We need not be concerned that these genealogies drop names or occasionally appear to miscount, since counting conventions varied. “Forty-two” may mean a full forty-two, and sometimes means only forty-one, not counting forty-two.<sup>14</sup> Rabbinic genealogy associates Solomon with the fullness of the moon because the Rabbis regarded him as a positive figure at a pinnacle of Jewish history. His glory and that of his Temple outshone any and all of their predecessors.<sup>15</sup> After Solomon, this glory was gradually extinguished into exilic darkness.

<sup>13</sup> *Pesiq. Rab Kah.* 5:12 reads in its entirety as follows:

Rabbi Berekhiah said: “*This new moon shall be to you . . .*” (*Exod 12:2*)

It shall be a symbol to you—[Once for all, I have sworn by my holiness, and I will not lie to David, that his line will continue forever and his throne endure before me like the sun.] It will be established forever *like the moon*, [the faithful witness in the sky].” (*Ps 89:35–37*). Just as the moon waxes and wanes so when you are pure you will count up to its fullness and when not, you will count down to its obscurity. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah Perez, Hazron, Ram, Aminadav, Nahshon, Salmon, Boaz, Oved, Jesse, David, Solomon, “And Solomon sat on the throne of Lord to rule” (*1 Chron 29:23*). Look, he is the [count of the] “moon in its fullness.” Then you count to its dimness, Rechaboam, Abijah, Asa, Jehosaphat, Jehoram, Ahaziah, Joash, Amaziah, Uziah, Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah, Menassa, Amon, Josiah, Zedekiah, “And he blinded the eyes of Zedekiah” (*2 Kings 25:7*). Look, he is the moon in its obscurity.

<sup>14</sup> Forty lashes (*Deut 25:3*) can therefore mean thirty-nine lashes: *2 Cor 11:24* refers to thirty-nine. The number thirty-nine is confirmed by Josephus, “but for him that acts contrary to this law, let him be beaten with forty lashes save one” (*Ant. 4:253*) and the Talmud (*b. Mak. 22a*).

<sup>15</sup> The *Dayyenu* hymn sung at the Passover Seder is thought to have ancient roots as a song of pilgrims bringing first-fruits as they came to the Temple: its fifteen stanzas match the fifteen steps that ascended to the Temple. That hymn portrays the blessings of God culminating in the Temple, the chosen place.

Some rabbinic genealogies begin the messianic chronology with Jacob's son Judah. *Genesis Rabbah* 98.7 interprets both Gen 49:9 ("[Judah] stoops, he crouches like a lion") and Num 24:9 ("He has crouched, he has lain down like a lion") with reference to messianic genealogy divided into generational stages in two different ways. Interpretations of the relevant verses vary accordingly. The first stage of one of these messianic lineages, tripartite like Matthew's, begins with Judah's son Perez and concludes with David. The second stage is from David to Zedekiah. The final stage is presumably, although it is not explicitly stated, from Zedekiah to the Messiah. In the context of this genealogical division, the midrash states that from Perez to David, "[Judah] crouched, he has lain down like a lion" (Num 24:9). During this period Judah was in a position of uncontested strength. With no need to confront his enemies, he had every reason to think he could lie down in safety. From David to Zedekiah, "[Judah] stooped down, he crouched like a lion" (Gen 49:9). No longer occupying a position of uncontested strength, Judah had to be in a position of readiness to strike his foes. It is probable that that this tradition understood that from Zedekiah to the Messiah Judah crouched in fear of his enemies.<sup>16</sup>

Here the midrashic editor abruptly introduces a variant periodization with only two parts: from Perez through to Zedekiah, and from Zedekiah to the Messiah.<sup>17</sup> According to this interpretation, crouching is the position of strength, lying down is the position of weakness. This midrash states that from

<sup>16</sup> See *Genesis Rabbah*, trans. Freedman (London: Soncino Publishers, 1983). There is a sharp break from the one tradition to the other. Whether it is the case that from Zedekiah to the Messiah Judah again was crouched in fear we can only surmise. At any rate, clearly in the Matthean genealogy Jesus, the Messiah, represents a peak, to say the least.

<sup>17</sup> *Genesis Rabbah* 98:7 printed editions read—with a double ending, suggesting an addition has carelessly fallen into the text from some other source (which I present in italics below):

*You are a lion's cub, O Judah* (Gen 49:9): The verse teaches us that God gave him the power of a lion and the boldness of its cubs.

*"You go up from the prey, my son"* (Gen 49:9)—from the prey of Joseph you rise in glory, from the prey of Tamar, you rise in glory.

*"[Judah] stoops, he crouches like a lion"* (Gen 49:9)—from Perez until David.

*"He has crouched, he has lain down like a lion"* (Num 24:9)—from David until Zedekiah. Others interpret: *"[Judah] stoops, he crouches like a lion"* (Gen 49:9)—from Perez until Zedekiah.

*"He has crouched, he has lain down like a lion"* (Num 25:9) —from Zedekiah until King Messiah.

*"Judah stoops, he crouches like a lion"* (Gen 49:9)—in this world. *"He has crouched, he has lain down like a lion"* (Num 24:9)—in the future to come.

(alternate ending)

Perez to Zedekiah, “[Judah] stooped, he crouched” (Gen 49:9), powerful and ready to fight his enemies during a period of unbroken kingship and political sovereignty. From Zedekiah to the Messiah, however, “[Judah] crouched, he lay down” (Num 24:9). With the beginning of the Exile, Judah was weak and defenseless, incapable even of being prepared to fight. Only the Messiah could bring about the change needed so that again Judah could be “stooped down [and] crouched” (Gen 49:9), that is, in a position of strength and ready to fight. The midrash goes on to say that during the messianic period Judah’s enemies would be defeated so that again he could be “crouched” and he could “[lie] down” (Num 24:9), but this time in safety. For Judah, the advent of the Messiah, who is the last of the generations, means strength, security and peace.<sup>18</sup>

According to Matthew, Jesus too (and also David) represents a period of strength and peace, in a realized eschatology (Matt 11:25–30), only this is to be a lasting and final period of strength and peace. Or perhaps the model for Matthew’s genealogy is one of decline after David, as in *Gen. Rab.* 98.7, where the period from David through to the Messiah is one of Judah’s oppression. This interpretation may serve as a model for understanding Matthew’s view of the Davidic line as moving from decline to utter decline to redemption.

*“Judah stoops, he crouches like a lion”* (Gen 49:9)—when he is not threatened by enemies.

*“He has crouched, he has lain down like a lion”* (Num 24:9)—when he is threatened by enemies he rises to face them.

18 Here is the manuscript reading, and the conjectured ending in brackets preferred by Theodor-Albeck, *Bereshit Rabbah* (p. 1258):

*You are a lion’s cub, O Judah* (Gen 49:9). The verse teaches us that God gave him the power of a lion and the boldness of its cubs.

*You go up from the prey, my son* (Gen 49:9)—from the prey of Joseph you rise in glory, from the prey of Tamar, you rise in glory.

From Perez until David—*He has crouched, he has lain down like a lion* (Num 24:9).

From David until Zedekiah—*[Judah] stoops, he crouches like a lion* (Gen 49:9).

Others interpret: From Perez until Zedekiah—*[Judah] stoops, he crouches like a lion* (Gen 49:9)—From Zedekiah until King Messiah—*He has crouched, he has lain down like a lion* (Num 25:9).

In this world—*He has crouched, he has lain down like a lion* (Num 24:9).

In the future to come—*[Judah] stoops, he crouches like a lion* (Gen 49:9).

When he is “not threatened” [a euphemism meaning when he is threatened] by enemies—*[Judah] stoops, he crouches like a lion.* (Gen 49:9).

When all his enemies are destroyed—*[He has crouched, he has lain down like a lion* (Num 24:9).]

*Now, as for Jesus<sup>19</sup> the Messiah his birth was like this: When his mother Mary was promised in marriage to Joseph, but before they had been intimate with each other, she was found to be pregnant by [the] Holy Spirit. (v. 18)*

In the time of Jesus (and symbolically even today) there was a twofold process by which a Jewish man and woman came to be married. There was first the betrothal, and then about a year later the marriage, after which the man and the woman lived together (*m. Ketub.* 5.2). Marriages were considered to be literally made in heaven. According to Prov 19:14, “And from the Lord a woman is *betrothed* [perhaps, more accurately, bound] to a man.”<sup>20</sup> This understanding is reflected in some rabbinic sources, which understand that Providence decreed the woman to the man fit for her: *Lev. Rab.* 29:8 is instructive:

Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba said: Rabbi Levi preached on Ps 62:9: As a matter of course, people say: “Mr. So-and-So is marrying Miss So-and-So.” [Concerning this, the Psalmist says: 62:9]—*People are mindless. Miss So-and-So is marrying Mr. So-and-So [Ps 62:9]—Folks deceive themselves.*

The clarification of this sermon is found in *b. Sotah* where God decrees destined marriages:

Rabbi Judah said in the name Rav: 40 days before the embryo is formed a heavenly voice goes out and says “the daughter of So and So is destined for So and So, the house of So and So is destined for So and So, the field of So and So is destined for So and So.”

There is reason to believe that the usual age of the young man at the time of his betrothal was between eighteen and twenty years (*m. 'Abot* 5:21), and that the age of the young woman was about twelve and a half or thirteen (*m. Ned.* 10:5; *Gen. Rab.* 95).<sup>21</sup> It is quite possible that when the Gospel opens Joseph is about eighteen and Mary about thirteen years old.<sup>22</sup> The actual age of marriage

<sup>19</sup> The word “Jesus” might be a scribal addition as it is absent in some citations and at least one manuscript. It is not Matthew’s style to have the article “the” before the name Jesus but it is usual to have it before “Messiah (Christ).”

<sup>20</sup> The same word is used in *b. Mo'ed Qat.* 18b to refer to a “betrothal.”

<sup>21</sup> See Buechler, “The Induction of the Bride and Bridegroom into Chupa in the First and Second Centuries in Palestine,” (1927), 82.

<sup>22</sup> The view is based on ages found said by the Rabbis to be the ideal for rabbinic society. Nevertheless, the funerary evidence shows that epitaphs of people who died in their teens

in ancient Palestine seems to have been around puberty for the woman, perhaps thirteen or fifteen, and as late as the mid-twenties or even early thirties for the man. Evidence shows that the ages at which Jewish men and women were being betrothed to each other in first-century Palestine were not much different than the ages of the young men and women who were being betrothed in the contemporaneous Roman world.<sup>23</sup>

While much has been made of Jesus' bachelorhood, it would be a mistake to think that bachelorhood for a man in his early thirties during this period was unusual. When his first child was born (c. 73 CE), Josephus was about the age that Jesus was when he died, thirty-five or so.<sup>24</sup> We may assume, therefore, that Joseph was somewhere in his mid to late twenties at the time of his betrothal, while Mary was twelve to fifteen.<sup>25</sup>

At the time of the betrothal the woman legally became the man's wife, though she did not yet live with him (*m. Ketub.* 1.2). Betrothal—in Hebrew, *qiddushin*, or *erusin*—was the act by which a husband created a legal prohibition for the woman to marry anyone but her intended.<sup>26</sup> The betrothal consisted of the groom giving his betrothed a small sum of money or gift declaring in some fashion, “Be thou betrothed to me by virtue of this money,” and she agreed to be consecrated to him (*m. Qidd.* 1.1).<sup>27</sup> Following the betrothal, the young woman was called the man's “wife” and he was called her “husband.” This is why in Matt 1:19, even though Joseph and Mary were not yet married, he is referred to as Mary's “husband” and she in 1:20 is referred to as Joseph's “wife.”

were unmarried and the epitaphs were dedicated by parents. See S. Klein, *Sefer HaYishuv* (1977) 39; 63; and Adiel Schremer, *Male and Female He Created Them* (2003), 85–91. The Jewish ossuaries in Palestine generally do not supply the age at death.

<sup>23</sup> Professor Dale Allison was kind enough to comment thoroughly on my work and drew to my attention the work of P.W. van der Horst, *Ancient Jewish Epitaphs: an Introductory Survey of a Millennium of Jewish Funerary Epigraphy (300 BCE–700 CE)*, (1991), who claims the average life span in antiquity was 28.4 years old. However, ancient Jewish writers speak of that age as the age of marriage, 73–84. *T. Levi* (11:1) speaks of 28 for Levi's marriage; *T. Iss.* (3:5) also gives 30 for his marriage and the *T. Jud.* (7:9, 8:1) allows that he was older than 20. In “Polygamy in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza,” Mordechai Friedman (1970–71) also gives us records for marriages at age 29 and 30. Evidence from the *Manual of Discipline*, Qumran scroll 1QSa 1: 9–10 allows marriage not earlier than “the completion of his 20th year.”

<sup>24</sup> At least according to what he writes about himself in *Life* 1:4, though in *War* 5:419 he seems to indicate that he was married somewhat earlier.

<sup>25</sup> See chap. 5 in Satlow, *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity*. (2001).

<sup>26</sup> George Foote Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era* (1927), 22.

<sup>27</sup> Shmuel Safrai, *The Literature of the Sages* (1987), 755.

Matthew refers to Mary's liminal marital status by describing her as *mnesteutheses*, usually rendered "promised in marriage." *Mnesteutheses* is to be understood in the passive sense. In fine, "betrothal" is the act by which the woman becomes bound to the husband, who indicates to her that he would have her for a wife. It is passive in the sense of her (tacit) agreement by accepting his betrothal money or gift, signaling that she is committed to him alone. The Syriac translation of 1:18 gives us *makira (leih)* and in Syriac Prov 19:14 we discover the word again, "And from the Lord a woman is *betrothed* [perhaps more accurately bound] to a man."<sup>28</sup> This reflects the passage in *b. Sotah* 2a above: marriages are ordained on high. (There is one more time the word is used for "betrothed" in the Peshitta: 2 Sam 3:14.) It is curious to note that this Semitic root—*mkr*—is generally used for the commercial transactions of buying (taking) and selling (giving).<sup>29</sup> The Mishnah (*Qidd.* 1:1) uses the term *nikneit* for this commitment. *Nikneit* in this context means "legally reserved for her husband," while elsewhere in rabbinic literature it is used with trade connotations (e.g., *m. B. Meṣi'a* 4:1).

In Judea, sexual union prior to marriage was customarily forbidden (*t. Ketub.* 1:4). Nonetheless, betrothal remained a legal state of matrimony. Once betrothed, the woman was not free to marry another man without first receiving a divorce. Matthew states that Mary became pregnant before she and Joseph had "come together" (1:18). This "coming together" refers to the conclusion of the second part of the marriage process. Most commentators properly see here a reference to the married couple's entering the marital home. This "entrance," which permitted the couple to have sexual relations and allowed them to live privately as husband and wife, is known as *hakhnasat kallah*, or *nisuin*, or *ishut*, and, in Judea, it was often preceded by the ceremony of *yihud*—"being together, uniting," remaining alone for a short period (*t. Ketub.* 1:24). The Syriac of the word *synelthein* in Matt 1:18—*nishtufun* (literally "joined in union")—possibly suggests the *yihud* (literally: being joined) ceremony event.

In Palestine, it was the custom before the *nisuin* to investigate the claims of the families as to the sexual conduct of the bride and groom during the betrothal period (*t. Ketub.* 1:4–6). According to this source, in some communities the claims of the *huppah* or marriage agreements concerning the bride, or concerning the willingness of her family to let her go, were also investigated. It had to be determined that everything was in order, particularly insofar as no adultery having occurred in the betrothal period. If it was discovered that adultery had occurred, then the marriage arrangements would almost

<sup>28</sup> The same word is used in *b. Mo'ed Qat.* 18b to refer to a "betrothal."

<sup>29</sup> D.M. Gropp, "The Samaria Papyri from Wadi Daliyeh II (Cave 4)" (2001), 24, n. 42.

certainly have been changed. Such investigations could involve either one or both parties bringing evidence of guilt and innocence. In Judea, if everything in the betrothal period had been properly carried out, the bride and groom would be encouraged to be alone together just before the wedding so that the bride might become familiar and desirable to the groom (*t. Ketub.* 1:4).

*But Joseph her husband, being a righteous man, and not wishing to expose her,<sup>30</sup> decided to divorce her secretly. (v. 19)*

Because the betrothed woman had legally become the man's "wife" she could, although not yet completely married to him, be divorced by him (*m. Ketub.* 1:2; *m. Yebam.* 2:6). During the period in which the woman was betrothed, as well while she was fully married, adultery was a reason for which a man could and should divorce his wife (*m. Ketub.* 7:6). The school of Shammai held that it was the only reason for which a man could divorce his wife, although this was not the prevailing view, as Matt 19:8 notes (see also *m. Git.* 9:10; Josephus, *Ant.* 4:253; Philo, *On the Special Laws* 1.30).

*M. Sotah* 7:6 defines divorce as a proper remedy for "those who transgress Mosaic rules" and "those who transgress Jewish or Judean rules [*dat yehudit*]."<sup>31</sup> Included in the second category are women who went out with their hair uncovered, or women who would weave in the marketplace and speak with men. *T. Sotah* 5:9 (ed. Lieberman) sets out rules in greater detail.<sup>32</sup>

If he saw his wife going out and her hair uncovered and dressed immodestly and in company of slaves and maidservants, or she wove in public and bathed and sported with any man—one fulfills a commandment by divorcing her, as scripture states: "When a man marries a woman, having relations with her, then it shall be if she does not find favor in his eyes because he finds in her lewd conduct then he shall write her a document of divorce and give it into her hand and send her from his house" (Deut 24:1).

This passage refers to a married woman living with her husband, as the citation of Deut 24:1 makes clear. The same rules apply to a betrothed or an *arusah* ["bound to him"]. In these cases, her *ketuba* settlement (prenuptial financial

<sup>30</sup> And thereby disgrace her.

<sup>31</sup> See also *t. Ketub.* 7:6.

<sup>32</sup> See *b. Git.* 89a. These issues are most recently discussed by Ishay Rosen-Zvi, "Tractate Kinui" (2006).

terms in case of divorce) is annulled, and there is a supposition that it is meritorious to divorce her, much in line with the passage concerning a married woman. An adulteress of any kind is forbidden to have further sexual relations with either her husband or with her lover.

*B. Ketubot* 11b/12a explains the procedures to be followed if a woman believed to have been a virgin at the time of betrothal was subsequently “found” otherwise. If proof were strong that she had been unfaithful during the betrothal period, the penalty, under a number of conditions, could have been death (Deut 22:24; *b. Ketub.* 51b). On the other hand, when there was no proof of infidelity and the woman claimed that she had not been a virgin prior to the betrothal, she is believed, but her *ketuba* could be reduced to zero for misleading her husband at the time she accepted his betrothal. If the woman lost her virginity during the betrothal period as a result of a fall while climbing a fence, her settlement amount would be reduced to 100 *zuzim*, the amount a non-virgin normally received. With regard to Mary, the case was not that of suspected but rather of seemingly certain adultery, since Mary was pregnant. Matthew makes clear that Joseph was contemplating divorcing her, and as readers we assume it must have seemed evident to him that Mary was pregnant from another man.<sup>33</sup> Although it was not the case in Galilee, in Judea a betrothed man could be alone with his “wife” and no one would question whether he was the father if she became pregnant (*m. Ketub.* 1:5).<sup>34</sup> In terms of the law, however, as a “righteous man” who knew he was not the father of the child, Joseph would have had no choice but to divorce her (Deut 22:23–27; *m. Sotah* 5:1).<sup>35</sup>

When witnesses observe that a man has delivered a divorce document to his wife, stating that she is now free of any legal ties binding her to him and is therefore free to marry again, the divorce is finalized. This procedure could be done privately. Betrothals were likely, then as now, public knowledge; for if not, how could a man be made forbidden to another’s betrothed woman he seduced (*m. Sotah* 5:1), not to mention more severe punishments.<sup>36</sup> No witnesses would know to warn him and he could always claim he had no idea of her status. The whole force of legislation regarding betrothed women assumed

33 For a detailed discussion of rabbinic texts, their problems and solutions, dealing with adultery and its judicial consequences see Shamma Friedman, “Sorting out the Wages of Adultery: Execution, Ordeal or Divorce” (Secunda and Fine 2012, 77–100).

34 See Safrai (1987) 756–57, and Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 97–105.

35 See also Safrai, 762.

36 See *b. Sanh.* 41a.

betrothals to be public knowledge. Since Joseph knew for a fact that Mary's child was not his, by law he was forbidden to her and she to him.

In the end Joseph decided to do two things. First, he decided to divorce Mary—indeed rabbinic law would have encouraged this since he could no longer live with her. He had believed she was a virgin at the time of betrothal, but she was now pregnant from what had to have been another man's union with her. This is classic adultery in the law. There is no difference in the laws of adultery between the rules governing a betrothed woman and a married woman. Second, he decided to do this privately so as not to embarrass either Mary or her family, about which Matthew is silent. With reference to this private manner of divorcing Mary, Matthew commends Joseph's righteousness. Likely for Matthew "privately" here means "in a secret way,"<sup>37</sup> that is, Joseph would hide the reason for the divorce. Perhaps we should understand that Gospel account is based on a likely scenario: since people in Joseph's community would know that he was righteous and that if he was getting divorced it was likely on account of adultery, he had to divorce her without fanfare. In Jewish law known to us from the Mishnah (*m. Qidd. 1:1*) only death and divorce can break a marital union. The term *qiddushin* refers to the first stage of marriage but the same manner of dissolving the union holds true of the later stage as well. There is no way for us as readers to determine Joseph's thoughts as the Gospel writer hides them. At any rate, it is not difficult for us to imagine that Mary's pregnancy would soon be known in any case and so Joseph must have been in a quandary.

Although as readers we know why Joseph was the wronged—and even humiliated—party<sup>38</sup> whose betrothed, he might well imagine, had betrayed him, he nevertheless did not wish to shame Mary publicly. Instead, according to the Gospel, he planned "to divorce her in secret."<sup>39</sup> For the informed reader, Joseph has made a wise decision. Instead of bringing Mary before a

<sup>37</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, in a private communication, pointed out the same word occurs in connection with Herod's meeting with the Magi, where secrecy was necessary.

<sup>38</sup> Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (1999), 92.

<sup>39</sup> Jewish sources have much to say about how the term "righteous" is applied to people who refuse to shame others. Gens 38:6–30 tells the story of Judah's daughter-in-law Tamar, who is said by Matthew to be one of Jesus' ancestors (1:3). For pious reasons, Tamar disguises herself as a prostitute and deliberately allows herself to become pregnant by Judah who, when he comes to hear of her pregnancy, is convinced that his daughter-in-law has committed adultery, and so orders her to be burned. But when Judah discovers that it was he with whom she conceived, and when he also discovers the reason she brought this to pass, he exclaims, "She is more righteous than I." Tamar did not shame Judah; she was willing to die in order to protect his honor (Gen 38:25–26). *B.B. Meṣi'a* 59a states: "It is better

tribunal to discuss settlements or seek judicial sanctions, he would arrange a brief ceremony before several witnesses, and hand her a written bill of divorce stating that she was now free to marry someone else (*m. Git.* 9:3).<sup>40</sup> According to Matthew, God knew Joseph's thoughts of divorce and sent an angel to convince him not to take such an action. Before he had an opportunity to act on his divorce plan, the angel explained to Joseph the circumstances under which Mary had become pregnant—circumstances that he accepted:

*But when he had thought about these things, look, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to accept Mary as your wife, for that which is born in her is from the Holy Spirit.”* (v. 20)

The angel's words indicate that Joseph was reluctant to proceed with the marriage, believing that Mary had proven herself both untrustworthy and sinful. In telling him to “accept Mary as his wife,” the angel commands Joseph to complete the second stage of the marriage: the living together of the man and woman under one roof. He then “took his wife,” marrying her and bringing her into his home. Mary thus became a member of Joseph's family, the family of David, as does her child. The angel refers to Joseph as “son of David” so that he might understand the messianic nature of the situation.

While there are examples in Jewish literature of other pregnancies said to have been caused by God, none is predicated upon conception apart from sexual intercourse. According to Josephus, God appeared to Amram in a dream when his wife was pregnant with Moses. In this dream God told Amram that Moses “shall escape those who are watching to destroy him, and... he shall deliver the Hebrew race from their bondage in Egypt” (*Ant.* 2:210–17). Matthew's passage, which is unique, seems to be a development of the term “son of God” known to other early Christian writers such as Mark (3:11) as well as Paul (Rom 1:4) though perhaps not with the involvement of the Holy Spirit.

It is not uncommon in the Hebrew Bible for either God or an angel<sup>41</sup> to inform someone “not to fear” to set upon a course of action that seems initially

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that a person throw himself into a fiery furnace than shame his neighbor in public.” *Gen. Rab.* 24:7 relates that God feels shame when someone embarrasses another human being.

<sup>40</sup> See also Angelo Tosato, “Joseph Being Just Man (Matt 1:19)” (1979) 551, and Keener, *Commentary*, 94.

<sup>41</sup> The word “angel” is a transliteration of the Latin *angelus*, which in turn is a transliteration of the Greek *angelos* (messenger). In the LXX *angelos* is the word most commonly used to translate the Hebrew *mal'ak* (i.e., messenger). In the Hebrew Bible the *Angel of the*

to be contrary to the divine will. For instance, God told Abraham in a dream not to fear going to Egypt, for “I will protect you.” (Gen 15:1). He told Jacob not to fear doing the same (46:2–3). And an angel of the Lord tells Hagar not to be afraid of an arduous journey (for God has heard the voice of the boy) (Gen 21:17). According to Matthew, the angel told Joseph not to worry about proceeding to stage two of the marriage rite. Nothing was amiss, and Joseph needed to have no qualms about the propriety of entering into union with Mary. She had not been unfaithful.

Matthew states explicitly (since no one in the story knows this as yet) that Mary had become pregnant from the Holy Spirit. The pious gloss concerning the activity of the Holy Spirit prevents readers from thinking that an impropriety has occurred. The phrase (*ek*) *pneumatos hagiou* is a Greek rendering of the Hebrew (*al yedei*) *Ruah haQodesh*, which signifies divine agency, sometimes referring to prophecy and sometimes to other miraculous interventions. *Eccl. Rab.* 2:8 to Eccl 2:7 [literally: and sons of the house *was*—the singular verb is the tip-off to me]<sup>42</sup> notes that Solomon’s “household staff” or “sons,” subject of “*was*,” refers to “the Holy Spirit”—*Ruah haQodesh*—a personification of a supernatural process that accomplishes the divine will, akin to the targumic *Memra* or the Philonic *Logos*. The Spirit is the active element of the God-head that interacts both with the transcendent and the imminent, the physical and the spiritual; it is that which personifies divine activity in the lower world. In this midrash, the Holy Spirit is pictured as the collective staff of servants serving Solomon’s (which name the Rabbis sometimes see as an allusion to God’s royal being) needs.

*She will bear a son, and you will call his name ‘Jesus’ [God saves], for he will save his people from their sins.* (v. 21)

*Lord* appears, for example, to Abraham (Gen 22:11), or to Moses (Exod 3:2ff), or to Hagar (Gen 16:7ff), or to Manoah’s wife (Judg. 13:3ff). In the case of the latter two, the angel announces not only the birth of but also the destiny of the children of Hagar and Manoah. The angel is a “messenger,” bearing the word of God to each of them. It is noteworthy that in the examples from the Bible above and the Joseph story, nothing is said about the messenger except that he appears. This is so because what matters is not the messenger but the message he bears. Because it comes from God, the angel proclaims His will.

<sup>42</sup> While the verb “*were*” would be appropriate for the plural subject (sons), the Rabbis understood something singular as being alluded to. That “Holy Spirit” is feminine in Hebrew should not puzzle us. The use of the masculine singular occurs with feminine subjects as well, for example, 1 Sam. 25:27: “which your maidservant brought” (third person masculine singular).

The angel informs Joseph that Mary would have a son whom he is to name Jesus.<sup>43</sup> This verse is probably based on Gen 16:11: “And the angel of Lord said to her, ‘Look, you are pregnant, and you will bear a son and you shall call his name *Yishma-el*, because God heeded your pain.’” Strengthening the form of prophetic naming is Gen 10:25: “To Eber were born two sons. The name of one was Peleg; for in his days the people of the earth were divided; and the name of his brother was Yaktan.” Peleg’s name is prophetic of events that were to occur in his time (namely, “people of the earth” were divided). According to *Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer*, chap. 31, which dates from around the eighth century but which preserves much earlier traditions, the following were named before their births: Isaac, Yishmael (in whose name, as with Peleg, the Rabbis saw prophecy: God will heed the pleas of the Jews whom the Ishmaelites persecute), Moses, Solomon, Josiah, and the Messiah. This list brings together people who were born to fulfill programmatic destinies. For example, commenting on Num 13:16, “Moses called Hoshea ‘Yehoshua Bin Nun.’” *Num. Rab.* 16 states that Moses saw that the spies he sent to Canaan were impious; nevertheless Joshua’s name reflects the prediction for that generation that “God will save us!” *B. Soṭah* 34b interprets the names of the other Israelite spies in a similar fashion.

Thus, when Matthew or his source relates that the angel says the child is to be called “Jesus” because he will save his people from their sins, it would seem its import, according to precedents in prophetic naming, is that God will save Israel from its sins. In the Hebrew Bible “His people” always refers to the nation of Israel (1 Sam 12:22; Ps 29:10; Ps 105:24; Ruth 1:6; 2 Chron 2:10, 25:11, and 32:10). The parallel is Ps 130:8: “He will redeem Israel from all his sins.” The two terms—“His people” and “nation”—appear together in Judg 11:23, 2 Sam 5:12, 1 Kgs 8:59, 1 Chron 14:2, and 2 Chron 31:8 and 35:3. The reference is to Israel, but ironically “save his people” will, in the end, mean “save his Gentile nations.”

*All this happened to fulfill what was said by the Lord through the prophet, “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel” (Isa 7:14), which is translated “God is with us.” (vv. 22–23)*

The Isaiah text is Matthew’s first of several prophetic quotations meant to show that the divine plan foretold by the prophets was now being fulfilled

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43 Note the similarity in “angel-speak” by comparing the angel’s message in Matt 1:20–21 to Luke 1:13, which states that the angel said to the father of John the Baptist, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.”

through Jesus. *Parthenos*, the word used by the Septuagint in Isa 7:14, can mean either a young woman or a virgin, just as can the English term “maid.” (After her rape, Dinah is referred to as a *parthenos*: LXX Gen 34:3 and 34:4.) Matthew uses the term as meaning “virgin,” telling us that Jesus is sired by the Holy Spirit and not by a man. For Matthew, the Septuagint’s rendition of the verse has found its fulfillment in a surprising reading that would not have been the way it was generally understood prior to Matthew’s use of it. This reflects our second type of fulfillment text as discussed above in the Introduction to this chapter. Matthew, or his source, finds two prophetic events in Isa 7:14: a virgin conceives a son and he is named “Emmanuel,” but only the first demands fulfillment while the second is descriptive, rather than prescriptive.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, the given name Jesus will reflect the meaning of Emmanuel: “God is with us.”

*When Joseph woke from sleep he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and he accepted his wife.* (v. 24)

The final verses indicate that Joseph was commanded, rather than urged, to bring Mary into his marital home. No room is left for lingering doubts about what the neighbors might think. Verse 24 states that immediately upon waking, Joseph acted.

*And he did not have sex with her until she bore a son, and he called his name “Jesus.”* (v. 25)

It would have been customary after this final stage of the marriage process for the couple to engage in conjugal relations, but Matthew specifically states that

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44 For Matthew, the event and the scripture are now united. For the sense of “fulfillment text” see the introduction to this chapter. Matthew states that Jesus’ birth fulfills ancient prophecy: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son” (Isa 7:14). Modern translators render this verse from the Hebrew as “Look, the young woman is with child and about to give birth to a son. Let her name him Immanuel” (JPS). The LXX of Isa 7:14 is: “Behold, this *parthenos* is about to conceive, and she will bear a son, and you shall call his name ‘Emmanuel.’” Both “you shall call” and “she shall call” are proper translations of the Hebrew *veqarat*. This verb form appears in both Deut 31:29 and Jer 44:23; in both cases it means not “to call” but “to happen,” and in both *veqarat* here is normally translated in the third feminine singular. Yet Gen 16:11 is an almost exact parallel to Isa 7:14, and this verse can only mean “you [fem.] shall call his name . . .” Isaiah was speaking to Ahaz about the young woman; thus for Isaiah the better translation is “she shall call.” Matthew writes that “they”—rather than “she” or “you”—“shall call his name Emmanuel.” That is, Matthew makes an emendation to suit his context.

the couple did not have sex until after Jesus was born. Apparently this command to abstain from sexual activity with Mary was included in the angel's instructions to Joseph. Judah and Tamar's son Perez (Matthew 1:3) is considered to be the ancestor of the messianic genealogical line: "When Adam sinned [creation's] fullness became defective and will not be completely restored until the Son of Perez comes" [see *Gen. Rab.* 12:6]. After impregnating Tamar, Judah "did not lie with her again" (Gen 28:26). However, although the two stories both resonate with the motif of suspected adultery, the conception of Mary's child, unlike the children of Tamar, does not result from a sexual act.

Finally Matthew recounts the birth of the infant, and that Joseph "named the child Jesus." This act of naming resonates in tension within the genealogy initiating the chapter: son of David. A savior, yes; genetically descended from David, as was Joseph himself (Matthew 1:16), no. The genealogy and its sequel are left behind and the narrative commences, as the door from the past swings open onto the life of Jesus.

# Chapter 2

## Introduction

From this chapter forward, the author of Matthew tells us a story in which Jesus is placed entirely within the social and religious milieu of Jewish society of first century Palestine. At the same time, the story gradually moves away from the literary and social structures that were current in this Jewish society, in order to address the needs of Gentile Christians who were Jesus' followers and members of Matthew's own community, who were socially and theologically distant from the earlier milieu.

The members of the Matthean community understood that they had broken away from the community of Israel. This separate identity would have been produced by two factors: partly a gradual process of differentiation, confrontation, and rejection (of which more later), but partly also the distinction made by the Romans between Jews and the followers of Jesus. The religion of the Jews was officially tolerated by the Romans even though in their homeland the Jews remained under martial law.

The religion of the Christians, on the other hand, was suspect in the eyes of the Romans. Christians were among the non-Jewish cults who were periodically persecuted by the Romans before the second century. Furthermore, the Christians were seen as a danger within the empire and they were sometimes persecuted for this reason: Tacitus (*Ann. 15:44*) records that Nero turned on the Christians in Rome after the fire there in 64 CE. But there is no record of a sustained policy of persecution of the Jesus followers in the first century. Indeed, there was no systematic persecution of the Christians before the second half of the second century. Pliny, governor of Bithynia (Turkey) in 111/112, exchanged letters with Trajan and informs us that it was illegal to be a Christian but that Christians should not be sought out; for the most part, they were not until the time of Decius (although there were exceptions).

By Matthew's time Christians were already quite separate from Jews. Allusions in Matthew to specifically Christian (as distinct from Jewish) scribes (Matt 13:52), to Jesus having "disciples of all the nations" (Matt 28:19),<sup>1</sup> to

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<sup>1</sup> I do not accept the argument that "all the nations" includes Jews. Ps 117:1–2 draws distinction between "all the nations" and "Israel." "Praise the Lord, *all the nations*; laud Him, all the peoples! For His loving-kindness is great *toward us...*" Paul uses these and other verses to show that "all the nations" refers to Gentiles in Scripture. See Rom 15:7. While Paul sees Jews as primary and the Gentiles as their equals, Matthew's use of "all the Gentiles" would make them the sole disciples of Jesus.

Jesus warning that “the Kingdom of God will be taken from the Jews and given to another nation,” (Matt 21:43), and to Matthew himself saying “and this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day” (Matt 28:15) are all evidence that shows the break was somewhat earlier than Matthew.<sup>2</sup> However, we cannot say with certainty when and how the separation occurred. Jewish evidence may suggest that Jews of the community of Jesus’ followers attended synagogues at which they were not welcome, assuming a first-century date, (which is highly debatable) for the institution of the *Birkat haMinim* imprecation in Jewish prayer.<sup>3</sup> At any rate it, would seem the members of this community did not follow Temple practices; nor, after the Temple’s destruction, did they mourn for it. Their neglect of Jewish oral law must have been purposeful to judge from Matthew’s own assessment of the “Tradition of the Elders” in chapter 15. I write here in general terms but in the commentary proper we shall see how Matthew believed that God had turned away from the Jews and towards the believers in Christ; we shall also see how he inveighed against the unwritten traditions of the Jews.<sup>4</sup> So by the time Matthew was writing his account of Jesus in the years following the Temple’s destruction, both Roman and Christian sources strongly suggest that the followers of Jesus were thought to be distinct from the Jews. Moreover, Jewish sources that focus on this later post-Temple period indicate that those Jews who were part of the Jesus movement were thought by other Jews to be even worse than pagans.<sup>5</sup>

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2 Professor Allison (in private communication) objects to my use of “break” since the process was highly complex and seems to have differed from region to region, time to time. However, Matt 21:42–45 strongly suggests that Matthew knows Jews and Christians have already parted ways:

*“Did you never see in the Writings, ‘the stone which the builders put on one side, the same has been made the chief stone of the building: this was the Lord’s doing, and it is a wonder in our eyes.’* (Ps 118:22)? For this reason I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you, and will be given to a nation producing the fruits of it. Any man falling on this stone will be broken, but he on whom it comes down will be crushed to dust.” See further 12:15–17.

3 See Basser, *Studies in Exegesis: Christian Critiques of Jewish Law and Rabbinic Responses, 70–300 C.E.* (2000), 61–71.

4 This will be elaborated upon in the commentary to Matt 15:1 regarding the Tradition of the Elders, which is the sense of *paradosis ton presbuteron* in Greek. See Baumgarten, “The Pharisaic Paradosis” (1987).

5 B. *Šabb.* 116a cites Rabbi Tarfon: “For even if one pursued me to slay me, or a snake pursued me to bite me, I would enter a heathen Temple [for refuge], but not the houses of these [people], for the latter know (of God) yet deny [Him], whereas the former are ignorant and deny [Him], and of them Scripture says, ‘and behind the doors and the posts hast thou set up thy memorial.’” (Isa 57:8).

The author of Matthew deliberately chose to construct his narrative with a Jewish vocabulary that has the feel of pre-church tradition. He undoubtedly used earlier genuinely original sources from the period when Jews who were Jesus followers were still within the Jewish fold. His story begins with the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, the traditional site for the birth of the Messiah, in the latter years of Herod's rule. Herod was thought by the Jews to be a descendant of Esau, the elder twin brother and sometime rival of their patriarch Jacob, whose life Esau once sought. Herod was in fact an Edomite (of Idumean lineage), and Edom was understood to be the national embodiment of Esau. The Romans appointed him king of the Jews in 40 B.C.E. and he gained control of Judea in 37 B.C.E. Although he was a ruthless tyrant, he kept Judea politically independent of Rome during his reign, which ended with his death in 4 B.C.E.<sup>6</sup>

The author of Matthew fills out the circumstances of Jesus' birth by turning to Jewish traditions concerning Moses<sup>7</sup> and Abraham.<sup>8</sup> His purpose in doing this was not to show that Jesus was a new Moses through whom would come a new law, nor to suggest that Jewish history was turning in on itself to draw the curtains to a close. (In Matthew's day Christians hoped to see the Jews punished for their having rebelled against the will of God by having Jesus crucified). His purpose was to use Jewish materials in the way the Jews themselves used them—pouring new wine into old skins, as it were.<sup>9</sup>

For the ancient Rabbis the words of a biblical verse produce sounds and images, in and of themselves devoid of universal meaning, which suggest other sounds and images. Information, but not systematic thought, might be derived from the new sounds and images but at the end of the day this information expresses things already known from elsewhere in the tradition. The play of sound and image all but ignores concept. This is because the Rabbis assume that the tradition, right down to the letters of a biblical verse, is a closed system in which there is no worthless information: no filler, nothing extra. To the

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6 The prayer recorded in minor tractate *Sop.* 13:12—"may a foreigner not sit on his [David's] throne"—must have been composed during Herod's reign.

7 See Ulrich Luz and Rosemary Selle, *Studies in Matthew* (2005), and Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*.

8 One early story concerning the birth of Abraham is preserved in a number of late works. It was also recorded by Eisenstein in his *Otzar Hamidrashim*: "Avraham Avinu," s. 15; in *Sefer haYashar* [Wilna, 1870]; in A. Jellinek, *Beth haMidrash* 2:118; and in *Ma'aseh Avraham* by Horowitz, *Collection of Small Midrashim*, 1.48.) According to the legend, when Abraham was born, a star appeared and the wise men told Nimrod the king that this star meant that someone had been born who would produce a nation that was going to destroy his kingdom. Nimrod then sought to kill Abraham but Abraham's father hid him in a cave for three years.

9 The same sentiment is eloquently expressed by Luz and Selle, *Studies in Matthew*, 33.

Greek and western mind, however, a text, even a sacred text, consists of two parts: vehicle and concept. And the concept is the point of the text, the meaning of a literary image. A word, let alone a single syllable, only has importance for the western reader insofar as it is needed to convey the concept or the point. If a particular word is only present in a text because grammar or sense require it, that word—and any image it might have evoked in some other context—is of no importance to the reader.

It is generally assumed by New Testament scholars that, for the most part, the Gospel writers read their Greek versions of the Hebrew Bible from the Greek view that word images yield universal concepts. Jewish readers of the Hebrew Bible in the early Christian centuries, on the other hand, tended to connect the words with associated images that had well-defined specific contours but they, for the most part, resisted finding any universal concept. So the question becomes: what is the nature of the Greek gospels, which interpret the Hebrew Scriptures? Do they use the Greek interpretive mode of conceptual thought, or the Hebrew visual/auditory mode of providing stark images to describe specific evil characters, good characters, and God? I take the position that while Matthew's rhetoric slides along the surface of the Moses stories in scripture and Jewish traditions, the intent is not to cut a deep slice out of these Exodus scriptures. Matthew, likely following an older source,<sup>10</sup> uses the images and the words as no more than evocative of biblical vocabulary but devoid of the conceptual paradigm of a Moses or a Pharaoh. Jesus is simply Jesus and Herod is Herod. They play themselves.<sup>11</sup>

Most of the extant Jewish literature from the Second Temple period is known to us from the Greek writings of the Jews preserved by the Church. However, Hebrew and Aramaic versions of some of these texts have recently been discovered near the Dead Sea. The authors of these texts show us how familiar phrases from the Bible could even then be used as literary devices, to describe events not mentioned in the Scriptures.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, the typological vocabulary used by the Jews to denote a deliverer or a persecutor was governed by biblical descriptions. Deliverers were invariably Moseses or Davids, while persecutors were either Pharaohs or Hamans. To be sure, Jewish typologies of the Messiah found in Matthew, such as comparing him to Moses riding on an ass (Exod 4:20) or calling him the King of the Jews, could suggest more than just a casual description by utilizing phrases

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<sup>10</sup> See Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 99–113, for his view of detecting presynoptic materials.

<sup>11</sup> Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 114–21, suggests (in contrast to my own view) a conceptual patterning of Jesus on the life of Moses.

<sup>12</sup> See Basser, “*Pesher Hadavar: The Truth of the Matter*” (1988).

borrowed from the Mosaic or Davidic narratives, but the Jesus stories do not. The narrative of Matthew makes it clear that Jesus was to lead the nations out of their decadence and to establish himself as an eternal Temple far removed from temporal time and space.

To sum up so far: the second chapter of the Gospel of Matthew introduces us to certain features that are typical of its Jewish aspect. It appears to contain fragments of Jesus tradition from earlier writings when Jews and Christians were still of one community. Acts 10 indicates that if initially the Jesus movement had been open to Jews only, that situation came to an end in the days of Paul.

Some issues require specific investigation in this chapter: parallel birth narratives, the origin of these parallels, and what these parallels can (and cannot) mean. A significant amount of literature on the Matthean birth narrative focuses on what are believed to be parallels between Jewish stories concerning the birth of Moses and the Gospel account of the birth of Jesus. Many have argued that a number of verses in Matthew are parallel to those in the stories of the birth of Moses,<sup>13</sup> while others have claimed that Matthew's purpose was not to compare the births of Moses and Jesus or to model one story after the other.<sup>14</sup> If these parallels are intentional, Matthew's likely purpose in drawing on extrabiblical birth narratives of Moses to flesh out the story of the birth of Jesus was to show that the early biographical histories of Jewish saviors share certain features, among which, for example, is the typically violent reaction of the king to the news, which has often been acquired in a supernatural way, of the savior's birth. That is, the king in whose homeland the savior was born, and whose position was threatened by the birth, often sought to have the putative newborn savior killed, even if it meant that a number of innocents were killed along with him.

These Jewish biblical and extrabiblical traditions incorporated many of the "birth motifs" of the hero that were commonly found in the birth stories of heroes in the various cultures of the ancient Near East. Otto Rank makes much of the common features found in the birth stories of the hero.

The hero is the child of most distinguished parents, usually the son of a king. His origin is preceded by difficulties, such as sexual abstinence, prolonged infertility, or secret intercourse of the parents due to external prohibition or obstacles. During or before the pregnancy, a prophecy, in

<sup>13</sup> Typical of these is R.D. Aus, *Matthew 1–2 and the Virginal Conception* (2004).

<sup>14</sup> Excellent overviews of the various positions can be found in Allison, *The New Moses* (1993), and Bourke, "The Literary Genus of Matthew 1–2" (1960).

the form of a dream or oracle, warns against the birth. As a rule, he is surrendered to the water, in a box.<sup>15</sup>

As Rank points out, the very earliest histories of such figures as Buddha, Sargon, Oedipus, Gilgamesh, Cyrus the Great, Romulus and Hercules loosely fit into this pattern.<sup>16</sup> But the birth of Moses as it is recorded in Exodus is greatly expanded in Jewish interpretive sources to follow more closely the formulaic Near Eastern pattern even if Rank, drawing from the biblical account alone, includes Moses among those whom he sees as fitting into this pattern.

It is, however, instructive to look at the language of the Jewish stories in the midrash/targumic tradition about a dream that preceded Pharaoh's decree to kill every Israelite infant male (preserved among other places in *Yalqut Šim'oni*, Exod 164). Here we find that, both in language and in structure, there is an allusion to an earlier Pharaoh's dreams, in the story of Joseph (Gen 41:1–7). The text is cited in full in my commentary to Matt 2:2. In other words, the authors of these stories reworked the language of an earlier biblical story to convey a particular image, but this does not mean that conceptual narratives of their stories are congruent.

In the same way, texts from the Bible are frequently referred to in the great works of Western literature to simply convey ideas; the stories from which the texts are taken are for the most part not borrowed at the same time. For example, Hamlet (11:ii) sings a version of a popular contemporary ballad which alludes to Judges 12:7:

*O Jephtha, judge of Israel, what a treasure hadst thou!*

What treasure had he, my lord?

*Why, 'One fair daughter and no more,  
The which he loved passing well.'*

A copy of the ballad, as Shakespeare knew it, was reprinted in Evan's *Old Ballads* (1810). An excerpt from first stanza reads as follows:<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Rank, *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero* (2004), 47.

<sup>16</sup> Rank, *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero*, 9–46.

<sup>17</sup> Henry N. Hudson, who edited *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, 1462–63: "Hamlet is teasing the old fox, and quibbling between a logical and a literary sequence. The lines he quotes are from an old ballad, entitled, *Jephtha, Judge of Israel*."

I have read that many years agoe,  
*When Jephtha, judge of Israel,*  
*Had one fair daughter and no moe,*  
*Whom he loved passing well . . .*

The point is that the author of the original ballad knew of the story of Jephtha in Judges, but Shakespeare's use of it in the mouth of Hamlet was simply his way of describing Ophelia as the "fair daughter" of Polonius. We are not supposed to think, because of this literary allusion, that the character of Polonius is modeled on the biblical Jephtha, or even that there is a shared motif here. Shakespeare might even be intimating that Ophelia's demise can be traced back to Polonius, but that does not make Polonius the new Jephtha.

### Commentary

*In the days of Herod the king, when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, behold, magoi from the East came to Jerusalem. (v. 1)*

The opening verse introduces the theme of the unit that follows. The word *magos* (pl. *magoi*) is the Greek word for "astrologer." An astrologer was anyone who was able to divine the future using enchantments.<sup>18</sup> A *magos*, then, was someone who could discern hidden occurrences or predict events that had not yet occurred. Philo refers to Balaam, the biblical enchanter, as *magos*,<sup>19</sup> and in Dan 2:2 one reads of Nebuchadnezzar calling upon "the enchanter" (in Hebrew *vela'ashafim* and in Greek *kai tous magous*), among others, to interpret one of his dreams.

*Saying, "Where is the king of the Jews who has been born? For we saw his star in the east and we came to worship him." (v. 2)*

<sup>18</sup> The Syriac version of Matthew calls them *magoshei* and reflects the usage of Palestinian Targumim, such as *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* in Exod 7:15. In this source Pharaoh casts spells upon the water "like an *amagosha*"—a magician. (Aramaic and Hebrew often add a prosthetic *aleph* to the beginning of words that have consonant clusters and also especially to foreign words). See Diest, "*Appayim* (1 Sam.1:5) \* Pym?" (1977), 205.

<sup>19</sup> Young's edition, Philo's *Life of Moses* 1, 264: "And he was celebrated and renowned above all men for his experience as a diviner (*magos*) and prophet."

There are many Jewish stories which tell of astrologers and/or dream interpreters who reveal the meanings of the miraculous portents associated with the births of Israel's saviors. In Eisenstein's *Otzar Midrashim*,<sup>20</sup> there is a late version of the Hebrew text of the *Chronicles of Our Master Moses*,<sup>21</sup> which Eisenstein identifies as being likely the work known as the *Midrash of Our Master Moses*, cited by medieval commentators of the twelfth century. In style it appears to be a Hebrew retranslation of a lost pseudepigraphic Greek work likely written originally in Hebrew or Aramaic. Another Hebrew text of the same story is found in *Yalkut Šim'oni* Exod 164, while an Aramaic text of it is found in *Tg. Ps-J.* to Exod 1:15. This story relates a dream concerning the birth of Moses, which angered the Pharaoh so much he was determined to kill all the children of a certain age to make sure he had gotten rid of the redeemer of the Jews. In brackets I add the *Yalkut Šim'oni* (ys) version.

In the sixtieth year after Joseph's death [In the 130th year after Israel came to Egypt (ys)] Pharaoh dreamt a dream. Behold in the dream [he was sitting on his throne ys] an old man stood before him who held in his hands a pair of [merchant (ys)] scales. He [the old man took the scales and suspended them before Pharaoh (ys)] placed all the inhabitants of Egypt, men women and children, [the sages of Egypt, her ministers and nobles and bound them together (ys)] on one hand of the scales. And he put a [afterwards he took a suckling (ys)] lamb on the other hand of the scale. And the lamb outweighed all the Egyptians [everyone (ys variant)]. He [Pharaoh (ys)] was startled and thoughts raced through his mind. He was truly amazed at this great [terrifying (ys)] vision [why had the lamb outweighed them all? (ys)]. When he awoke, it was but a dream so he [got up early and (ys)] he gathered all the wise-men of Egypt and all the magicians. . . . And he (one of his advisors—a eunuch [ys]) said to him [this is certainly a bad omen of terrible evil which will come upon Egypt in the final days for] a son would be born to the Israelites who would destroy all [the Land of (ys)] Egypt. And now, my lord king, I will counsel you wisely that [*if the matter is good with the king the proclamation of the kingdom should go out before him and be written in the laws of Egypt*] that every male child of the Hebrews shall be killed (ys)] you should command that every son born to the Israelites shall be killed. Perhaps then the message of the dream will not be fulfilled. *And the matter was good in the eyes of Pharaoh and in the eyes of his servants* [And the king did so (ys)].

<sup>20</sup> 356–57.

<sup>21</sup> Lewow/Lemberg, 1865, identical to Jellinek, ed., *Bet haMidrash* 2:111.

According to the Aramaic portion of text in *Tg. Ps-J.*, Pharaoh relates that he had seen in a dream all the land of Egypt placed in one hand of a scale and a lamb in the other hand; the hand on which the lamb was placed outweighed the hand on which all of Egypt was placed. At once he sent for all the magicians in Egypt. Jannes and Jambres, the chief magicians, were able to interpret his dream for him. They told Pharaoh that a male child was soon to be born into the assembly of Israel through whom all the land of Egypt would be destroyed: “Whenever a [Jewish] son is born you shall kill him.”

The Aramaic portion in the *Tg. Ps-J.* is more closely tied to the biblical text and so does not contain the fuller story of the Hebrew portions of these texts. It is probable that the Hebrew portions are later additions and so postdate the Aramaic text in the *Tg. Ps-J.* This hypothesis is supported by the fact that the italicized passages in the Hebrew text I translated above are paraphrases of several passages from the Book of Esther (1:19, 1:21). It was not common for Hebrew writers in the Second Temple period to borrow passages from the Book of Esther to use in narratives that speak of Pharaoh.<sup>22</sup> Of course, anyone who approaches these texts first and foremost as a reader of Matthew perceives that the closest link is to the (later inserted) Hebrew texts, since in Esther the Persian king and his prime minister issue a decree to kill all the Jews in Persia, and in Matthew Herod issues a decree to slaughter the Jewish male infants in and around Bethlehem.

Another source tells us that it was one of Pharaoh’s astrologers who informed him of the birth of Israel’s redeemer (*Exod. Rab.* 1:18–22). This source is thought to be from the medieval period but it does seem to derive from sources known to Josephus and also from *Yalkut Šim’oni* source materials. The basic facts of this story are common to all four texts: “Astrologers” tell Pharaoh here; “magicians” tell him in the TJ and an “advisor” tells him in the *Yalkut Šim’oni* version, while Josephus writes that the announcement is made by “one of the sacred scribes.” Following this, Pharaoh issues the decree to kill “every male child born to the Israelites” (*Ant.* 2:205).

The Gospel narrative, by beginning with the predicted birth of the deliverer and the terrible consequences of that prediction for the deliverer’s peers, aims to draw an *inclusio* around history—bound at one end by Moses the deliverer and at the other end by the ultimate deliverer, the Messiah. The idea is expressed in a statement attributed to Rabbi Berekhiah (around 340 CE) speaking in the name of Rabbi Isaac (around 300 CE) and we see the same

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<sup>22</sup> As previously noted, the Joseph story is also reflected in the opening passages of this text which speak of Pharaoh having had a dream (Gen 41:1 and 41:7), and this—one story reflected in another—is a common feature in late Hebrew narratives.

*inclusio*. The source of this midrash is *Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer*, chap. 30, of late composition (eighth or ninth century) but containing much older traditions, much the same way *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* does.<sup>23</sup>

*Just as the first Deliverer was, so will the last Deliverer be.* As Scripture says about the first Deliverer: “Moses took his wife and his sons, setting them upon an ass” (Exod 4:20), so also the last Deliverer: “Lowly and riding on an ass” (Zech 9:9).

In these extra-biblical stories,<sup>24</sup> the members of the families of these saviors have already received prophecies and so they are alert to what lies ahead that will fulfill these prophecies. And so we find stories not mentioned in the Bible where the lives of heroes are foretold before their births. This is so not only of Moses<sup>25</sup> but of Abraham as well, as I pointed out in the introduction to this chapter. The reader, aware of these prophecies, understands the pattern better than the actors themselves.

*When King Herod heard this, he was greatly distressed and Jerusalem was distressed with him.* (v. 3)

Herod came to power through conquest and deceit. He was not of Jewish ancestry nor of royal descent, and he was not recognized as a legitimate king by the Jews. He poisoned or otherwise eliminated anyone who even remotely aspired to the throne or had a claim to it, including his first wife, Mariamne, and their sons Alexander and Aristobulus. One can surely imagine that hearing that another child had been born, about whom it was foretold that he would be king of the Jews, would certainly have distressed him.

The phrase “and Jerusalem was distressed with him” has often troubled commentators, who wonder if the reference to Jerusalem here is a reference to

<sup>23</sup> The *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* and *Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer* share some traditions found nowhere else.

<sup>24</sup> In *Mekhilta of Rabbi Yishmael Beshalah* 10 (*Shira*), to Exod 15:20, Miriam has a revelation. She tells her father, Amram, “In the end you will beget a son who shall deliver Israel from Egypt.” This is like the dream of Miriam in Pseudo-Philo’s *Biblical Antiquities*, 9:2–10: “I will work a miracle through him and save my people.” John Dominic Crossan considers the tradition behind these stories in “Virgin Mother or Bastard Child?” (2005), 45.

<sup>25</sup> See Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 113; Matt 2:13 = Exod 2:15, Matt 2:16 = Exod 1:22, Matt 2:19 = Exod 2:23, Matt 2:19 = Exod 4:19, Matt 2:21 = Exod 4:20.

the Jews of the city only, or to the Romans, or to both. The key to understanding this part of the verse lies in Esth 3:15, in which it is said that the city of Susa was “in distress” after the Persian king Ahasuerus issued the decree that all the Jews throughout all of Persia were to be killed.

In his retelling of the story of Esther, Josephus (*Ant.* 11:220) has given us his understanding of what it meant for the city of Susa to be “in distress.” He seems to have been following the text from the Septuagint. He relates that haste was made (about ordering the death of the Jews in Persia) in Susa as well. Then he recounts that the king and Haman were busy feasting and drinking, “*while the city was in commotion.*”

According to *b. Meg.* 11a, Rava, a Babylonian teacher of the fourth century, once gave a sermon based on a tradition that related Esth 3:15 to Prov 29:2:

*When the righteous are in authority the people rejoice* (Prov 29:2)—the “righteous” refers to Mordecai and Esther, as it is said, *and the city of Susa was delighted and happy* (Esther 8:15). *But when the wicked beareth rule, the people groan* (Prov 29:2)—the “wicked” refers to Haman, as it is said, *and the city of Susa was distressed* (Esther 3:15).

The Jews of Jerusalem were in distress because the times were indecisive. The Jews knew something ominous was afoot but they did not know what. A king in distress meant trouble. Herod was in distress because he did not know if his plan to find Jesus would succeed. The Jews were made nervous because of Herod’s obvious displeasure; though they could not account for it, they nevertheless intuited that something terrible was about to come of it. This is the very sense of Esther 3:15. Matthew foreshadows Herod’s wicked decree about to erupt in verse 7 with this subtle allusion to the Persian decree to kill the Jews. Ahasuerus and Haman were up to no good, but just what they were up to was not known as yet. Did Herod issue orange alerts, or close off entry into Jerusalem, or show his anger in ruthless ways as was his habit? The narrator tells us only that he was distressed because he had just been informed that a rival to his throne has just been born and because the Jews of Jerusalem sensed his distress, they were distressed too.

The language of distress may have been borrowed from Esther, but the contemporary reader realized that Herod was not Ahasuerus who threatened to annihilate Mordecai and all the other Jews of Persia, nor could he be cast easily as Pharaoh who threatened to do away with Moses for killing an Egyptian. Indeed, our narrator shows us Joseph and his family fleeing, not to the oppressive Egypt of Moses’ day and its oppressive Pharaoh but to first-century Egypt

with its metropolis of Alexandria. Everyone knew Alexandria of that time to be a cultural haven and it boasted Jewish philosophers, merchants, and well-established, well-to-do Jewish communities.<sup>26</sup>

*And gathering all the principal priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. (v. 4)*

Priests and scribes were Jewish religious leaders who were most familiar with the oral Jewish traditions that Herod could not access himself. Priests administered the Temple rites, while scribes were experts in the oral laws and traditions surrounding all aspects of Jewish life. Surely these teachers would know where the birth of the Messiah was to take place. Herod is portrayed here, not wholly unrealistically, as a believer in Jewish traditions, and a little further on (v. 7ff.) he is also shown to be a believer in Chaldean astrological wisdom.

Popular Jewish understanding of *the Messiah* was partly based on a passage from the oracle of Balaam (who came to curse the Israelites and blessed them instead) in the Book of Numbers 24.<sup>27</sup>

How goodly are thy habitations, Jacob, and thy tents, Israel! As shady groves, and as gardens by a river, and as tents which God pitched, and as cedars by the waters. There shall come a man out of his seed, and he shall rule over many nations; and the kingdom of God shall be exalted, and his kingdom shall be increased. God led him out of Egypt; he has as it were the glory of a unicorn: he shall consume the nations of his enemies, and he shall drain their marrow, and with his darts he shall shoot through the enemy. He lay down, he rested as a lion, and as a young lion; who shall stir him up? They that bless thee are blessed, and they that curse thee are cursed. (24:5–9)

It would seem that Jewish tradition also stressed the military role of the Messiah. Philo of Alexandria (15 CE–70?) writes about the messianic figure spoken of in the oracle of Balaam for his gentile readers.

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<sup>26</sup> Prof. Dale Allison (in private communication) has told me the passage is generally understood to mean that the family stayed in the Egyptian desert. However, I remain skeptical that there was much demand for carpenters in the desert and if they lived on miracles, surely the text would say something about it.

<sup>27</sup> See the references to Num 24:9 above in the commentary to chap. 1.

For “there shall come forth a man,” says the oracle, and leading his host to war he will subdue great and populous nations, because God has sent to his aid the reinforcement which befits the godly. (*On rewards and punishments* 95, Loeb)

Many commentators identify *the star* that guides the magi with the star that is referred to in Num 24:17:

I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near; *A star shall come forth from Jacob*, A scepter shall rise from Israel, And shall crush through the forehead of Moab, And tear down all the sons of Sheth.

Others suggest that the star resembles more the pillar of light which led the Israelites in the desert. There is no need to think that star here is a reference to the one or the other. Rather, the point is that a supernatural light in the form of a star is guiding the magi and there need be nothing more to it than that. There is no promised land here and no conquering hero; the image stands on its own.

*They said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for thus it has been written by the prophet [Micah 5:1] . . .”* (v. 5)

A rather strange story in *y. Ber. 2:4*<sup>28</sup> speaks of a local Arab peasant telling a Jew to lock away his oxen and utensils because the Messiah has been born and he should go and visit him. From the bellowing of certain animals, the Arab can discern that the Messiah’s name is Menachem, son of Hezekiah, and that he had been born in the royal city of Bethlehem of Judah. It would appear that the author of the story knows something of Matthew’s narrative. As bizarre as the story is, the author finds it plausible that a non-Jew can come to know through extraordinary means not only that the Messiah has been born but that he has been born in Bethlehem of Judah. The figure of Menachem in this story has been plausibly identified by some as Menachem ben Judah, one of the leaders of the *Zealots*, or as they were also known, *Sicarii*.<sup>29</sup> And perhaps this Menachem was also the Menachem ben Hezekiah who is referred to in *Sanh. 98b* as Messiah. It seems that the real Menachem also saw himself in messianic terms.

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<sup>28</sup> A similar story is found in *Midrash Zuta Lamentations* [ed. Buber] 1:2, version 2, where the behavior of animals reveals that he has been born and his name there is Menachem ben Amiel.

<sup>29</sup> He was killed in 66 CE (Davies, Horbury and Sturdy 1999, 506–507).

Josephus (*Jewish War* 2:433–34) tells us that this Menachem was the son of Judah the Galilean who, under Quirinius, had scolded the Jews for recognizing the Romans as their masters in place of God. Menachem had taken some friends and broke into Herod's armory at Masada. He distributed the arms to some brigands and with this force entered Jerusalem as if he were king.

*"And you Bethlehem, land of Judah, are not at all least among the leaders of Judah. For out of you shall come a leader, who will shepherd my people Israel"* [Micah 5:2]. (v. 6)

“Bethlehem Efratha” is the reading in the MT. Matthew writes, “Bethlehem, land of Judah” because he likely understood that “Bethlehem, land of Judah” is “Bethlehem, house of Efrath” in the Septuagint (LXX to Micah 5:2). What Micah means is rendered here correctly as “Bethlehem, land of Judah.” Bethlehem was the descendant of Efrath, from the tribe of Judah.<sup>30</sup>

We note here what Nachmanides had to say about those regions mentioned in the Bible—areas that he himself traveled through—that were connected by tradition to Rachel’s burial. He states that the reason Bethlehem is called “of Judah” in the Hebrew Bible (1 Sam 17–12) is because the city is the beginning point of Judah’s territory. The territory of Benjamin (the son of Rachel and in whose territory it would be natural for her to be buried) ends less than a kilometer away. But Bethlehem is mentioned in Jeremiah as her burial site. The solution to the apparent conflict is easily resolved since Bethlehem is the closest city to the site of Rachel’s weeping for her children. So it was mentioned as a marker although she was not buried in that city. The confusion about the precise location of Rachel’s tomb is settled in this way in his Commentary to Gen 35:16:

And I witnessed that she [Rachel] was not buried in Rama or in its environs since Rama of Benjamin’s territory is four *parsaot* distant [from her grave] and the one in Mt. Ephraim (mentioned in 1 Sam. 1:1) is over 2 days journey from it. Therefore I conclude that the verse “a voice in Rama is heard” (Jer 31:14) is poetic license [*mashal*]. It means that Rachel cried so loud and bitterly [as if] her voice would be heard upon that [distant] Rama which was atop the mountain that came to be in the territory of her son Benjamin. . . . And it seems most likely that Jacob buried her by a road rather than bring her into Bethlehem of Judah which is near by it. He understood through the Holy Prophetic Spirit that

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<sup>30</sup> 1 Chron 4:1–4: “The descendants of Judah . . . the firstborn of Ephratha and father of Bethlehem.”

Bethlehem of Efrath would be given to Judah and he wanted to bury her in the territory of Benjamin her son.... And accordingly [Rabbi Meir] says in *Sipre Deut.* [*piska* 352 to Deut 33:11] that she died in the territory that would be apportioned to Benjamin.... I noticed that the [Aramaic translation] of Jonathan ben Uziel was sensitive to this understanding of the verse.

*Then Herod, having summoned the magi secretly, learned from them the exact time the star had appeared. (v. 7)*

The secrecy of the meeting shows that Herod sought to move quickly against the child. Except for Joseph and Mary, and also Herod and the magi, no one as yet knew of the birth of the Deliverer.

*And in sending them to Bethlehem, he said, "Go, search carefully for the child, and as soon as you have found him report to me, so that I might go and worship him." (v. 8)*

The magi, who did not know as yet where the child was born, were sent to Bethlehem. Note that “worship” here means to prostrate oneself before someone who is recognized as one’s superior, akin to “falling” (v. 11) which connotes specifically religious worship, perhaps with a conscious echo of Num 24:4, 16. Herod showed them his intelligence gathering was not to be trifled with. He also put them at ease (which will later be called “tricking” them) as to his intentions since Jerusalem itself was uneasy about something lurking in the air.

*When they heard the king, they went, and look, the star which they saw in the east led them, until they came to the place where the star stood still, over the place where the child was. Seeing the star, they rejoiced, filled with exceedingly great joy. (vv. 9–10)*

The star led the magi directly to Bethlehem. Herod had not had them followed, an oversight that the historical Herod would likely never have committed.

*When they came to the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and falling, they worshiped him, and opening their treasure chests they brought him gifts, gold, incense, and myrrh. (v. 11)*

Falling upon one’s face was the final position of worship (for the High Priest and the people in the Temple) (*m. Yoma* 6:2). In this position the Priest declared the

ultimate glory of God's Kingdom. That gifts are to be brought to the Messiah is mentioned in the late source *Exod. Rab.* 35.5, which states that all peoples will bring them, Egypt first, then Ethiopia, but no gifts will be accepted from Edom (Rome).<sup>31</sup> The midrash is primarily based on Ps 68:30–34 and 80:14. It is not unlikely that the Rabbis knew a tradition that was also known, in some shape or form by Matthew.

*And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way. (v. 12)*

Whereas in the midrashim concerning Pharaoh's fear of Moses the wise men of Egypt advised Pharaoh to take steps against Moses, here the wise men from the east, hearing of the deceitfulness of Herod toward them, simply escape. They had no interest in cooperating with the dangerous king. Matthew carefully avoids telling us whether anyone other than Herod, his councilors and the magi, were aware that a child had been born whose sovereign status had been foretold.<sup>32</sup>

The flow of verses is as follows:

12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way. . . . 16 When Herod saw that he had been deceived by the magi he was greatly aroused, and he sent out the order to kill every child two years old and younger in Bethlehem and in all of its surrounding villages, according to the time when he learned from the magi.

Following verse 12, several problems with the text confront the reader. First, why do verses 13–15 occur where they do? From the point of view of sense and sequence, verse 16 clearly follows verse 12. Second, why does Matthew tell the whole story of the flight into Egypt in verses 13–15, and then recount most of it again in verses 19–21? Third, what accounts for Matthew's departure from his usual sequential style? Almost everything within Matthew's narrative, until the final chapters, proceeds step-by-step, with little or no backtracking. Yet here in these verses the narrative jumps about in way that is atypical of Matthew. The awkward structure shows signs of having been clumsily edited.

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<sup>31</sup> The same passage also appears in *b. Pesah.* 11b.

<sup>32</sup> Bethlehem is a very short distance from Jerusalem. Matthew supposes the magi must have left Herod's kingdom by a route that both avoids Jerusalem and was also, presumably, free of any of his troops. "The other way" is not specified.

Perhaps Matthew has incorporated some older traditions into his account (vv. 13, 14, 15), intending them to function somewhat as footnotes do.

*When they had departed, look, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph, saying, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and be there until I tell you. For Herod is about to seek the child, to kill him.”* (v. 13)

The angel uses three verbs of command in quick succession to emphasize the urgency of the situation in which Joseph and his family find themselves: *“Get up, take . . . and flee.”* The use of such verbs of command in quick succession is commonplace in biblical narrative. We can compare Matthew’s language here to that of Gen 19:14–15, in which Lot first urges his sons-in-law, and then the angels urge Lot, to flee Sodom: “Lot went out and spoke to his sons-in-law, who were to marry his daughters, and said, ‘*Get up, get out* of this place, for the Lord will destroy the city.’ The angel urged Lot, saying, ‘*Get up, take* your wife and your two daughters . . .’” and also to that of Gen 31:13, in which Jacob tells Rachel and Leah of his dream in which the angel of God instructed him to return home, “‘I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar, where you made a vow to Me; now *get up, leave* this land, and *return* to the land of your birth,’” and also to that of Gen 35:1, in which God appeared to Jacob telling him to return home: “And God said to Jacob, ‘*Get up* now to Beth-el and *make* your living-place there: and *put up* an altar there to the God who came to you when you were in flight from your brother Esau.’” Either Matthew or his source emulates the biblical Hebrew style.

*He got up, took the child and his mother by night, and departed for Egypt.*  
(v. 14)

Without hesitation, Joseph obeyed the threefold command of the angel and left his land for Egypt. Matthew (or perhaps one of his sources) then concludes this section with the fulfillment verse from Hosea. As noted previously, the usual purpose of the fulfillment verses in the Gospel is to show that a certain action described in the Gospel conforms literally to what has been said in a number of texts from the Prophets. The fulfillment prophecy always follows immediately upon the description of the act that fulfills the prophecy. (In 2:18 the wailing follows the decree of Herod to slaughter children, and that decree would of course have been the occasion for wailing). In this case, it is Joseph’s going down to Egypt with his family and his staying there until he is called to return. It must be understood here that the angel/God will himself go down

to Egypt to call Joseph from there so that the prophecy can be literally fulfilled.<sup>33</sup> Literal readings of fulfillment verses are typical of Jewish sources.

*He was there until Herod's death, in order to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "From Egypt I called my son" [Hosea 11:1]. (v. 15)*

The phrase “*in order to fulfill*” reproduces the Hebrew “*k'dei leqayem*.” The phrase is found in a tradition preserved in the *Tanh.*, *Pikudei* 2, which discusses the proper procedure for stoning a criminal.

[The witnesses] shall place it [the stone] upon his heart—in order to fulfill [Heb. *k'dei leqayem*] what was written [in the Torah Deut 17:7]: *the hand of the witnesses shall be upon him first.*

According to this tradition, four components are involved in process of fulfillment: 1) There is an act—the stone is placed upon the heart; 2) There is a statement of purpose—“in order to fulfill”; 3) There is a reference to the biblical source that is the basis for the command, which is followed by 4) quotation of the relevant verse (Deut 17:7).

The singular “my son,” from Hosea 1:1 in Matthew, closely matches the source quoted by the Rabbis in Hebrew, and by Aquila in Greek: *kai apo aiguptou ekalesa ton hion mou*, and not in the plural as in the Septuagint, which says “his sons” (*ta tekna autou*). The Aramaic Targum’s “sons” [*banin*] agrees with the plural reading of the Septuagint. However, Matthew eliminates the word “and” from Hosea, removing the passage from the context of God’s relationship with Israel and refashioning the text into a prophecy of God calling back “his son” Jesus from Egypt. He has extracted a Christian verse from the profoundly Jewish verses recalling Israel’s redemption.

As in the tradition from *Tanh.*, we see in this verse a four-step process of fulfillment. 1) There is an act—“And he was there until Herod’s death”; 2) a statement of purpose—“in order to fulfill”; 3) a reference to the textual source for the act—“which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet”; 4) the biblical verse being fulfilled—“*From Egypt I called my son.*”

Fulfillment verses can at times depend upon the literal interpretation of the prepositions within them in order for them to be fulfilled. We have seen that

33 The idea of God going to Egypt is not unknown. Gen 46:2–4 says: “And God spoke to Israel in a vision at night and said, ‘Jacob! Jacob!’ ‘Here I am,’ he replied. ‘I am God, the God of your father,’ he said. ‘Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you a great nation there. *I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will surely bring you back again.*’”

this was the case in the *midrash* on Deut 17:7 above, which spoke of the necessity of the placing of the hands of the witnesses *upon* the criminal who is to be stoned in order for the verse to be fulfilled. Another account of a verse being fulfilled by means of a literal interpretation of a preposition in it is found in the contemporary Passover Seder service.<sup>34</sup>

Thus did Hillel during the time the Holy Temple stood: (1) [act] he used to wrap together *matzah* and bitter herbs (and the Passover lamb) and eat them together (2) [fulfillment clause] *to fulfill [leqayem]* (3) [scriptural source] that which Scripture says, (4) [scriptural citation] “*upon matzah and bitter herbs they shall eat it [the Passover lamb].*

The phrase “in order to fulfill” indicates that a verse is being read and carried out according to the letter.<sup>35</sup> I have already written extensively on this matter in my comments to chapter 1:23.

Despite the great volume of commentary claiming otherwise, there is no reference being made here to a specific theology of divine sonship or to the context of Hosea, or to Israel or Moses, or to anything other than the very words of the verse alone.<sup>36</sup> Matthew wants us to focus on “from [Egypt]” for that is precisely the word upon which the fulfillment of the text depends. There is one more point of interest here. The citation of this fulfillment verse in no way relates to anything more than the words of the verse that are cited. Matthew is not thinking of Moses, or Israelites in Egypt or anything else besides the literal words “From Egypt—my son.” The verse (Hos 11:1–2) in context reads:

“When Israel was a child I loved him, [and] from Egypt I called my son.  
The more I called them, the farther they went from me,  
Sacrificing to the Baals and burning incense to idols.”

<sup>34</sup> See Basser, “Some Examples of the Use of the New Testament to Broaden the Limits of our Evidence for Understanding and Dating Jewish Traditions” (2015).

<sup>35</sup> The reading is worthy of an Amelia Bedelia, the loveable, literal-minded housekeeper (a children’s character created by Peggy and Herman Parish) who has no concept of idiomatic language.

<sup>36</sup> See Tracy Howard, “The Use of Hosea 11:1 in Matthew 2:15” (1984); Moises Silva, “The New Testament Use of the Old Testament”; George Soares Prabhu, *The Formula Quotations in the Infancy Narrative of Matthew* (1976); Krister Stendahl, *The School of St. Matthew and Its Use of the Old Testament* (1969); and Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, “The Use of Explicit Old Testament Quotations in Qumran Literature and in the New Testament” (1961).

Hosea condemns “my son” who was called “out of Egypt.” Matthew isolated those words to have us think Hosea predicted God’s bringing back his son, Jesus, in a way that is complimentary to “my son.” We are not to think of the Hosean context: Jesus worshipping idols would be absurd for a Matthean fulfillment text. This kind of selective referencing, “atomization,” surgically removes a phrase from a biblical verse for the Jewish preacher’s purposes. For instance, Num 27:11: “If his father had no brothers, give his inheritance to the nearest relative in his clan, that he may *yarash otah*.<sup>37</sup> The actual meaning here in context is “that he will inherit it.” But the word for “it” (i.e., the inheritance)—*otah*—refers to the inheritance property, a feminine noun, and if atomized (removed from context) could mean “that he will inherit her.” So Rava (*b. B. Bat.* 111b) remarks the verse tells us that a man will inherit his wife (= her) and the gendering of the sentence implies a wife will not inherit her husband. Atomized interpretations, which are usually far from contextual meanings, extend the authority of Scripture to rules and events that appear out of the ordinary.

In the following example a verse from Ezekiel (who lived in the time of the Exile after 586 B.C.E.) is said to have been *fulfilled* at the time of the Exodus (some six or seven hundred years earlier). Yet, Ezekiel is speaking about the destruction of Edom on Mount Seir as an event yet to come. The preacher atomizes the verse to have it apply to the battle against Amalek (*Mek. R. Yish. Beshalah* [Amalek, end of *parasha* 1]):

Exodus 17:13:

So Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword.

Others say (Exod 17:13—the slaughter of Amalek by the sword) is a fulfillment of Ezekiel 35:6:

*“Therefore as I live,” declares the Lord God, “I will give you over to bloodshed, and bloodshed will pursue you; since you have not hated bloodshed, therefore bloodshed will pursue you.”*

The bloody execution of the Amalekites is given scriptural explanation—those who live by the sword shall die by the sword.

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37 The preceding verses read: “Say to the Israelites, ‘If a man dies and leaves no son, turn his inheritance over to his daughter. If he has no daughter, give his inheritance to his brothers. If he has no brothers, give his inheritance to his father’s brothers’” (Num 27:8–10).

*When Herod saw that he had been deceived by the magi he was greatly aroused, and he sent out the order to kill every child two years old and younger in Bethlehem and in all of its surrounding villages, according to the time when he learned from the magi. (v. 16)*

Jewish literary models concerning this verse were discussed in the introduction to this chapter. The verse requires little else in the way of explanation.

*Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet (v. 17)*

This verse is awkward. One might think this is not, strictly speaking, a fulfillment-exegesis in form, because it anticipates something that has yet to happen: the slaughter of the innocents. Nonetheless, it is likely that once Herod's decree was known (and bad news travels quickly), the response of those parents anticipating the slaughter was continuous wailing. What makes it awkward is the use of this verse in a passage into which Matthew has interpolated material suggesting slaughter and then the death of Herod. He then backtracks, and it makes one wonder if the verse relates to what has happened offstage (vv. 12–16), or confirms something that is yet to happen. The prophetic text in the Gospel suggests that “as far away as Rama will be heard the wailing and weeping of the parents whose children in and around Bethlehem are to be killed.” The fulfillment text is given in accord with what we noted earlier in 1:23.

*“A voice was heard in Ramah, crying and loud wailing; Rachel is crying for her children, and she does not wish to be comforted, because they are not [Jer 31:15].” (v. 18)*

The manuscript evidence suggests that *threnos kai* (“crying and”), which is missing from a number of early witnesses to the text, was added to some of the later manuscripts so that it would conform to the passage in the Septuagint, which is not unlike what is found in the Masoretic text.

*When Herod died, look, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt (v. 19)*

Here Matthew informs the reader that what the angel said to Joseph in 2:13 about how long he was to remain in Egypt with his family and when he would know that it was time for them all to return—“and be there until I tell you”—has come to pass. Matthew is careful to mention that this communication actually occurs in Egypt, literally fulfilling the words of Hosea 11:1: “From Egypt . . .”

*... saying “Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the Land of Israel, for the ones who were seeking the life of the child have died.” (v. 20)*

The threefold command in this verse mirrors the threefold command in verse 13: “‘Get up, take...and go’”; the reason for the command here also mirrors the reason for the command in verse 13. The reason Joseph took his family to Egypt was because “Herod [was] about to seek the child, to kill him,” and the reason Joseph and his family could now return from Egypt was because “the ones who were seeking the life of the child have died.” Commentators such as Raymond Brown<sup>38</sup> find in this mirroring reason enough to compare the Matthean story of the flight to, and return from, Egypt to Moses’ flight to, and return from, Midian, about which we read in Exod 4:19—“And the Lord said unto Moses in Midian, ‘Go, return into Egypt: for all the men who were seeking your life have died.’” But a cautious reading, though it certainly will allow that Matthew has borrowed the language from the text in Exodus, stops far short of the inference that Jesus was a new Moses. The flight to, and return from, Egypt, of Joseph and his family have only been included in the Gospel text to fulfill to the letter the prophecy from Hosea.<sup>39</sup>

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38 See Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*.

39 Professor Dale Allison was kind enough to write me at length about this point and to send me his careful work *The New Moses* (1993) on the subject. He points to the similarities of circumstances of birth, evil king, slaughter of infants, flight and return of the deliverer, water (Red Sea, baptism), wilderness temptations, and even perhaps the teaching on a mountain. The unpublished dissertation of my late friend and colleague, Dr. Basil Robert Bater, “The Church in the Wilderness: A Study in Biblical Theology” (1962) made the case based on the same creative idea of “parallels,” which remained fashionable for the next forty years. I could not help but think that if this were indeed the case, why is Jesus nowhere called “prophet” as a serious title? The word in 13:57 seems to be part of a popular saying independent of Jesus—the signal feature of the personage of Moses. In truth, I wish it were so. I will try to argue that Matthew sees Jesus as originally intended to save the Jews, he himself a Jew of the highest rank in learning and piety. But things go wrong at the end and then Jesus speaks of replacing his people with another and making disciples of the Gentiles. How nicely it would serve my argument to allow that Matthew’s Jesus was a veritable Moses who then abandoned the rebellious Jews! However, too many, perhaps all, of the alleged parallels strike me as far-fetched. Matthew, on his own, has little to say of Moses and what little is there is neither particularly laudatory nor sympathetic to Jesus’ own views. In the end, I see little wrong if one is persuaded by his arguments, which I find creative and imaginative but not compelling. While I am sure Paul is adept at building typologies, Matthew’s Jesus is adept at relating parable and a master of metaphor. The latter was the trait of the Jewish teacher in the synagogues of the Galilee and the former in the synagogues of the (hellenized) communities of the Diaspora.

*He got up and took the child and his mother, and entered into the land of Israel.* (v. 21)

We recap here for clarity although there is not too much to add to what we have already said concerning the family's flight from, and return to, the Land of Israel. By using parallel structures, Matthew shows that the return from Egypt is the mirror image of the earlier flight to Egypt. The overall scheme of this section is this:

- v. 13 – the angel instructs Joseph to leave for Egypt;
- v. 14 – Joseph complies.
- v. 15 – states how long Joseph stayed in Egypt and gives us the fulfillment prophecy.

The summary narrative concerning Herod provides proof-texts in verses 16–18, interrupting the flow of the parallel verses.

- vv. 19 and 20 – the angel instructs Joseph to return to the Land of Israel;
- v. 21 – Joseph complies.

The net effect of the passage is of a tightly structured narrative with an awkward summary of events in mid-story but nicely smoothed over at the end. The history of the text is murky and difficult to unravel. We can only wonder why Matthew, who is so careful in his storytelling to build his plots along straight lines, allowed his narrative to veer off course in midstream before steering it back.

*But having heard that Archelaus, ruled Judea in the place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there; being warned in a dream he departed to the district of Galilee* (v. 22)

When Herod died in 4 B.C.E., his kingdom was divided among three of his sons. Herod Archelaus, the principal heir, was given Judea along with Jerusalem to rule (as well as other territories), but he was not given the title “king” but rather “ethnarch”—ruler of the people. He governed poorly and came to be hated by all in Judea, forcing the Romans to replace him with a procurator in 6 C.E.

It is not clear to me what the verse intends. Did Joseph hear from someone that Herod Archelaus ruled in Judea in place of his father, as the first part of the verse suggests; or did he hear of this in a dream, as perhaps the second part of the verse suggests? At any rate the text says that it was because of the dream

that Joseph did not return to Judea with his family but instead went to Galilee and the city of Nazareth.

It seems likely that the phrase “being warned in a dream” was clumsily added by Matthew (or an editor). Had this phrase been part of the original narrative we would almost certainly have been told that it was the *angel* who directed Joseph to Nazareth so that the prophecy spoken of in verse 23 might be fulfilled, as was the case in 2:13–15. As it is now, the narrator provides the prophecy in hindsight. He does not claim that Joseph consciously moved to Nazareth to fulfill a verse—but once they had moved there it was apparent to a clever exegete that the name Nazorean could now be explained as a prophetic honor (see v. 23 below). Perhaps he meant to tell his readers that the name for Jesus in Jewish (or non-Christian) circles—“Jesus Ha-Nozri”<sup>40</sup>—fulfills a prophecy. It is impossible to know the date or significance of this title.

Verses 22–23 reflect authentic Matthean language that mirrors the language of Matthew 4:12–16, as Raymond Brown points out.<sup>41</sup> While the insertion of the fulfillment text is part of the Matthean narrative, I cannot help thinking that he might have had a testimony list of such verses at his disposal that he utilized liberally.

*And when he arrived he settled in a city called Nazareth, in order that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, “He will be called a Nazorean.”*  
(v. 23)

There is no such verse in the Bible. But there are at least three texts to look at in relation to this concluding verse of the chapter. First a text from *b. Ber.* 55b, which reads:

And everything that happened to me fulfills the verse that says, “All dreams materialize according to oral interpretations.” Do you mean to say there is such a verse as “all dreams materialize according to oral interpretations”? Certainly—as Rabbi Eleazar said: all dreams materialize

<sup>40</sup> It could be debated when this epithet became attached to Jesus. No one really knows what it means. If it existed in the time of Matthew, the prophecy nicely explains it. On the other hand it may be pure coincidence. There is suggestive evidence that Christians were termed *nozrim* by the end of the first century and that Jews prayed for their downfall. J. Louis Martyn’s *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (1968), 4–41, argues this case. Others have objected and I have argued (*Basser, Studies in Exegesis*) that we will likely never know the wording or date of this prayer for certain.

<sup>41</sup> Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 107.

according to oral interpretations, as it is said in Genesis 41:13: “And it came to pass; just as he interpreted for us, so it happened.”

The point is that, at least according to the Rabbis here, insofar as fulfillment exegesis goes, an authoritative interpretation of a verse from the Scriptures has itself the status of Scripture. Second, we consider Isa 60:21. In a tradition preserved in Wertheimer’s *Batei Midrashot*, this verse is interpreted in a *pesher*-style *midrash*, a form which was not uncommon in Tannaic literature.<sup>42</sup> The exact date of the tradition is unknown. *Midrash Alpha Beta* appears to be from the Gaonic period but contains many rare (and likely ancient) interpretations concerning the Messiah. The tradition reads:

The branch [*netzer*] of My planting” (Isa 60:21)—this refers to the Messiah. “He is called *Netzer*, as it is said, ‘And a rod hath come out from the stock of Jesse, and a branch (*netzer*) from his roots is fruitful.’” (Isa 11:1).

In this tradition “He is called *Netzer*” is offered as a designation of the Messiah based on an interpretation of Isa 11:1. Now we have just seen above that a fulfillment text need not be from Scriptures to be cited as a fulfillment proof-text. It is enough that the fulfillment text be an interpretation of a text from Scripture to be cited as Scripture in a fulfillment exegesis.

Matthew, or perhaps his source, writes: “And when he arrived he settled in a city called Nazareth, in order that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, ‘He will be called a Nazorean.’” This fits the conscious type of fulfillment discussed above in 1:23. What is cited as a verse is in reality the explanation of Isa 11:1, at least as the Rabbis, reading the verse from Isaiah literally, understood it. “The Messiah is [to be] called *Netzer*.” This is no different than saying “and everything that happened to me fulfilled the verse that says ‘all dreams materialize according to oral interpretations.’” As we have seen in the tradition from *b. Ber.* 55b above, this was how the Rabbis interpreted Gen 41:13. Matthew’s insertion of this text, while somewhat strange, is within the

<sup>42</sup> Wertheimer, *Batei Midrashot* (1988), 2:457. *Pesher* is the term used in the Dead Sea Scrolls to indicate that nouns in a biblical verse are symbols representing Israel’s history (and particularly that of the community who wrote the *pesharim*) and they are identified with historical people. The verbs now connect the decoded nouns into statements of past, present and future history. Here “branch” is a code word for the Messiah and so is a title given to him. Matt 2:23 sees the term as meaning literally a resident of Nazareth rather than “branch.”

range of Jewish tradition and must have originated within circles that were adept at interpreting Hebrew Scriptures. I suspect Matthew had a source he relied upon; he did not personally locate where in the Scriptures it was quoted from when he copied it, and he therefore cites the words of “the prophets.” The explanation of the teaching based on a scripture is cited as if it were Scripture itself. Matthew refers to the prediction inferred from Isaiah 11:1 as though it were itself a prophetic scriptural passage: “He will be called a Nazorean.”

# Chapter 3

## Introduction

Chapter Three introduces us to John the Baptist.<sup>1</sup> The Greek *baptiso*, like the Aramaic *tzabe'a* (Hebrew *tabal*), denotes dipping items into water to cleanse them or into dyes to color them. According to both Matthew and Josephus, John acquired the title “the Baptist” (or “Baptizer”) because he administered ritual immersions in the Jordan River.<sup>2</sup> Matthew maintains that John’s purpose in doing this was to prepare people for the coming of the *eschaton*, the kingdom of God in which only the righteous—those who have repented and have been purified—could participate. This repentance was dependent, or so it seems, on John’s administering ritual baptism in the Jordan River.

Throughout their history the Jews have ascribed numerous purposes to the act of ritual immersion, including being part of the preparation of a scribe before writing the divine name in a Torah scroll. But while immersion as a final stage in the process of repentance is fairly commonplace, immersion *for the sake of* repentance—in other words, as a precondition of repentance—has almost never been one of those purposes. “Almost never” is, however, not the same as never.<sup>3</sup> There are several texts which seem to suggest, at least on some psycho-mystical level, that immersion brought one to a state to effectively engage in acts of repentance. For instance, Lev 16:30 says that on the Day of Atonement, “*From all your sins before the Lord you shall cleanse yourselves.*” M. *Yoma* 8:9 preserves a well-known passage in which Rabbi Akiva interprets a

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1 John was called *matsba'ana*, “dyer” or “baptist,” in a medieval Jesus story that has ancient roots. See Boyarin, “A Revised Version of the Translation of a *Toledot Yeshu* Fragment” (1978), 250.

2 David Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (1956) 111–12, would have us believe that the ritual of baptism was derived from the ritual immersion required by the Rabbis for proselyte conversion.

3 The Pharisees also immersed themselves frequently. In *t. Yad.* 2:20 there is a fascinating debate between the Pharisees and the *Tovlei Shaharit* (Morning Bathers). “The *Tovlei Shaharit* protest against you, O Pharisees, for you mention the divine name in the morning without immersion.” The Pharisees said, “We protest against you, O Morning Bathers, for you mention the divine name from an impure body.” Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 22:7) cites the memoir of Hegesippus (end of first century) concerning Jewish sects. According to him, two groups that were noted for immersion were the Hemerobaptists and Masbothaeans; the former sounds like our *Tovlei Shaharit*.

text from Leviticus, deriving two “proofs” that God is the agent through whom one’s sins are cleansed:

Fortunate are you, O Israel, for before whom [does Scripture require] you shall cleanse yourselves? [That is] Who is it that cleanses you? Your Father who is in heaven [his paraphrase of Lev 16:30].

1. Scripture says so [*explicitly*], “*I shall cast upon you clean waters and you shall be cleansed* [From all your uncleanness, and from all your idols, I do cleanse you]” (Ezek 36:25).
2. Now Scripture says, “*Mikvah of Israel is the Lord . . . the fountain of living life, the Lord*” (Jer 17:13). [So we derive the notion] Just as the *mikvah* [waters of immersion] cleanses the impure, so does God purify Israel.<sup>4</sup>

In this midrash, the last in *m. Yoma*, Akiva pulls sharply away from the tractate’s laws of repentance, with the emphasis on the voluntary and ritual acts by which people cleanse themselves in order to merit forgiveness. He strongly implies that the entire repentance process is in fact initiated and made possible by God: “Who is it that cleanses you?” To illustrate his point, Akiva cites two verses whose subject is not periodic repentance, but rather the final redemption. He understands that the final redemption, like the redemption from Egypt, is about God’s intervention in what otherwise would have been a hopeless situation. Periodic repentance is, like the final redemption, dependent upon God. First, Akiva compares sin to the idolatry of the Jews in exile, perhaps implying in his selection of Ezek 36:25 that idols are akin to the dead; therefore the cleansing procedure requires waters of purification (something like the sprinkling in Numbers 19). Akiva seems to suggest little more in citing Ezekiel than agreement with the prophet that God’s agency is necessary in cleansing from sin.

But Akiva’s choice of Jer 17:13 is daring. Here, the plain sense of Jeremiah’s prophecy is not Akiva’s sense. The verse begins “[The] *mikvah* of Israel is the Lord.” And *mikvah* here comes from *kvh*, hope. *Mikvah* is that which is hoped for, what is longed for, even if distant. The first words of the verse declare that God’s salvation is what Israel hopes for; the next eight words describe the fate of those who abandon that hope. Only the final four words of the verse identify God as a “fount of living waters.”

To the Talmudic reader, the word *mikvah* also means an immersion pool (defined in *m. Mikwa’ot*) which effects ritual purification of people and utensils

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<sup>4</sup> A *mikvah* is a special immersion pool. Many ancient *mikva’ot* have been located in Israel.

when they are dipped in it. Among other things, immersion in a *mikvah* is the final stage in the purification of those who have been defiled by a corpse: after being sprinkled twice with prescribed ashes, the defiled person must immerse to be restored to a state of ritual purity.

Akiva, using an associative technique, “Just as . . . so does,” transforms the meaning of the words in the verse from Jeremiah to show that God himself becomes the *mikvah* waters.<sup>5</sup> Making the use of a rhetorical form, he elides one usage of a word into a completely other and unexpected usage. God’s role shifts from being the active unitary savior to the vessel through which salvation flows, effecting the transformation of Israel. Israel, in a state of impurity, holding on to hope of salvation, almost unwittingly, in Akiva’s midrash, reaches a state of purity.<sup>6</sup>

*M. Šabb.* 9:1 preserves another midrash from Akiva, in which a similar kind of transformation occurs:

Rabbi Akiva said, “From which biblical verse can we support the notion that an idol conveys ritual impurity to the one who carries it (even without direct touching)? From that Scripture which states, ‘You shall cast them [idols] away like a menstrual thing, you shall say to it, Get thee hence’ (*Isa* 30:22). Just as the menstruating woman imparts uncleanness to the one who carries her so an idol imparts uncleanness to the one who carries it.”

Here we have the fascinating transformation of a law governing an impure state of a menstruating woman into a law governing idols. The transformation occurs as a result of the reading of certain words of the verse in a particularly literal way. The law which resulted from this text depends upon a slide of rhetoric: the exaggeration of “like a menstrual thing”<sup>7</sup> is now said to be a “menstruant woman.” Now Akiva reads the simile (as if it meant an idol is like a menstruant woman in one respect) as a fact. Similes are comparisons that imaginatively blend similar items into a single image, but not in concrete fact. For Akiva the simile creates a new legal insight. A purity law governing one who carries a menstruant woman is made to apply to one who carries an idol.

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5 In sum, *mikvah* can mean two distinct things for a rabbinically oriented reader. One is an immersion pool subject to many qualifications (laid out in *m. Mikwa'ot*) that can effect purifications of people and utensils when they are dipped in it. It is also the word for what is hoped for—salvation. The sense is that God is the savior of Israel.

6 Or in Matthean language (3:11), “He will immerse you in the Holy Spirit.”

7 This is an expression to refer to items that are “untouchable.”

Thus the fact Akiva takes phrases (metaphors or similes) from the intended scriptural context can signal the transformation of a being from one thing into another. The formulation is highly complex. In this midrash Rabbi Akiva speaks of carrying, the act of moving an object from point A to point B, and so the set form used for midrashic transformations (“Just as . . . so also”) subtly mirrors the act of physically conveying an idol from point A to point B. Akiva’s style of midrash is bold and daring. He will derive *halakhah* from it.<sup>8</sup>

It appears that Akiva’s midrash in *m. Yoma* also gave rise to a later custom of Jews immersing themselves in ritual waters shortly before the onset of the Day of Atonement.<sup>9</sup> However, this midrash does not in any way suggest that the purpose of immersion is for the forgiveness of sins. In a poetic way it suggests only that God is Israel’s baptismal source, once penitents have come before Him for forgiveness.

As though he were in dialogue with those who claimed that the immersions John administered in the Jordan effected repentance, Josephus asserts that this was not the case.<sup>10</sup> In *Ant.* 18.116–19, he speaks of John at length. He writes that John was a good man who had exhorted the masses to lead righteous lives, to practice justice, and to act in piety toward God. John asked them to join in baptism but he did *not* have them use the rite to gain pardon for their sins. It was to serve as a consecration of the body, implying that the soul had already been thoroughly cleansed by right behavior prior to their immersion. Josephus (18:118–19) goes on to tell how the Tetrarch, Herod, became alarmed by John’s sway over the people that he feared could turn into sedition and uprisings. Deciding to strike first, Herod had him put to death.

Josephus’ account suggests that he wanted to correct a common misconception about John. He makes it clear that the purpose of the ritual cleansing, which he administered, was to bring the body of those he immersed to the

<sup>8</sup> Ovadiah of Bartenura, in his commentary to *m. Šabb.* 9:1 does not consider this midrash to be a serious exegesis. Rather it is designed as *asmakhta* in poetic support of a law designed to distance Jews from idolatry. *Asmakhta* is a very widespread mechanism in Talmudic law whereby the Rabbis enact laws to safeguard the purity of the people by winking at a biblical verse. Jesus’ use of Scripture in his rebuff of Satan in chapter 4 fits this category. Undoubtedly, this idea of God cleansing Israel is equally poetic and not to be seen as unassailable exegesis.

<sup>9</sup> The High Priest would also immerse himself on the Day of Atonement. *M. Yoma* 3:3 states: “Five immersions and ten washings of hands and feet were performed by the High Priest on the very day of Atonement.” His *mikva’ot* are mentioned in *m. Mid.* 1:4 and 5:3.

<sup>10</sup> But the texts that suggest a mystical aspect to immersion nonetheless cannot be used to infer that immersion *for the sake of repentance* was normative in Jewish tradition. See further Michael D. Swartz, “Like the Ministering Angels,” (1994).

same state of purity as the soul.<sup>11</sup> Probably Josephus had observed how others understood that the purpose of John's baptism was to effect repentance and he wanted to make clear that what John did was in fact normative.<sup>12</sup> Josephus also reports that the Essenes performed frequent ritual cleansings (*War* 2:159–61).

While Matthew's infancy narrative serves as a prologue to his Gospel; it is with John that the synoptic tradition begins. It is noteworthy that Matthew draws a parallel between Jesus and John. For as he begins his ministry Jesus' first words are almost the same words that John himself first says in the Gospel: "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near." John is made to be a forerunner and prototype of Jesus.<sup>13</sup> John's execution in anticipates that of Jesus.

### Commentary

*In those days John the Baptist came proclaiming in the desert of Judea; (v. 1)*

"In those days" replicates the style of Hebrew biblical recitations that report significant historical happenings. The phrase is found in straight narrative, for example, "In those days, when King Ahasuerus sat on the throne of his kingdom, which was in Shushan the capital" (*Esther* 1:2). It is also found in prophecies concerning the end of time, for example,

<sup>11</sup> Some teachers saw godliness as something one acquired by stages. Individuals moved through these stages in which the body and soul became more and more refined. The purified state of the soul required a more purified body to hold it. Preserved in several places in rabbinic literature are references to the teaching of Phineas ben Yair. In Talmud *y. Šabb* 1:3, in a legal passage discussing purity issues, we are told that this discussion inspired the rabbi to say that "carefulness is a requisite for cleanliness, which is requisite for body purity, which is requisite for humility, which is requisite for fear of sin, which is requisite for the *Holy Spirit*, which is requisite for piety, which is requisite for the resurrection of the dead which is requisite for Elijah (the version at the end of *m. Soṭah* revises the text here slightly so that it says: "which is brought about by Elijah" [adding a single letter in the Hebrew text from "*meviah l'ydai*" to "*meviah aly'dei*"]). Those seeking to be godlier advance from the lower stages of disciplined repentance for sins against God and fellow persons, to the rigorous piety required for eternal life.

<sup>12</sup> Josephus himself became a follower of a "Baptist type" named Bannus for three years. This teacher lived in the wilderness and frequently immersed himself in cold water to maintain a high level of purity (*Life* 10–12, in Loeb).

<sup>13</sup> "From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'" (Matt 4:17) is not an exact parallel to Matt 3:1–3. While John speaks of the "end," Jesus speaks of the Kingdom of Heaven. In Matthew, the phrase "Kingdom of Heaven" is used primarily by Jesus.

"In those days and at that time," declares the Lord, "search will be made for the iniquity of Israel, but there will be none; and for the sins of Judah, but they will not be found; for I will pardon those whom I leave as a remnant." (Jer 50:20)

and

"I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days." (Joel 2:28–29)

Even so, it is not clear what exactly "those days" refers to in Matthew 3. I prefer to read it this way: "In those days when John the Baptist *began to preach*"—so that the time being referred to with the phrase "in those days" is the time of John.

It has been argued that for Matthew John is Jesus' model who had, in fact, baptized him. Jesus, like John (the argument goes), was an apocalyptic prophet foretelling the overthrow of Rome and the establishment of a new world order under the rule of the righteous.<sup>14</sup> These arguments have strengths and weaknesses. The argument goes that on occasion Matthew does have John and Jesus saying the same, or nearly the same, thing (compare 3:1–3 with 4:17, and 3:7–10 with 23:33). Casting John in the role of Elijah and having him proclaim the end makes him very much like an apocalyptic figure.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, it might be noted that Matthew 3 is patterned after the fourth chapter of Malachi, in which apocalyptic motifs dominate:

"Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer [likely Matt 3:7 sees here Pharisees and Sadducees] will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire," says the Lord Almighty. "Not a root or a branch will be left to them [comp. Matt 3:12]. But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall. Then you will trample down the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I do these things," says the Lord Almighty. "Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and

<sup>14</sup> Josephus, *Ant.* 18:116–18, could be read that way when he talks about why John was executed (see the introduction to this chapter). Also see Dale Allison in *The Apocalyptic Jesus* (Allison, Borg, et al. 2001), 18; 24.

<sup>15</sup> Matt 11:14: "If you are willing to accept it, this is Elijah who was to come."

laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel. See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.”

However, the relationship between John and Jesus is ambiguous. In this chapter John recognizes Jesus as his superior (3:11) and would this be likely if Jesus was a devotee of John?<sup>16</sup> Perhaps or perhaps not. Second, every faithful Jew believed that the end would surely come and that Elijah would be its herald. The question was when: now or later? Urging repentance, no matter what the motive, is not exceptional. Threatening a change of leadership and authority is exceptional. Concerning this latter point, a text from *y. Ta'an.* 4:5 is illustrative:

Rabbi Simeon ben Yoḥai taught: “Akiva, my teacher, used to interpret *a star*, [Aramaic “Kokhba”] *goes forth from Jacob* (Num 24:17) as “Kozeba” [Simeon bar Kozeba, also known “bar Kokhba,” a military leader who fought the Romans 130–135 CE] goes forth from Jacob. Rabbi Akiva, when he saw Bar Kozeba, said: ‘This is the king Messiah!’ Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Torta said to him: ‘Akiva! Grass will grow on your cheeks and still the son of David will not have come!’ ”<sup>17</sup>

A text from *t. Menah.* 13:23 is also instructive.

Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Torta said: “But of the last Temple that in the future is to be rebuilt, *may it be in our lives and in our days*,<sup>18</sup> it is written,

<sup>16</sup> In chap. 11, it seems the two were not closely acquainted since John, having heard of Jesus, wonders whether he is indeed the Messiah.

<sup>17</sup> Identifying the protagonists in current history who will fulfill ancient prophecy has ancient roots. Even God engages in the identifications. Consider Ezek 38:17–19:

“Thus says the Lord God, ‘Are you the one of whom I spoke in former days through my servants the prophets of Israel, who prophesied in those days for many years that I would bring you against them? It will come about on that day, when Gog comes against the Land of Israel, declares the Lord God, that my fury will mount up in my anger. In my zeal and in my blazing wrath, I declare that on that day there will surely be a great earthquake in the land of Israel.’ ”

<sup>18</sup> I suspect that the words I have put in italics were added by a copyist or teacher, for they stand in tension both with the rest of the text, and with the perspective of the alleged speaker—Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Torta—in the unit just cited. If I am right, the fact that the bolded phrase is here at all is a clear indication of how strong the belief in the imminent arrival of the Messiah and the reconstruction of the Temple was in the anonymous copyist’s day.

'And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow to it. And many people shall go and say: Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will etc.' [Isa 2:3].

The expectation of the coming of Elijah together with the hope in the advent of the Messiah is reflected in this prayer in minor tractate *Sop. 9:7*: "May *Elijah the Prophet* come speedily to us. May *King Messiah* flourish in our days."

In other Jewish traditions concerning his coming, it is said that Elijah was to separate the wheat from the chaff, that is, to divide between those who were far or who made themselves far from God, and those who were close or made themselves close to God. But a message of comfort was added at the close of these discussions denying that Elijah would come to divide, and affirming that the opposite was true: Elijah would in fact bring peace and harmony to all.<sup>19</sup>

Some Jewish sources suggest that at least some of the believers in the imminent arrival of Elijah did not assume that Elijah would be clearly recognizable to all. Someone might claim to be Elijah and merely be a pretender; how was one to tell? *Midrash Zuta* (ed. Buber) to Song 7:14 poses this question, and Rabbi Yossi suggests tests for any putative Elijah. The tone of the text, though, is difficult to discern. Does it belittle those who think Elijah is to be tested to make sure that he is in fact Elijah, or does seriously propose that such tests be carried out? I suspect the text is being serious and not sarcastic. Rabbi Yossi advises that when someone comes along claiming to be Elijah, he should be asked to revive specific dead people who are recognized as having died. Rabbi Yossi also says that he personally would ask Elijah to enumerate the vows he himself had made. These assertions suggest that Rabbi Yossi indeed believed that Elijah's arrival was imminent, and he had his own test prepared in anticipation of the appearance not only of an authentic Elijah but also possible pretenders who might mislead the gullible. (In the next chapter of the Gospel, Matthew has Satan, not some well-meaning innocent, propose tests to determine whether Jesus is "the son of God.") Nevertheless, there were some who heard about such proposed tests and considered them presumptuous.

On the other hand, some thought that Elijah would come but that his arrival was not imminent. *T. Sotah* 13:2 cites Ezra 2:63:

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<sup>19</sup> See *t. Ed.* 3:4 and *m. Ed.* 8:7. Dale Allison has pointed out to me that Matt 17:11 adopted the same position and that the next verse notes this expectation remains unfulfilled.

And the Tirshatha [Governor] said to them that they should not eat of the most holy things, *until there will stand up* a priest with *Urim* and with *Thummim*.

According to this text, the expression “until there will stand up” means much the same as “Don’t hold your breath,” which is what one might hear today.<sup>20</sup> The text also points out that it was common for people to say to one another, “until the dead rise,” or “until Elijah comes.” First Maccabees 4:46 also suggests that the arrival of Elijah or someone in that role was not imminent: “... and they stored the stones in a convenient place on the Temple Mount until a prophet should come to tell what to do with them.”

In sum, activism and disobedience (not mere critique) characterized the extreme forms of eschatological prophecy. Though it is not at all clear whether Matthew wants to cast John in this extremist mold, he will insist that Jesus be cast in this role in chapters 23:43 and 25:13–40.

*Saying, “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near.”* (v. 2)

Since John the Baptist is cast as Elijah, whose coming was promised by Malachi (4:5), we note also that Malachi reports that Elijah will turn the hearts of fathers and their children to each other (4:6). “Turning” (Heb. *hashavah*) connotes “bringing to repentance” (Heb. *teshuva*).

The phrase “the Kingdom of Heaven” is uniquely Matthean among the Gospels; the other Gospels say “the Kingdom of God.” The following text from *Pesiq. Rab.* (ed. Friedmann), chapter 2, illuminates the phrase. In this text, the Song of Songs (also known as Song of Solomon and Canticles) is “pesherized.” This means the verse was broken into units in which the nouns were assigned coded values (often with things or people referring to the end-time which is about to come to fruition now). When these things or people are read in place of the nouns that are really in the verse, the substitution code reveals a hidden message. In this case the message is of messianic import. The “Kingdom of Heaven” in this passage refers to that kingdom which is to arrive at the time of the uprooting of all the kingdoms—but especially Rome—which have been persecuting Israel until that time. It is with the arrival of this kingdom that God’s sovereignty is to be established, as in *Pesiq. Rab.* (ed. Friedmann), chap. 2.

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<sup>20</sup> Dale Allison reads Matt 5:8 as echoing this idea. But I remain unconvinced that Matt 5:8 is really thinking about a new heaven–new earth Messianic Age theology (originating from a new interpretation of Matt 5:17—heaven and earth passing away).

*Song 2:11: The rains are over and gone.*

This symbolizes the [end of Israel's] subjugation to the nations.

*Song 2:12: The flowers appear on the earth.*

Rabbi Isaac<sup>21</sup> said, “*And the Lord showed me four craftsmen*” (*Zech 1:20–21*). *And I said, “What are these coming to do?” He said, “These are the horns that scattered Judah, so that no one raised his head. And these have come to terrify them, to cast down the horns of the nations who lifted up their horns against the land of Judah to scatter it”* (*Zech 1:21*, in the Hebrew text 2:3–4). These symbolize the following: Elijah and King Messiah and Melchizedek and the priest anointed for war.

*Song 2:12 (continued): The time of pruning the vines has come.*

*The time for pruning the not fully formed: the time of [pruning] the wicked when the Lord will break the staff of the wicked [Isa 14:5].* The time has come of this wicked kingdom which will be uprooted from the world. The time of the Kingdom of Heaven has come, which will make manifest “*and the Lord will be King over all the Earth [on that day the Lord will be one and his name one]*” (*Zechariah 14:9*).

It is obvious, and virtually all commentators note this, that Matthew has John and Jesus saying some of the same things, as noted at the beginning of this chapter. In Matt 3:2: John the Baptist says, “*Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near.*” According to Matt 4:17: “From that time Jesus began to proclaim, ‘*Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near.*’” Looking ahead to Matt 3:7, we read, “When he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his immersion, he [John] said to them, ‘*Offspring of poisonous serpents, who told you to flee from the coming wrath?*’” In Matt 23:33, Jesus retorts to the Pharisees, “*Snakes! Offspring of poisonous serpents! How will you flee ‘the judgment of Gehenna?’*”<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> In *Song Rab.* 2:33 the fuller citation is given: “Rabbi Berekhiah in the name of Rabbi Isaac...” In *b. Sukkah* 52b this is attributed to Rabbi Hana bar Bizna in the name of Rabbi Simeon Hasida.

<sup>22</sup> *Gehenna* is equivalent to divine wrath in some Jewish texts. *B. 'Abod. Zar.* 18b claims that one who scoffs will fall into *Gehenna*—the proof-text is Prov 21:24: “An arrogant and haughty man—‘Scoffer’ is his name; he will go off into the *Wrath of the Arrogant*.”

We have yet to ascertain to what extent Matthew's Jesus really knew John. Certainly, Chapter 3 reports they were connected. On the other hand, Chapter 11 is difficult to reconcile with Chapter 3. For according to Chapter 11, it seems that John never met Jesus and he sent his disciples to observe him.<sup>23</sup> When they told him John wanted to know if Jesus was really the expected Messiah—"Jesus answered and said unto them, 'Go and show John again those things which ye do hear and see' " (11:4).

By saying that the "Kingdom of Heaven has come near," John seems to mean the "the end-time," or the *qetz*, has come near. Concerning the coming of the end-time, we turn again to a text in *Pesiq. Rab.* (ed. Friedmann), chap. 41:

They asked wicked Balaam: "Do they [the children of Israel] have knowledge of the end-time of salvation?" He said, "Certainly!" They asked him, "When is it?" He replied to them, "It is distant—I see it, but not now; I behold it, but not near."<sup>24</sup> [A star shall come forth from Jacob, A scepter shall rise from Israel" (Num 24:17)]. So he pushed the end to a distant time with his words.... Malachi came and said, "*For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven* [when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze," says the Lord of Hosts, "so that it will leave them neither root nor branch"] (Mal 3:19; in some texts, 4:1).

In Malachi, salvation for the saved means destruction for the wicked, who will be reduced to "stubble" and "set ablaze." This corresponds with Matthew's rhetoric, which portrays the Pharisees and Sadducees as "arrogant" and as "evildoers." The double reference to "arrogant" and "evildoers" in Malachi necessitates for Matthew a double referent, "Pharisees and Sadducees" (v. 7). It is not common for Matthew to group together "Pharisees and Sadducees"; normally he writes "Scribes and Pharisees."

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<sup>23</sup> Dale Allison suggests that in chapter 11, John was simply wondering if Jesus was "in the running" for the office of Messiah and so removes the tension between the two chapters. However, in 3:14 John acknowledges that he is unfit to baptize Jesus for Jesus is the superior one. Whatever one might say, there remains a degree of tension between the two chapters.

<sup>24</sup> When Balaam says in this midrash that the end is "distant," he makes it distant; but when Malachi says that the end is near, he makes it near.

*This is the one spoken about by Isaiah the prophet, “A voice of one crying out in the desert: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight” [Isa 40:3].<sup>25</sup> (v. 3)*

The text of Isaiah in Matthew here is not that of the MT which reads, “A voice reads/calls in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God,’” and which reflects what is found of this text in the documents from Qumran (1QS8: 12–14; 4Q176). However, the text from Isaiah in Matthew is almost word for word the same as that found in the Septuagint.

Over and above the issue of textual provenance, I have not found any ancient Jewish sources which suggest the Isa 40:3 text alludes to either the Messiah or to Elijah. Dunn’s claim that Qumran materials are pertinent is an exaggeration.<sup>26</sup> He cites a single text (1QS8: 12–14) from this community which states that its members shall study Torah in the desert, for only by doing this can the way of the Lord be prepared. However, it might be said that the style of exegesis in this text is the *pesher*-style for which the Qumran community is well known. “Clearing the way” means clarifying the text of the Torah and has no eschatological sense at all. None of the Qumran texts which cite Isa 40:3 “reading/calling in the desert . . . etc.” read it as in Matthew: “Crying out: in the desert, prepare . . .” Perhaps the Qumran community advised its beginning students to commence their study by considering the biblical text as a massive desert that needs to be clarified and paved with exhausting study. Whatever the case, the full members of the community did not study in the desert, and it may be that even the initiates did not physically go there either.

*John himself had his clothing made from camel’s hair, and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. (v. 4)*

The image is that of Elijah in 2 Kings 1:8: “‘Wearing a hairy garment,’ they replied, ‘with a leather girdle about his loins.’ ‘It is Elijah the Tishbite!’ he exclaimed.” In a famous passage attributed to Phineas ben Yair, it is said that the resurrection of the dead is a prerequisite for the advent of Elijah the prophet.<sup>27</sup> *M. Soṭah* has emended this difficult text to say that the resurrections

<sup>25</sup> LXX Isa 40:3, cf. Mark 1:3 and Luke 3:4, “A voice of one crying out in the desert, ‘Prepare the ways of the Lord; make straight the paths of our God.’”

<sup>26</sup> See James Dunn, “John the Baptist’s Use of Scripture” (1994), 45.

<sup>27</sup> See *Midrash Tannaim* (ed. Hoffman) to Deut 23:15; also *y. Šabb* 1:3; *y. Šeqal* 3:3; *Midrash Proverbs* [ed. Buber], 15:31; *Song Rab.* 1:9; *m. Soṭah* 9:5.

will come through him. All other traditions only know of Elijah coming to announce the Messianic Era. The antiquity of this idea of the arrival of Elijah to announce the Messianic Era should not be doubted (see further Chapter 11, n. 2), for the Gospels themselves bear witness to its antiquity.

*Then Jerusalem and all of Judea went out to him, and all the region around the Jordan* (v. 5)

According to the recorded sources, John attracted large crowds. Matthew claims that before these crowds John proclaimed the end-time. As we have seen, Josephus suggests that Herod Antipas feared John, which means probably that not only was John proclaiming the end of subjugation to sin, but also the end of subjugation to earthly kings—and so to this hated new Herod, the son of the Wicked Herod (as Jewish sources call him). See the introduction to this chapter for more extensive discussions concerning this verse.

*And they were immersed in the Jordan River by him, confessing their sins.* (v. 6)

The “sins” referred to here are likely breaches of the laws of the Torah and of its interpreters. What would the Jews have said in order to confess their sins in the brief time it would have taken for them to prepare and to be immersed in the Jordan River? A text from the Tosefta, in which the major confessions alluded to in the Hebrew Bible are reviewed, is helpful here. *T. Yoma* (ed. Lieberman) 2:1 reads:

How did [the High Priest] confess his sins?

Please God—I have done *perverse* things and I have done *transgressive* things before you, both my household and me. Please God forgive the *perverse deeds* and *transgressions* and the *sins* for I have been perverse, transgressive and sinful before you, I and my household. It is written in the Torah of Moses your servant, “For on that day he will forgive you to purify you; from all your *sins* before the Lord you shall cleanse yourselves” (Lev 16:30). And Scripture further says, “And he shall confess upon it [the sacrificial animal] all the *perversities* of the Children of Israel and all their *transgressions* and *all their sins*” (Lev 16:21). . . . For so we find the way of discussion described of those confessed. David said, “We have sinned with our fathers, we have acted perversely and we have acted wickedly” (Ps 106:6). Solomon said, “We have sinned [and] we have been perverse

and we have [scribe badly copied *peh*—(*pashanu*) = (transgressed) been [*resh*—*rashanu*] wicked” (1 Kings 8:47). Daniel said, “We have sinned, we have been perverse and we have been wicked” (Dan 9:5). So what did Moses declare? “He forgives *perversity*, and *transgression* and *sin* He cleanses” (Exod 34:7).

Samuel Lachs discounts the likelihood that these confessions above were of the kind that John would have expected; he cites the more private examples found in *y. Yoma* 8:9 and *Lev. Rab.* 3:3.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, it could be argued that given the biblical warrant for such confessions as those found in the text from the Tosefta, I think we can safely say that the confessions from this text might well have served the needs of those being baptized, especially if they were used to hearing it on the Day of Atonement in the Temple. Lachs’s examples are much more concise: sin is acknowledged and forgiveness requested.

We said in the introduction to this chapter that Josephus explains that John’s baptism was not for the purpose of cleansing the soul from sin and that he likely says this because others, such as the Gospel writer, believed that this was the case.

*When he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his immersion, he said to them, “Offspring of poisonous serpents, who told you to flee from the coming wrath?” (v. 7)*

According to midrashic tradition the wicked prophet Balaam used confession to flee from God’s wrath, as in *Midrash Aggadah* (ed. Buber) to Num 22:34:

*And Balaam said to the angel of the Lord, I have sinned* (Num 22:34). Balaam the Wicked jumped to confess for he knew nothing protected against God’s wrath but confession. “And now if I have done evil in your eyes I do repent” (Num 22:34).

*M. ’Abot* 4:11 may be the source of the midrashist, for there it says: “Repentance (followed by) good works is like a shield against retribution.” So repentance is to be followed by good works. This is why Balaam ultimately failed to win divine favor. His repentance was not followed by good deeds. However John does not refuse the Pharisees and Sadducees the opportunity to repent, although by calling them “snakes” he makes clear that he does not trust what they outwardly profess. Lachs suggests that as the result of the translator

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28 Samuel Tobias Lachs, *A Rabbinic Commentary on the New Testament* (1987), 37–38.

reading *eße* instead of *af'a* in an original Aramaic text,<sup>29</sup> we have the Pharisees and Sadducees being called “snakes” instead of “spotted cat[s].” For Lachs, a spotted cat—“attractive on the outside but inwardly... vicious”—and not a snake, suggests hypocrisy.<sup>30</sup> I know of no uses where hypocrisy is termed “spotted cat.” On the other hand, *snake* is a term that is applied to hypocrisy. Proverbs 23:31–32 tells us that some things look enticing but in the end deceive and injure. “Do not look at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup and goes down smoothly. In the end it bites like a serpent and stings like an adder.” And these biters and stingers are what the Sadducees and Pharisees turn out to be under their pious veneer. The point is that confession saves one and that even the Pharisees and Sadducees will be saved if they confess sincerely and then follow that confession with good deeds.

*Bear fruit worthy of repentance* (v. 8)

That is, do good deeds to go along with your repentance. This phrase here may reflect more the MT version of Isa 40:3, especially the second part of the verse, “make straight *in the desert [arava]* a highway for our God,” than that of the Septuagint (and so also that in Matthew) in which the phrase “in the desert” is not found.

There are many rabbinic passages in which “fruit” is used as a metaphor for “good deeds.”<sup>31</sup> It appears that one of these passages became attached to the end of a unit now preserved in *Yalkut Šim'oni* (Torah, 855) that interprets Ps 68:5 (literally: “Pave the way for he who is enthroned on the *aravot*”).

Rabbi Pinchas the Priest, the son of Hama, said: *Aravot* [deserts, but likely it was originally the singular *arava* of Is. 40:3],—the Holy one sows upon it [note the singular here] the *deeds of the righteous* and *they* (the deeds) *bear* [lit: make, as in Matthew] *fruit*.

Since Ps 68:5 speaks of the “highest heaven,” *aravot* (as the Rabbis took it), it is not likely that this verse is the one Rabbi Pinchas was thinking of. It is more likely that an editor by mistake grouped another discussion discussing

29 The technique of suggesting a Semitic original for Matthew’s sources is known as retroversion and is used to solve difficulties by positing mistranslations in the Gospel text.

30 Lachs, *Rabbinic Commentary*, 42. Also see Lachs, “Studies in the Semitic Background to the Gospel of Matthew” (1977).

31 *Gen. Rab.* 30:6; *Lev. Rab. Emor* 27.1; *Tanh. Emor* 7.7 and 17.7; *Midrash Aggadah* [ed. Buber], *Vayikra* 25.27.

the desert (*arava* in Isa 40:3) with the interpretations of Ps 68:5 because of the similar wording (*arava* and *aravot*).

The question that began the discussions concerned *aravot, heavens*. The Rabbis are asked to establish its meaning in the Psalm. Inexplicably, one answer, late in the discussion, is that “the Holy One takes note of the deeds of the righteous and their deeds are fragrant (*arev*) to Him.” It is possible that this text does discuss *aravot*, although it may not. However, the final unit, that of Pinchas the priest above, clearly refers to a desert where the deeds of the righteous are planted and they bear fruit. The image would be more than strange if his discussion concerned fruit growing in God’s throne room in the *Aravot* heavens!

It is reasonable to assume that what Rabbi Pinchas is saying is this. “What use is the pathway in the desert that Isaiah mentioned?” I will tell you. “From the seeds of the good deeds of the righteous that God sows in it, a garden of fruits will be produced in it for the enjoyment of all in the time to come.” This reading seems to me the upshot of the idea of Rabbi Pinchas. It also suggests to me that originally the Hebrew version of Isa 40:3 and not that of the Septuagint lies behind the text cited by Matthew. The expression “bear fruits” may not be as accidental as appears at first glance in this chapter. For we have at least some indication now that Matthew’s images of repentance and good deeds can be connected to the idea of making a way in the desert to bear good fruits. In any event, John is telling the Sadducees and Pharisees to change their ways in order to show that their repentance is sincere.

*And do not decide to say among yourselves “We have Abraham for a father” for I say to you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones here. (v. 9)*

Lachs thinks that those commentators who see a pun here on the (putatively) original Hebrew words *avanim* (stones) and *banim* (sons) may be right. However he thinks it even more likely that there was a misreading from the Hebrew original: *ebyonim*—“‘the poor,’ ‘the outcasts of society’”—was read as *abanim*—“stones,” and so the original meaning of the verse was that these *ebyonim*, these outcasts, who were coming to be baptized by John, could have descendants as worthy as the descendants of Abraham.<sup>32</sup> That is, the Pharisees and Sadducees had no special claim to the patriarch. But is either suggestion sufficient to overcome the Pharisaic or Sadducean claims to special divine

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<sup>32</sup> Lachs, *Rabbinic Commentary*, 42. See also Lachs, “John the Baptist and his Audience” (1975).

dispensation and justify John's severe castigation of Pharisees and Sadducees? Does John mean to point to these social outcasts and say they are base and worthless but God can have them parent righteous children? Furthermore, I do not know why people of poor character would be called "*ebyonim*." *Ebyonim* are the financially poor. Thus on the festival of Purim one gives gifts to the *ebyonim* (Esther 9:22). To my mind, what is intended here are real, inert, lifeless stones<sup>33</sup> (although is true, that for the Rabbis, stones might sometimes symbolize children).<sup>34</sup>

Most commentators to Matthew believe that the Pharisees and Sadducees feel secure because of their belief in the doctrine of "the merits of the fathers" (in Heb. *zekhut avot*). The doctrine claims one's religious debts are covered because of the credit one has gained from one's forefathers and specifically by having Abraham as one's father. This doctrine is spoken of in Jewish sources from all periods. For instance, in *Gen. Rab.* 60:2, Prov 17:2 is parsed as follows:

*A servant that dealeth wisely*—refers to Eliezer who bound himself to Abraham; *was likened with a son that brings shame to others*—refers to Isaac, whose submission at the Aqeda shamed the faith of idolaters; *and [likened] to be among brothers [with whom] he will share a part of the inheritance*—refers to Israel. Just as these [descendants] invoked the merit of the fathers, Eliezer likewise invoked it. "And he said: 'O Lord, the God of my master Abraham [send me, I pray Thee, good speed this day], and show kindness unto my master Abraham'" (*Gen 24:12*). This is the absolute beginning point of the process [of such merit].

Apparently the Rabbis did not feel that the claim to such credit was theirs alone. However, I do not think that this doctrine is the reference point for Matt 3:9. The commentators who say that John is referring to this doctrine must resort to clever wordplay that is neither compelling nor contextually likely in order for the reference to stones to fit it.

33 "Raise up from these stones." The term "raise up" has the sense "to establish, set up (replace)." *Tanh. Num.* [ed. Buber], *Naso* 18: "God will raise up from you children who will be scholars, priests and prophets." *B. B. Qam.* 20b: "One who loses a boat, he sets up (replaces it with) another boat."

34 For the Rabbis the stones that Jacob selected as his pillow represented the future progeny of the children of Israel that would be raised up (*he'emidan*), *Gen. Rab.* 68:11. But these stones are not the physical source material of children, they are only symbolic of the future.

Rather, behind John's words is the belief that stems from God's promise to "establish" a covenant with Abraham and with Abraham's descendants after him (Gen 17:7). By virtue of being Jews, Abraham's descendants are promised that redemption (here, in this word) will come to them and through them. Consider a text from *b. Yebam.* 64a, in which the Rabbis discuss what would happen to the promise to keep this covenant with Abraham's descendants if his descendants were somehow to be wiped out.

"To be a God to you and to your children after you" (Gen 17:17). Thus when Abraham has "children after you" God's protection extends to them. When there are no longer "your children after you," to whom should it extend? To trees and *stones*?<sup>35</sup>

In this text the Rabbis ask rhetorically: "If there are no Jews, who inherits God's protection as promised in the covenant? Would the promise go to "trees and *stones*?" They therefore infer that God will not abandon the Jews.

Now let us return to John's words in this verse: "I say to you, yes, exactly—God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones here even if there are no Jews left." John uses the same word as the Rabbis—*stones*. While it may be the case that Matthew did not know of this midrash, he does anticipate a certain response to John's words from the Pharisees. That is why John tells them not to decide to say "We are Abraham's children after him": in other words, do not think that God assures your existence so the promise to Abraham can be kept. John adds with a rhetorical flourish that even stones will suffice to fulfill God's promise.

The reference to "these stones" parallels a midrashic usage, in which "this" and "these" can mean any item of little or no value.<sup>36</sup> Matthew's use of the expression here suggests to me both that the usage is quite ancient and that his source for the entire verse is based upon a Hebrew tradition rather than on a pun. His facetious retort is purely rhetorical and does not require serious theological analysis.

*The axe is already set against the root of the trees; every tree failing to bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. (v. 10)*

35 A common expression in rabbinic literature (e.g., *b. Tem.* 17a).

36 Midrashic usage indeed suggests John means: "from any old stones." See my "Review of D. Rottzoll's, *Rabbinischer Kommentar zum Buch Genesis*, "where I fault him for not being aware of this feature of midrashic usage (Basser 1995).

Here the emphasis is on the urgency of the situation. The metaphor continues from 3:8 above: “Bear fruit worthy of repentance.” Those not doing good deeds are soon to be destroyed. Nothing will remain of them; they shall be thrown into the fire.<sup>37</sup> In *Sipre Deut.* 308 the same fate is predicted for the wicked:

*A perverse and twisted generation* (Deut 32:5)—Moses said to Israel, “You are crooked, you are twisted and you are going nowhere but into the fire.”

In the time of Moses, when the Israelites captured metal utensils in their war with the Midianites, they were commanded to purify them. Numbers 31:23 makes clear that fire was considered superior to water as a cleansing agent. Water was to be used only for utensils that could not bear the heat of fire.

Then Eleazar the priest said to the men of war who had gone to battle, “This is the statute of the law which the Lord has commanded Moses: only the gold and the silver, the bronze, the iron, the tin and the lead, *everything that can stand the fire, you shall pass through the fire, and it shall be clean, providing it be purified with the “waters that eradicate pollution.” But whatever cannot stand the fire you shall (just) pass through the waters.* (vv. 21–23)

A midrashic text from *b. Sanh.* 39a understands “pass through” to mean “immersion” (Aramaic: *tabil*):

A *min* (Jewish-Christian perhaps) taunted Rabbi Abahu: When God buried Moses, into what was he immersed? For should you think in water, does not Scripture write, “Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand” (Isa 40:12)? So he told him—he was immersed in fire, as it is written, “for behold the Lord comes in fire” (Isa 66:15). [The *min*] replied, “Is immersion effective in fire?” He said, “Certainly, the preferred immersion is in fire, as it is written, ‘*But whatever cannot stand the fire you shall (just) pass through the waters’* (Num 31:23).”<sup>38</sup>

37 Malachi, who, as we have pointed out, is the source for the promise of the return of Elijah before the day of the coming of the Lord, tells us in 3:19 (4:1):

“Behold, the day is coming, blazing like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble, And the day that is coming will set them on fire, leaving them neither root nor branch, says the Lord of hosts.”

38 Lachs, *Rabbinic Commentary*, 45 n. 4, supplies some pertinent bibliography for the analysis of this passage.

A dead body is prepared for burial by immersion or by something equivalent to immersion (pouring specially prepared water over it). The point here is that God purified Moses' body by immersing it in fire. Indeed we hear that God is fire (Deut 4:24) and so it may be that John's words here are to be understood in this way: "He will immerse you in fire; namely, the Holy Spirit." On the other hand a text from *y. Sukkah* 5:5 equates the Holy Spirit with water: specifically, with the ritual waters drawn at the time of the Water Celebration in the Temple during the festival of Sukkot:<sup>39</sup>

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi asked: Why is its name called "place of drawing water"? For from there they draw the Holy Spirit, as it says "And you shall draw water in happiness from the sources of salvation (*yeshua*)"<sup>40</sup> (Isa 12:3).

*I immerse you in water for repentance, but the one coming after me is stronger than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to carry. He will immerse you in the Holy Spirit and in fire.* (v. 11)

The text states that somehow in the ritual drawing of water the Holy Spirit is drawn down upon those who are drawing the water. The Holy Spirit, fire, and water are prominent images in both the Jewish mystical and apocalyptic texts. I do not know what the full meaning of these baptismal rites in Matthew are; what is apparent, however, is that in some mysterious way they are the ultimate agents for cleansing and admission into God's salvation.

The same tradition is also found in *Midrash Tannaim* (ed. Hoffman) to Deut 16:14 and *Midr. Ruth Rab.* 4:9. The rabbinic passages that speak of drawing the Holy Spirit (likely down from heaven, the source of salvation) see a water-drawing ritual from mysterious sources as enabling the mystical descent of the Holy Spirit upon the drawers. Holy Spirit and fire are images of the divine that are abundant in Jewish mystical texts, apocalyptic and Merkavah writings. They are now said to be the agents of purification to be used by Jesus.

"Whose shoes I am not worthy to carry" is understood by many commentators to mean that John is not worthy even to be a slave of Jesus. Yet it may be better to think that what John is actually saying here is that he is not fit to be the coming one's *disciple*. The relevant rabbinic passages are cited by the gospel commentators, among which is *Mekhilta of Rabbi Yishmael* to Exod 21:2.

39 For the Sadducean view of the Pharisaic water-drawing ritual on Sukkot, see chapter 22, p. 575.

40 Also the very name of "Jesus" in Hebrew.

In this text the Rabbis state that a Hebrew slave must not put shoes on his master or carry his things before him when going to the bathhouse, though one's son or disciple may do these things.

Again the effect is purely rhetorical: to show the greatness of the one to come. Both this verse and the one following it are meant to introduce Jesus onto the scene.

*His winnowing-shovel is in his hand, and he will clean out his threshing-floor and gather his grain into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with an unquenchable fire.* (v. 12)

This verse restates what is said in Matt 3:10. Here it seems out of place or at best parenthetical. It is also a paraphrase of Mal 3:19 (4:1).

*Then Jesus came to the Jordan to John from the Galilee to be immersed by him.* (v. 13)

It seems that, like others before him, Jesus feels the need to confess his sins and repent and so he comes to John to be baptized. To avoid embarrassing implications, then, Matthew must interrupt his source here. Almost certainly his source had verse 16 follow directly upon verse 13 (both Mark and Luke lack the brief dialogue between Jesus and John in verses 14 and 15), so that it would have read:

I immerse you with water for repentance, but the one coming after me is stronger than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to carry. He will immerse you in the Holy Spirit and in fire.—Then Jesus came to the Jordan to John from the Galilee to be immersed by him.—When Jesus was immersed, as soon as he rose from the water, look, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to him.  
(Matt 3, vv. 11, 13, 16)

The narrative flows better without the interruption by verses 14 and 15, because John does not recognize Jesus when he first comes to him. When John has finished administering the baptism, at which point the heavens open and the voice from the heavens calls out to identify him, we still do not know whether John realizes who Jesus is. The irony here is that, although John has spoken of Jesus and of what he will come to do when he comes (3:11), John may have no understanding that his words are actually prophetic for the immediate moment.

Verse 14 suggests that John is fully aware of whom Jesus is but it seems that the verse breaks the flow and is likely an interpolation into the scene.<sup>41</sup> Matthew is forced to insert his own dialogue here to avoid what he sees as a problem; the very same John who has just spoken of his unworthiness before Jesus is now the administrant at the baptism by which he, Jesus, apparently shall be saved.

*John stopped him saying, “I should be immersed by you, and you come to me?”* (v. 14)

This verse seems to intimate that John knows full well that Jesus is the one he awaits. This verse does not sit that well with 11:4 when John sends the question to Jesus asking if he is the messiah.

*Jesus answered him, “Permit it now, for so it is fitting that we fulfill all righteousness.” Then he permitted it.* (v. 15)

It has to be this way, explains Matthew through Jesus' answer, to fulfill what God has ordained for all who would be saved—even if for Jesus, baptism is unnecessary.

*When Jesus was immersed, as soon as he rose from the water, look, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to him.* (v. 16)<sup>42</sup>

With this verse we enter the world of the earliest Jewish mystical tradition. The baptism of Jesus brings about a mysterious change in the universe as, upon its completion, the heavens open. Ezekiel's visions of the Merkabah throne lie behind Matt 3:15:

<sup>41</sup> Dale Allison, in his reading of my work, phrases the solution as follows: The Baptist's words are from Q, the baptism itself from Mark, and the seam between them is Matthean redaction (Q plus Matthew's bridge plus Mark).

<sup>42</sup> See my commentary to verse 17 below for the connection between John's immersion of Jesus and the descent of the Holy Spirit. I also discuss the Targum to Isa 42:1—“This is My servant the Messiah, I draw him close, My chosen with whom My Memra is very pleased—I set My Holy Spirit upon him”—and other pertinent materials bearing on the synoptic tradition there.

Now it came to pass in the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, in the fifth day of the month, as I was among the captives by the river of Chebar, that the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God. (Ezek 1:1)

However, despite the fact that a whole tradition of Jewish mysticism derives from Ezekiel's vision, the sources explicitly state that this vision was not the most complete in Jewish history. A tradition preserved in the *Mekhilta of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai* to Exod 15:2 states that the Israelites saw God, not just a vision of Him as did Ezekiel, when the waters of the Sea of Reeds parted:

[The Israelites sang,] "This is my God, and I will worship him" (Exod 15:2). Rabbi Eleazar said, "How do we know that the lowest maid-servant saw upon the splitting seas more than [Hosea] and Ezekiel saw? Hosea reported, "And through the hand of the prophets I can be imagined" (Hos 12:11), and Ezekiel reported that, "The heavens opened and I saw visions of God" (Ezek 1:1). Everyone (when the sea split) recognized Him and they all said, "This is my God!" (Exod 15:2)

"*This is my God*" (Exod 15:2) implies the heavens parted and they could actually point to Him. In the text from Matthew, the reverse happens; here the voice of the Spirit says "*This is my son!*" The presynoptic text conflates traditions from Ezek 1:1, Exod 15:2, and Isa 42:1 in the present scenario.

*B. Hag. 15a* interprets the meaning of the Spirit of God "hovering" over the waters:

And the *Spirit of God* hovered over the face of the waters. (Gen 1:2)—  
Like a dove hovering over her offspring, barely touching them.

Here we have "Spirit of God" barely touching the water. Jesus has the vision of the descent of the Holy Spirit as a direct result of his immersion. There seems to be an echo of the moment of creation here; if so, it is the moment before the dark and formless world is transformed by the creation of light (Gen 1:2–3). A second allusion to creation—this time to the creation of light—will come much later, in the Transfiguration episode (Matt 17:1–9), when the heavenly voice repeats what it has said here: "My son . . ."

*And look, a voice from the heavens, saying "This is My beloved son, in whom I am well-pleased."* (v. 17)

Virtually all the modern commentators understand this “voice from the heavens” as the Hebrew “*bat kol* from the heavens” (*b. Sotah* 48b).<sup>43</sup> But perhaps Daniel 4:28 is more relevant:

The words were still on his lips when *a voice came from heaven*.<sup>44</sup> “This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar: Your royal authority has been taken from you.”

Not only is the form of Daniel’s phrase “a voice from heaven” closer to Matthew’s, but the similarity in content would also suggest a deliberate echo. In Daniel, an immediate regime change is prophesied by the “voice from heaven.” Matthew casts Jesus in the role of one who announces not only a time for repentance, but proclaims an immediate change of leadership and authority.

“This is My beloved son, in whom I am well-pleased.” The synoptic tradition here borrows from Isa 42:1: “Here is My servant, whom I uphold, My chosen one in whom I delight; I will put My Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations.” The Targumic tradition of the same text identifies the servant as “Messiah”: “This is My servant<sup>45</sup> the Messiah, I draw him close, My chosen with whom my *Memra* is very pleased. I set My Holy Spirit upon him; he shall reveal laws to the nations.” The term *Memra*, which in Aramaic almost always translates as “Word”—that is, “the word of God”—is a euphemism used to avoid describing God anthropomorphically. In Hebrew “my chosen”—*bahir*—can be translated as “my beloved,” and so *Memra* is used here so that it is not inferred that God feels emotional love. To be “chosen” can mean to be “loved.”

In this straightforward scene, Jesus is described as the son of God. “*Ben*,” literally “son” in Hebrew (*bar* in Aramaic), is also a term used to indicate sharing one or more attributes of a greater entity and also embodies its essence. It is probable that Matthew intends his readers to understand that God’s declaration that Jesus is “My son” here is to mean that Jesus shared in God’s attributes, but what exactly does that declaration mean? Has Jesus received a mark of

<sup>43</sup> For example, see Lachs, *Rabbinic Commentary*, 47 n. 6.

<sup>44</sup> *Bat Qol* (an audible voice from heaven to comment on an earthly situation) refers to a voice that replaces “prophecy” and is somewhat removed from the godhead. *Kol min ha-shamayim* (voice from the heavens) seems to be a divine voice of a higher order of authority.

<sup>45</sup> See *b. B. Bat.* 127b, to the effect that “my son” and “my servant” were interchangeable in Hebrew and Aramaic popular usages.

special, but not necessarily, unprecedented, divine favor? Or is the reader to understand that this announcement means that Jesus is uniquely fitted for a particular preordained role?

In the synoptic gospels God calls Jesus “My son”<sup>46</sup> twice: at his baptism (Matt 3:17, Mark 11:1, and Luke 3:22) and again at the Transfiguration (Matt 17:1–3, 5, 9; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:35), at which Jesus is seen talking with Moses and Elijah. Now there is a source that talks about what it means to share in the divine glory, and that source mentions Moses and Elijah as examples of those who did so. According to *Tanh. Exod. Va'era* 8, sharing in God's divine glory means sharing either in one or all three of God's name,<sup>47</sup> God's power,<sup>48</sup> or God's garments.<sup>49</sup> The midrash claims that Moses shared God's name, Elijah shared God's power, and the Messiah shared God's glory (crown of gold).

It is apparent, then, that Matthew's received source for the Transfiguration episode assumed that its readers were familiar with this midrashic image. Jesus is portrayed as talking with Moses and Elijah to indicate that he is the third of the three who share the divine glory, namely, the Messiah.

At the Transfiguration, Jesus' clothes became dazzlingly white, an indication that he was sharing God's garment of glory as the midrash to Psalms 43:3 points out. The hidden light of Creation is about to dawn at the Transfiguration. We have already drawn attention to the fact that the voice that called “my son” at the Baptism confirms the title at the Transfiguration. It is of note that Moses, Elijah, and the Messiah all find their way into *Midrash Shohar Tov* to Ps 43:3: “Send me your light and your truth; they will lead me.”<sup>50</sup> This midrash refers to Isa 42:1 (discussed above), but also to Mal 3:23—“I will send you Elijah the prophet”—and Ps 105:26: “He sent Moses his servant, and Aaron whom he had chosen....” The synoptics, then, by juxtaposing John the Baptist (Elijah) and

<sup>46</sup> At the Transfiguration Matthew and Mark have “my beloved son,” while Luke has “my son, my chosen one.” At the Baptism all agree on the wording, “my beloved son.”

<sup>47</sup> See Exod 7:1, in which God says to Moses, “I have made you as *Elohim* to Pharaoh” [a divine name and even the generic word for God].

<sup>48</sup> See 1 Kings 17:17 ff., where Elijah revives the son of the widow of Zaraphath.

<sup>49</sup> According to a midrash from *Tanh. Exod. Ps 21:4* “(You have set on his head a crown of fine gold)” means that David has realized that God will clothe the Messiah with his own garments of glory.

<sup>50</sup> The midrash refers to Ps 105:26 and remarks that just as Moses and Aaron brought redemption from Egypt, another pair—light (Elijah) and truth (the Messiah)—will bring the final redemption.

the heavenly voice which identifies Jesus (Messiah) through the use of Isa 42:1, seem to have woven their text from the numerous threads of the midrash to Ps 43:3.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Two of my articles analyze passages in the Gospels in relationship to the midrashim: “Sharing in the Divine” (Basser 2002) and “The Jewish Roots of the Transfiguration” (Basser 1998). Dale Allison wonders why I do not mention Ps 2:7, the enthronement scene: “You are my son; today I am your father.” The answer is that where we have a clear reference in the Gospels to a verse in Isaiah; what is to be gained by adducing more verses? I have already said in my introduction to chapter 1 that I do not see much purpose in piling up verses or more rabbinic references than are necessary to make a point. That others do so for the sake of “thoroughness” I find wearying, but that is a matter of personal preference.

# Chapter 4

## Introduction

To regard Matthew 4:1 as beginning a new unit, separate from the chapter that came before it, would be unwise. Matthew 3:16 through to 4:11 forms a distinct unit and should be read as such. We might call this unit “The Initiation of the Messiah.”

From 3:7 to 3:12, Matthew’s Gospel gives warning through John to those who, whatever they might think of themselves, are unworthy in God’s sight. John says that their destruction is imminent. The text slowly shifts its focus away from John and from those who have come to him for baptism, toward the one who is to come after John, whose arrival is the reason John gives such warning. For it is the one coming after him—obviously Jesus—who, according to John, will bring about their destruction (3:12).

Once John begins to speak of the coming of Jesus, the reader’s expectation is that he will soon appear, and he does. Jesus too comes to John to be baptized by him. Once he has been baptized, the Spirit of God descends upon him, and a heavenly voice proclaims Jesus to be the son of God. This proclamation scene is inseparable from the Transfiguration, by means of which, having resisted the Accuser, Jesus is confirmed as the savior. It is a mistake to separate these two scenes since they are both based on the same midrashic understanding: that Moses, Elijah, and the Messiah are participants in the divine realm. And so Jesus is led away from the Jordan and into the further wilderness, where he is to face the Accuser alone.<sup>1</sup> The Accuser tries to tempt Jesus with three different tests; these tests have been ordered for him by the Holy Spirit, who is the one who leads Jesus to the Accuser in the first place.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In these tests, Satan appears not as the fallen angel or a devil with horns bearing a trident, but as a bureaucrat in the angelic courts whose job is to determine the strength of the faith of those who claim loyalty to God. He is the one who knows how to persuade the “evil urge” to rebel.

<sup>2</sup> We might speculate on the implications of these tests. Two of these tests are designed to prove that he shares God’s power and deserves the title “the Son of God”; the third is designed to test his loyalty to God. In point of fact the narrative suggests that the Accuser needed only one test in order to determine whether God was right to call Jesus “My son.” The last test is really the first and last temptation. Now Satan appears as the Lord of this World with riches and kingdoms at his disposal. Writers in this period and even afterwards had no problems combining these dual Satans (the prosecutor of Job and the demonic soul grabber of Faust). These dual images of Satan appear later in Jesus’ parables in chapter 13: one who obstructs

Most theologians and biblical scholars have understood this scene to be one of combat or confrontation with evil,<sup>3</sup> in which in the end Jesus defeats the very embodiment of evil, Satan. But this understanding is difficult to maintain, for Jesus does not enter into any real contest with Satan. In fact he refuses to engage with him and in the end simply sends him away. Dismissing Satan's arguments and avoiding contact with him are stock themes in Jewish lore. Perhaps the worst that can be said of Satan in these tests is that he tries to challenge Jesus' title as "the son of God." But yet it is precisely the Satan's job to test and resolve (for more on these themes, see my commentary to Matt 4:1 and 4:2).

The details of the tests are as follows. After Jesus has completed his forty-day fast,<sup>4</sup> Satan comes to him to demonstrate what it means to be truly the son of God by proposing, first, that he turn stones into bread. Doing this would be of immediate practical use to Jesus, in that he would then be able to eat; it would also be verification of his power. In Jewish tradition, as I say, the one who is called son of God is that one who shares God's powers. The aggadic examples of such figures are Moses and Elijah.<sup>5</sup> The story which best illuminates the Gospel passages here is that preserved in *Midrash Proverbs* (ed. Buber) 1:1. The test seems practical. We noted an *Aggadah* in the last chapter which shows that he who is worthy of the title "Son of God," is the one who has demonstrated that he shares in God's divine glory. Moses has God's name, Elijah can resurrect the dead (*Tanh., Exod, Va'era*, 8).<sup>6</sup> However, both had to prove their qualifications publicly

those who are weak and one who plants his agents among the righteous. Can Jesus put aside the glory and wealth of this world or will he sell his soul to the Devil? But because Jesus refuses to respond to the first test to show his divine powers, the Accuser then tries to test him with the second test to prove his super powers (which Satan considers worthy of a son of God and Jesus will be asked again to prove himself throughout—in chapter 13 to the people of Nazareth and again in chapter 27 when on the cross). Jesus will point to his powers at times as proof of who he is (his message to John in chap. 12). Only after Jesus refuses to respond to this second test, too, does Satan refrain from testing him concerning Satan's understanding of what it means to be the son of God and instead tests his loyalty to God, and this test Jesus passes. He will not worship Satan. In the other cases, the reader knows Jesus could do them but he will not negotiate with Satan—to give in to the Devil for one thing, even if reasonable is to open the door for other things. But this final test does not prove that Jesus is worthy to bear the title "Son of God," at least in so far as this title means that he shares in God's glory. It does prove beyond doubt that he is "righteously loyal."

<sup>3</sup> The model of battling is a constant theme in the hagiography of the lives of the Christian saints.

<sup>4</sup> Shimon bar Yohai, desiring wisdom, sat fasting for forty days (*Midrash Mishlei* [ed. Buber] 1:1), emulating Moses and Elijah, both of whom fasted for forty days.

<sup>5</sup> For interesting stories about God sharing his keys with Elijah see *b. Sanh.* 113a.

<sup>6</sup> See above Matt 3:17.

to their adversaries—Moses and Aaron to Pharaoh (Exod 7:10) and Elijah to the priests of Baal (1 Kings 18:1–4).<sup>7</sup> And Elijah at the end of time will have to prove himself by resurrecting the dead or by doing other supernatural feats.

After Jesus refuses to turn the stones into bread, the Satan then proposes that he throw himself down from the highest point of the Temple in order to confirm what Satan understands is said about him in Ps 91:11–12: that were he to do this he would be caught by holy angels and lifted up before he struck the ground. Most commentaries speculate, and some even discuss aggadic traditions, concerning why Satan removes Jesus to the pinnacle of the Temple before proposing this test. To my mind, the pinnacle of the Temple was the obvious place to bring Jesus for this test since it was believed that it was here that God's holiest angels congregated. The biblical tradition tells us that in a dream Jacob saw angels ascending and descending on a kind of stairway or ladder (Gen 28:12). In commenting on this text the Rabbis claimed that Jacob dreamt this at the very place where the Temple was eventually built (*Gen. Rab.* 69:7).<sup>8</sup> Given this fact, what better place for a son of God, falling toward the earth, to be caught by angels than at the place where the angels gathered?

The synoptic tradition includes the temptation scene so that a change of status can be conferred on Jesus from simple teacher to “son of God.” Jesus’ credentials have been established for the reader through the infancy narrative and the baptismal scene, at which the Spirit of God descended upon him, and the voice from the heavens declared him to be God’s Son. But whether anyone else knew of these credentials of the adult Jesus is an open question. It is probable that no one, not even John, took the dove that descended upon Jesus for the Holy Spirit. It is also not certain if John even heard the voice from the heavens proclaiming that Jesus was God’s Son. The text gives no indication of this. Apparently, the divine voice designating Jesus as “My Son” was heard in the heavens and God wanted to have Satan confirm the title. For a hero, the confirmation would be by passing tests of power. Instead Jesus passes the tests by refusing to negotiate with the Devil—he will never let the Devil have any control of what he will do or will not do. At any rate at 4:11 the entire initiation scene concludes as Satan is sent away.

As “the one who is to come after” John, Jesus is now set to begin his career as an itinerant preacher and healer, that is, his role as savior of Israel, as the name given to him by the angel before he was born presaged. Even though he will ultimately fail as Israel’s savior, nonetheless he does succeed as savior of the Gentiles, although this was not his assigned task.

<sup>7</sup> *Midrash Zuta* to Song of Songs [ed. Buber], 7:14.

<sup>8</sup> Also the imagery found in Isa 6:1–4 of angels around or above the Temple.

At the point in Matthew when the reader is told that John has been arrested (4:12), a new literary unit begins that encompasses the main narrative. As required by the plot, John must be removed so that Jesus can take center stage. Until his arrest, it was John who was the main character in Matthew's rendering of Israel's salvational drama. It is interesting to note that the Gospels tell us that Jesus only hears of John's arrest through third parties—an indication, perhaps, that he was not one of his constant followers. The synoptic account of John's arrest is found in Mark 6:17–29 and Matt 14:3–12. I quote here from Matthew:

For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him.

According to the Gospel, John was arrested and subsequently executed because he was not afraid to point out to Herod Antipas that his union with his sister-in-law Herodias was illegal according to Torah law, since Herod's brother Philip, to whom she had been formerly married, was alive and well and had a daughter.<sup>9</sup> While Herodias' divorce from Philip might have been lawful, her union with her brother-in-law was a grave sin.<sup>10</sup> So Antipas had John killed. Josephus' account is quite different. In a text from his *Jewish Antiquities*, Josephus' sequence of events has it that Herod ordered John executed before (not after as in the Gospels) his marriage to Herodias because he feared that John's religious doctrines were a challenge to his own authority (*Ant.* 18:118–19). He thought John might try to lead a popular rebellion against him.<sup>11</sup> Whatever the case, the sources agree that John was arrested and executed by Herod.

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<sup>9</sup> If a brother dies without any children, then his wife is to marry a surviving brother through a ceremony of levirate marriage (Deut 25:5–10).

<sup>10</sup> See further chap. 14.

<sup>11</sup> *Ant.* 18:118–19 suggests he was killed for fear of rebellion. "Now when [many] others came in crowds about him, for they were very greatly moved [or pleased] by hearing his words, Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion (for they seemed ready to do anything he should advise) thought it best, by putting him to death, to prevent any mischief he might cause, and not bring himself into difficulties, by sparing a man who might make him repent of it when it would be too late. Accordingly he was sent a prisoner, out of Herod's suspicious temper, to Macherus, the castle I before mentioned, and was there put to death." (trans. from Whiston edition (1852)).

The removal of John from the scene clears the way for Jesus to step into his shoes and preach his message. Jesus can now gather disciples and begin his own mission. Matthew points out that Jesus attracted large crowds, as John had done, but there is no indication in the synoptic gospels that he ever used baptism as a mechanism for salvation.

### Commentary

*Then Jesus was brought to the desert by the Spirit to be tested by the Accuser.*  
(v. 1)

The implication is that God has arranged for Jesus to be tested by the Satan so that the strength of his faith can be measured. This testing of Jesus is also in line with Turner's model concerning the initiation rites of social groups and especially in proving the worth of the hero.<sup>12</sup> Typically Jewish tradition has

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<sup>12</sup> The following excerpt from Stephan V. Beyer's study, "Myths and Symbols on the Quest for Vision" (2002) is relevant here:

"Probably the central informing myth of the wilderness vision quest is that it is a rite of passage, as classically defined by Arnold Van Gennep [*The Rites of Passage*, trans. M. Vizedom and G. Caffee (1908; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960)]. According to Van Gennep, the function of the rite is to effect the passage from one life stage or social status to another—at birth, puberty, initiation, marriage, old age, and death. Such rituals are performed at special times or places, away from the centers of community life, at night, in the wilderness, naked or in special clothing, in order to remove the participants from normal or profane space and time. They interpose a sacred interval in the flux of profane experience, in order to facilitate the transition from one condition to a totally different one [G. Kirk, *The Nature of the Greek Myths* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1974), 89]. . . . Most influential on the contemporary wilderness vision quest was Van Gennep's subdivision of all the rites of passage into three stages—*separation*, *transition*, and *incorporation* (1908/1960, p. 11). The stage of transition is often called the *liminal* or *threshold* stage; this is the stage of 'betweenness,' when the participant is at neither one stage nor the other, in neither one condition nor the other. The liminal stage is a sacred state—as anthropologist Victor Turner puts it, 'one of ambiguity and paradox, a confusion of all the customary categories' [V. Turner, 'Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage,' in *Betwixt and Between: Patterns of Masculine and Feminine Initiation*, ed. L. Mahdi, L. S. Foster, and M. Little (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1987), 7]—and thus is filled with power and the potential for power. . . . Thus, the myth of the rite of passage has two functions. First, it provides a structure for the quest process, dividing it into stages, and allowing the apportionment of tasks and rituals appropriate to each phase. Second, it

seen that once God has chosen someone to be his representative, that someone is then tested by an agent of God. For instance, a tradition in *b. Šabb.* 89b states that while Moses was up on Mt. Sinai receiving the law, Satan came to test God's people Israel by trying to convince them that Moses' prolonged absence was a result of his having died on the mountain. In the end the Israelites believed Satan, after which they turned to Aaron and proposed that he create a god for them—the golden calf. In other words, the Israelites failed the test.<sup>13</sup>

Abraham's being called upon to sacrifice his son Isaac (*Genesis 22*) can also be seen to have been for the sake of measuring the faith both of Abraham and Isaac, and here again Jewish tradition sees that Satan appeared to them both in an effort to prevent the sacrifice from being carried out; that is, to prevent the true faith of Abraham and Isaac from being revealed. The tradition states that

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empowers the quester to seek change, to expect a transition, to accept transformation in the wilderness... The quest of the hero is claimed to be the central myth of narrative literature; so basic is the quest pattern to narrative that Joseph Campbell labels it with the Joycean term *monomyth* [J. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949; Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1968), 30; J. Joyce, *Finnegan's Wake* (1939; New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 58]. Here, in Campbell's words, is the monomyth, the myth of the hero's quest.... A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man (1949/1968, 30). As Campbell points out, the mythological adventure of the hero is in fact a magnification of the formula represented in the rite of passage, which Campbell gives as *separation—initiation—return*, and which he calls 'the nuclear unit of the monomyth' (1949/1968, p. 30).... Another potent myth for the quester is that the vision quest is not simply a rite of passage, or a heroic quest, but something more specific—an *initiation*. Initiation ceremonies are universal among indigenous cultures. It is difficult to draw a bright line between rites of passage and initiations, but perhaps we can best capture the difference by saying that indigenous initiations typically involve some sort of test or ordeal—fasting, darkness, fearful seclusion, endurance of pain, and often scarring or other changes to the body.... Fasting is a traditional means of self-empowerment and a means of attaining clarity [S. Foster and M. Little, 'The Vision Quest: Passing from Childhood to Adulthood,' in *Betwixt and Between*, ed. Mahdi, Foster, and Little, 97]. To deliberately abstain from food is to mark the liminal state, the state of paradox and openness, and to negate one's prior human and social existence. Without meals to organize the day, having only constantly recurring circadian rhythms, time quickly becomes timelessness; linear time—that is, history—becomes circular time, the time of beginnings. Thus fasting is a particularly potent way to mark a new transition, a willingness to change."

<sup>13</sup> This story also appears in *Exod. Rab.* 43:1 and in *Tanh. Exod.* [ed. Buber], *Ki Tissa* 9:13. According to these texts, Moses confronts Satan and casts him aside.

both Abraham and Isaac were able to resist Satan. Concerning the appearance of Satan before Isaac, a text from *Yalkut Talmud Torah* (ed. Mann), Genesis, section 107, reads:

[From *Midrash Yelamdenu*]: While Abraham and Isaac his son were going to the sacrifice (Isaac not knowing he was to be offered), Satan came and stood to the right of Isaac. He said to him, ill-fated man, son of an ill-fated woman—think of all the fasts your mother endured so you could be born. Now your old man has lost his mind and is going to slaughter you.... Isaac shuddered since he saw no sacrificial ram and intuited what was about to befall him. His father in response told him: God has “chosen” you. Isaac said—since he has “chosen” me, my soul is His. Still, I worry for my mother “and they walked on together” (Gen 22:7)—one to slaughter and the other to be slaughtered. And Isaac was thirty-seven years old at the time.

Concerning the appearance of Satan before Abraham, several texts—Gen 22:2 and 22:4—from *Midrash Aggadah* (ed. Buber), read as follows:

Gen 22:2: While they were walking Satan came to Abraham. He said to him, “Have you lost your mind? The son God bestowed upon you at 100 years of age—can you go to slaughter him? It was really me who fooled you and [speaking like God] told you, ‘take your son, your only one...’ (Gen 22:2).” “I swear it was God who told me.” When Satan saw Abraham was disregarding him he immediately approached Isaac... when he saw he had no effect on Isaac he went to Sarah... when she heard she cried out first and wept and her soul left her from so much agony.

“On the third day” (Gen 22:4)—why did it take three days when the place was so near? But we learn that Satan came and turned himself into a river to block Abraham. Abraham said: I will go into the river to test its depths and he almost drowned. He prayed that [God] should save him from the water so he would not drown in it. God rebuked Satan (for abusing his power) and Abraham was suddenly once again on solid ground.

*M. Abot* 5:5 relates that Abraham was tried with ten trials and passed them all.

*After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. (v. 2)*

Chapter 3 ended with Jesus being proclaimed the son of God. Then in 4:1 Jesus is removed by the Spirit far into the wilderness where he is tested by the Satan.

Before he is tested he fasts for forty days. It would seem that this liminal period is needed to confer a change of status on Jesus, confirming his status as “son of God,” so that he can properly embark on his career as “the one who is to come after” John.

Both Deut 9:9 and Exod 24:18 tell of how Moses fasted for forty days while he received the Torah. This biblical account of Moses’ fasting while receiving the Law provides the model in the Jewish tradition for one receiving divine revelation. Consider the story of Elijah and how he fasted forty days at Horeb, during which time the Lord revealed himself to him (1 Kings 19:8ff.), and also the story of Shimon bar Yoḥai, preserved in *Midrash Proverbs* (ed. Buber) 1:1, who prayed for wisdom and fasted for forty days in order to receive it.

It may also be the case that behind the report of Jesus’ fast stands Isa 42:1b (which also stood behind Matt 3:16–17, as we noted above). The Targum to Isa 42:1b reads, “I set my Holy Spirit upon him, he shall reveal laws to the nations.” Along with several others, this text from Isaiah appears in *Midrash Shohar Tov* to Ps 43:3. As we have seen above (end of chapter 3),<sup>14</sup> this midrash talking about God’s sending light and truth messianically interprets all the verses it cites. In the midrash, Moses, Elijah, and “[God’s] Servant” are all said to be the redeemers of Israel. In sharing divine powers all three fit the category of Matthew’s “son of God”: one who shares in the divine.

In Jewish tradition, the model of the lawgiver who fasts for forty days is Moses, and it is no surprise that Matthew describes Jesus as having fasted for this length of time. Matthew understood, as did the storyteller in *Midrash Proverbs* 1:1, that a forty-day fast was requisite for one who is to receive divine wisdom. Matthew also knew the Isaiah 42:1b tradition, which concerns the Messiah’s role as revealer of the law to the nations, and he combined that tradition with the tradition of the fasting of the lawgiver. The point of beginning this chapter with Jesus’ fast is to allow the narrator to begin his account of the first test, acquiring bread.

*The Tester came and said to him, “If you are the son of God, speak, so that these very stones may become bread.” (v. 3)*

The Satan begins by testing Jesus’ faith in his own calling: does he share divine power or not? Stones are inert; only someone in possession of divine power

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<sup>14</sup> While only the very first few words of Isa 42:1a appear in the midrash—“Behold My Servant, whom I uphold”—it is midrashic and scribal method to indicate with these few words that the entire verse, and perhaps more, is meant.

could turn them into bread. Presumably it is because Jesus has been fasting for forty days that Satan devises this test; the bread would remove Jesus' hunger, the forty days are over, he has the power, why shouldn't he use it? Nevertheless, Jesus refuses. Precisely because the prompting comes from Satan, Jesus recognizes this seemingly reasonable suggestion for what it is: a test. He refuses to use his divine power because to do so would be to give in, even a bit, to what Satan suggests.

*He answered, “It is written, ‘A person shall not live by bread alone but by every word which comes out of the mouth of God’”* (Deut 8:3).<sup>15</sup> (v. 4)

Jesus rebuffs Satan's initial challenge, which after all would not have involved any act of rebellion. He will later provide food miraculously for large crowds. It is difficult to understand Jesus' response here, since God has not said anything to him about not performing miracles for his own welfare. It seems that for Jesus what is wrong with Satan's request is that it is “Satan's request.” Since it is Satan's job to tempt God's chosen in order to prove their worthiness as chosen ones, one has to be careful, as Jesus is here, not to be led astray.<sup>16</sup>

Jesus' use of the text from Deuteronomy in his response to Satan is a poetic way of telling Satan to “get lost,” the sentiment he will express at the end. That is, whatever the verse Jesus cites might otherwise mean, in the context of the discussion with Satan it means, “We are not going to go there.”

*Then the Accuser took him to the holy city and stood him upon the summit of the Temple.* (v. 5)

The Temple is the place in which God's glory is found (Ezek 43:5) and, as I have pointed out, the summit of the Temple is the place where God's angels congregate.

<sup>15</sup> LXX Deut 8:3: “A person does not live by bread alone, but by every word which comes through the mouth of God will a person live.”

<sup>16</sup> *B. Abod. Zar.* 16b–17 and *t. Hul.* 2:24 make the same point, but in lieu of any temptation put forward by Satan, the temptation is found to be in the attractive insights of Jesus. However these must not be listened to by Jews, since they can lead them away from the will of God. The text ends with citations from Scripture which speak of the necessity of keeping one's distance from heretics.

*He said to him, “If you are the son of God, throw yourself down. For it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, and they will bear you up on their hands, lest you strike your foot against a stone’” (Ps 91:11–12).<sup>17</sup> (v. 6)*

As before, Satan's request seems a reasonable test of the divine powers of the initiate—which is what initiation tests in the wilderness are supposed to do. Is the son of God to doubt what has been written by David? (In the Septuagint the text is from Psalm 90, and the heading says that it was composed by David.)

*Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘You shall not test the Lord your God’” (Deut 6:16).<sup>18</sup> (v. 7)*

While the citation from Deut 6:16 appears to be an appropriate counter to the Accuser's request, it is really another polite but dismissive way of saying, “Get lost!” The verse is not really applicable to the circumstances at hand. The complete text from Deuteronomy reads, “You shall not test the Lord your God as you tested Him at Massa.” The reference here is to the incident in the wilderness at Rephidim when the Israelites complained to Moses about God's seeming lack of concern for them and their well-being. The Israelites at Rephidim did not test God by challenging Him to do something extraordinary, but rather by testing his patience.

*Again, the Accuser took him to an exceptionally high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. (v. 8)*

This is not a test of sonship. It is a test of faith.

*And said to him, “I shall give you all these things, if you fall down and worship me.” Then Jesus said to him, “Go away, Satan. For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve him alone.’”<sup>19</sup> (vv. 9–10)*

Jesus declares that it is forbidden to worship anything or anyone other than God.<sup>20</sup> It seems clear that the inclusion of this text from Deuteronomy is a

<sup>17</sup> LXX Ps 90:11–12: “For He commands his angels concerning you, to guard you in all your ways, and they will bear you up on their hands, lest you strike your foot against a stone.”

<sup>18</sup> LXX Deut 6:16: “You will not test the Lord your God.”

<sup>19</sup> LXX Deut 6:13: “You shall be made to fear the Lord your God, and serve him.”

<sup>20</sup> It may be possible to read into Jesus' response to this third test a rebuke to early Christians who worshipped Jesus. If this were true, it would indicate that at least in Matthew's church it was held that neither angels nor Jesus were to be worshipped. However, I find

valid response. This is where Satan was going all along and now he is sent away, so to speak, with his tail between his legs.

*Then the Accuser left him, and look, angels came and waited on him. (v. 11)*

The angels now bring Jesus sustenance so that he can break his fast, since he would not, as Satan encouraged him to do, produce bread for himself. It is with this act that Jesus is indeed confirmed as the son of God.

*Having heard that John had been handed over, he departed for Galilee. (v. 12)*

With this verse a new unit begins. John is no longer in the picture and Jesus now departs for the place in which he will carry out his ministry. He is concerned to fulfill the Scripture (Isa 8:23–9:1) literally and moreover, this is his hometown area.

*And leaving Nazareth, he settled in Kfar Nahum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, in order to fulfill what was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, “Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the sea road, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles. The people which sits in darkness saw a great light, and light has dawned for those who sit in the region and shadow of death” (Isa 8:23–9:1).<sup>21</sup> (vv. 13–16)*

Capernaum (in Hebrew, *Kfar Nahum*) is mentioned in *Midrash Proverbs* 13:22 which compares the inheritance of the good person with that of the sinful person. The midrash identifies the good with certain Rabbis and the sinful with certain Christians. The inhabitants (or more likely, an inhabitant) of Kfar Nahum are identified as being among these sinners (*Eccl. Rab.* 7:3).

Isaiah 9:1–6 has long been seen as a messianic text in Christian circles—“unto us a child is born” (9:5)—in which a successor worthy to sit on David’s throne is promised. The text from this chapter of Isaiah quoted here speaks of those living in a kind of spiritual death who will welcome the great light as it rises first for them. This verse resonates well with the “light” and the “truth” of

here no reason to infer any such polemical intent. It may even be that Matthew did worship Jesus.

<sup>21</sup> LXX Isa 8:23–9:1: “Country of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, the sea road, and the rest of those dwelling along the coast and across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles, heritage of the Judeans. The people who go in darkness see a great light. You who dwell in the region and shadow of death, light will shine upon you.”

Ps 43:3, which in the midrash signifies “Elijah” and “Moses” respectively, the redeemers of Israel (*Midrash Shohar Tov* to Ps 43:3).

*From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has drawn near.”* (v. 17)

This is the same message preached by John the Baptist (Matt 3:2). Jesus picks up where John left off, a clear indication that he is the one whom John said was to come after him (Matt 3:11). There is very little in Matthew’s Gospel to suggest that repentance was central to Jesus’ mission. Nevertheless, the simplicity and directness of his message may well mark it as an authentic tradition about Jesus believed by early Christians, even if it is not from Jesus himself.

While repentance and the messianic kingdom are not always associated in Jewish texts, the Talmud records the following discussion between Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi and Elijah concerning when the Messiah would come. The former asked the Messiah and he said he was coming “today”. Elijah explained what this meant (*b. Sanh.* 98a):

Rabbi Yehoshua said, “He lied to me. He said, ‘Today I will come.’ But he has not come.” Elijah said, No he meant “Today—(indicating the whole verse) if only you will listen to His voice” (Psalm 95:7).

To appreciate the story it is essential to understand that biblical verses were not numbered in those days as they are now. Verses were indicated by their lead words.

*Walking by the Sea of Galilee he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and Andrew his brother, casting nets into the sea, for they were fishermen. He said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of human beings.”* (vv. 18–19)

“Simon called Peter” is a way of saying that Peter was most often referred to by his Greek name, rather than by his Hebrew name, Simon. In Matt 8:22 Jesus also says to a potential follower, as he does here, “Follow me!” These conversion scenes share a degree of *double entendre*—1) fishermen = fisher of men; 2) follow me = do not follow the funeral procession.

*Immediately leaving behind their nets, they followed him. Going on from there he saw another pair of brothers, Jacob the son of Zebediah and John his brother in the boat with Zebediah their father, mending their nets, and*

*he called them. Immediately leaving their boat and their father behind, they followed him. (vv. 20–22)*

In verses 18–20, we are told that the brothers Peter and Andrew abandoned their livelihood as fishermen to become disciples of Jesus.<sup>22</sup> But in verses 21–22 we are shown something more troubling: Jacob and John not only forsake their trade but also their father, in order to become disciples of Jesus.<sup>23</sup> In minor tractate *Abot of Rabbi Nathan* (version A, 6:13), there is a story about Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanos who, against the wishes of his father, left his home to study Torah with Yohanan ben Zakkai. Rabbi Eliezer's father was wealthy, and so, unlike in the Gospel story, economics there would not have been an issue.

Jesus' lack of concern for the integrity of the family is almost shocking. It is difficult to understand how Jesus can ask poor fishermen to desert their families, who depend on them. The economic consequences would have been severe. But the Gospel stories show us a Jesus who is intent on having disciples to spread his teachings whatever the human cost.

*He went around the whole Galilee teaching in their assemblies and proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom and healing every illness and every sickness among the people. (v. 23)*

Jesus is now an itinerant preacher and wonderworker, doing the work of the “anointed one.” Isaiah 6:1 explains what the work of the “anointed one” is to be: “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord has *anointed me* to preach *good news to the meek*.” Jesus probably began his sermons with this verse. (In the commentary to Chapter 5 we shall see how Jesus worked this text into the introductory poem of his Sermon on the Mount). Jesus’ work takes him into the schools and synagogues of the towns he visits, teaching Torah. There is nothing remarkable about this, although we do not know how he became a teacher.

From time immemorial it has been common for Jewish teachers to end their sermons on a note assuring the audience of final consolation and redemption.

<sup>22</sup> “Raise up many disciples” was the advice of early teachers (*m. Abot* 1:1).

<sup>23</sup> This is in contrast to Elijah and Elisha in 1 Kings 19:20–21:

“Elisha left the oxen, ran after Elijah, and said, ‘Please, let me kiss my father and mother good-bye, and I will follow you.’ ‘Go back!’ Elijah answered. ‘Have I done anything to you?’ Elisha left him and, taking the yoke of oxen, slaughtered them; he used the plowing equipment for fuel to boil their flesh, and gave it to his people to eat. Then he left and followed Elijah as his attendant.”

*Midrash Psalms* (ed. Buber), Ps 4:12, points out that all the biblical prophets begin with words of condemnation but end with words of comfort. *Midrash Aggadah* (ed. Buber) Gen 30:11 informs us that at the end-time it will be Elijah who will announce the “good news” to Israel. One might expect Jesus’ preaching to be consistent with the view that the harbinger of the Messianic Era will bring the message of “good news.” But we note that both John before him and Jesus in his sermon in chapters 5 through 7 issue stern warnings (even concluding the entirety of the sermon on such a note) of judgment and even in chapter 8 mentions gnashing of teeth and punishment.

*The report about him went out to the whole of Syria, and they brought him everyone who was ill, with various diseases and pains, those who were tormented by demonic possession, and those who were moonstruck and paralyzed, and he cured them.<sup>24</sup>* (v. 24)

Josephus states that there were a large number of Jews in Syria (*War* 2.461–68); he also speaks of being witness to the exorcism of a demon (*Ant.* 8.42–49).<sup>25</sup> Faith healers are always popular. In *b. Ber.* 34b a number of stories are told of Hanina ben Dosa effecting miracles through prayer.

*Great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Ten Cities, Jerusalem, Judea, and from across the Jordan.* (v. 25)

The Ten Cities, or Decapolis, refers to a group of ten cities that were mostly located east of the Jordan and south of the Sea of Galilee (though Damascus, well to the north of the Sea, was one of the ten), and which shared the same predominantly Hellenistic culture. The cities belonged to the province of Syria. In these cities people enjoyed a high degree of personal rights but in them the Jews would not have received the formal Jewish education given in the schools and synagogues of Jewish Palestine. The Talmud knows these cities by the designation “Land of the Gentiles” (*b. Git.* 7b).

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<sup>24</sup> Christian faith healers in the manner of Jesus were attractive to Jews. *T. Hul.* 2:22 mentions a certain Yaakov (c. 140) who healed by calling on the name of Jesus ben Pantera, a reference to Jesus the Christ. The Rabbis prohibited Jews from availing themselves of the services of such healers.

<sup>25</sup> Dennis C. Duling, “The Eleazar Miracle and Solomon’s Magical Wisdom in Flavius Josephus’s *Antiquities Judaicae* 8:42–49” (1985).

# Chapter 5

## Introduction

Chapters 5 through 8 interweave Jesus' teachings into the moral fiber of the *hasid*—the pious and humble servant of God. His tri-chapter Sermon presents a list of exhortations in a form resembling that of a manifesto. Along with these teachings, Jesus urges his disciples to keep their spirits up while remaining both humble and willing to accept whatever persecutions to which they may be subjected. Jesus assures his disciples that those who suffer persecution either for his sake or for the sake of righteousness shall share in the ultimate reward: the Kingdom of Heaven. I do not read these three chapters as a message directed at Matthew's own church. Rather, Jesus' words, making no personal claim, are aimed at strengthening his disciples and the Jewish people of his time. Much later in the Gospel the Kingdom of Heaven will be promised to a different group, the nations of the world who are the enemies of Israel (24:24, 28:19).

Jesus uses the Galilean preacher's style to teach to his disciples. As attendants of the elders, Scribes were not authorized to promulgate decrees, but could only give exhortations of faith and elucidate Scriptures. In this chapter Jesus will go beyond the boundary that defined the authority of Scribes in the manner in which he teaches, but not in the content of his teaching. That is, while Jesus does not say anything in this chapter that would contravene any of the laws of the Sages and Pharisees, nonetheless in six places in it (5:21–42) he teaches in the form of a teacher of the Law, without citing prior teachers. Scribes had no authority on their own to offer opinions on the Law.<sup>1</sup> Yet there is no scriptural exegesis in Jesus' sermon beyond what was the common understanding of the verses. His teaching on divorce and oaths will require some attention, as here it is not clear at all what he wants to do. Jesus' use of exaggeration is not surprising. What may be surprising are some cases where it seems he wants to be taken literally.

The Sermon opens with a hymn of consolation and praise for the humble and the afflicted. Tightly structured, the hymn seems repetitive (there are eight beatitudes in it),<sup>2</sup> but it is not boring as each phrase is developed from a

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<sup>1</sup> Here "scribes" refers to aides of court elders who knew and transmitted oral traditions but did not innovate.

<sup>2</sup> In his collection *Ha-Esh Ve-Ha-Etzim* ("The Fire and the Wood"), S. Y. Agnon has devoted his first story, "According to the Suffering is the Reward," to this theme. A *paytan* (modeled after the Gaonic descriptions given of Yehudai Gaon, ca. 800 and the *Neila* prayer of the Ba'al

biblical verse that has the word *anav* (meek). It is written in a proto-*piyyut* style (a kind of liturgical poetry that blends Scripture, Midrash, and the poet's values).<sup>3</sup> The hymn locates scriptural constellations concerning the phrases alluding to "next world" and "face of God," together with "humble" and "afflicted" (in Heb. *anav* and *ani*). In it there are allusions to biblical texts but none of these are directly cited.<sup>4</sup>

The ninth and final beatitude (5:11) begins a new unit. The *piyyut* style is abandoned and instead Jesus begins to address his hearers directly. Be worthy examples and shining lights, he says to them (5:13–16). Thereafter Jesus speaks of the importance of keeping every law, however minor (5:17–20); for as he says, he has not come to abolish the law but rather to see to it that its every part is fulfilled, is practiced.

Many have thought that once Jesus has declared that he has not come to abolish the law but rather to fulfill its every part, he then refers to six age-old laws of the Jews and states what, according to him, it really means to fulfill them. For him a desultory compliance of the law is not enough.<sup>5</sup> I do not agree. The Sermon uses these verses to introduce sermonic exhortations on related matters but does not imply literal compliance is anything less than mandatory. The word *murder* introduces a sermon on anger, adultery a sermon on lust. The material of these sermons is standard fare for Jewish teaching.

For the preacher, divine laws are designed to transform human behavior. Sermons tease old messages out of scriptural passages in new ways. The

Shem Tov) writes such poetry until one day he meets an afflicted soul, a suffering servant figure. At the end the *paytan* learns in a revelation that the poet whose art is the expression of a meek life which is immersed in human suffering makes a mark in heaven. So much for Agnon's story. Jesus' sermon begins with a series of beatitudes celebrating the purity of the meek. Among the varying usages of "blessed" in it we find phrases structured as "Blessed are those [collective noun] who *are* X," and "Blessed are those who *do* X." In order to affirm his connection with his listeners, Jesus concludes with the blessing—"Blessed are those who are persecuted," "Blessed are you, the persecuted." This blessing sums up Jesus' liturgical "Ode to the Harassed."

3 Mirsky, *Yesodot Tzurot Hapiyyut* (1985); also, by the same author, "From Midrash to Piyut to Jewish Poetry" (1967–68).

4 Scholars have studied these beatitude forms in Qumran Scrolls and other literature of the Second Temple period. While the form and genre are fixed, the meaning of any piece is open to the listener or reader to infer. See Benedict Viviano, "Beatitudes Found Among Dead Sea Scrolls" (1992); John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew* (1994), 323; Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and Christian Origins* (2000), 116–18; and perhaps most important, Émile Puech, *Qumrân Grotte 4*, xviii (1998).

5 See E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (1993), 210–12.

messages are based on a desire to transform one's character and ultimately the society in which one lives. That was the job of the preacher. As in the works of Philo, Josephus, Ben Sirah, and many others, the Jews are not only to refrain from bad behavior; they are also to refrain from any social activity and/or emotional involvement that might in some way lead one toward bad behavior. That is the goal of the rabbinic laws of Mishnah and Talmud. Some commentators like Neusner (see further comments to v.20) suggest that in laying out these moral laws in this way, what Jesus is doing here in form is very roughly akin to what the Rabbis called "making a fence around the Torah" (*m. 'Abot* 1.1).<sup>6</sup> To "make a fence around the Torah" is to extend the law beyond what the Law minimally requires one to do. The Rabbis extended the reach of certain laws in order to prescribe or else to prohibit matters which, if not prescribed or prohibited, might lead to the transgression of the laws around which the fence was built. They argue that Jesus appears to be adding fences. It is true that Matt 23:23 tells us that the Scribes and Pharisees added tithes on mint and other spices that are never eaten alone; by doing this they erected a fence, so to speak, around the ritual law concerning the tithing of staple vegetables. That is, if such things as mint and dill are tithed, then obviously the staple vegetables, as the law enjoins, are to be tithed too. Yet, as Jesus points out, the Pharisees would not lift a finger to safeguard the moral law: "Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, stage-actors! You tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and you leave aside the more serious things of the Torah, *judgment, mercy and faith*." Yet we must be wary of reading the later portrayals of Jesus complaining about fences into the pastoral sermonic setting and seeing him doing the very thing he rails against in chapter 23. I will set forth my own idea of what we have here in my comments to v. 20 below.

To say that rabbinic authority was somewhat lenient in demanding higher standards of conscience is to make a valid critique. The Rabbis did not often legislate on matters that were thought to be unenforceable. However they did at least encourage people concerning right behavior in these unenforceable matters. So for instance, while prurient behavior was understood by all to be prohibited, there were few legal safeguards against it. There were rules for keeping males and females from being alone together—but little beyond that was practical. However, a passage in *'Abot of Rabbi Nathan* (version A, chap. 2) shows the extent to which this matter was of concern. In the text the biblical verse, the foundation upon which the fence was built, is interpreted in a most

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6 His encouragement to go beyond the outward manifestations of religious observance and reach through to the inner core will continue in Chapter 6.

creative way (the careful manipulation of a scriptural text to make a point was considered an art).

"Keep your way far from her" (Prov 5:8): ["Her"] refers to a prostitute. A person tells you, "Do not go near a certain market or do not go in a certain lane-way because there is a certain prostitute of dazzling beauty who frequents these places." Do not then think to yourself, "That warning is of little concern to me. I know my will power will withstand the temptations. Even if I do happen to meet her in these places, I trust in myself that nothing will happen." Even so, do not go there for perhaps you will stumble.

A rabbinic text from *Midrash Tannaim* (ed. Hoffman), Deut 22:4, shows similar intent. The matter here is mercy toward an injured animal, and again the Rabbis do not legislate. However they do make known that, in this case, it is their preference to show mercy, even if doing this is not strictly required by law. It does apply to the scrupulous and this is the point I believe Jesus wishes to make. The text reads:

*You shall not [stand by] and watch the donkey of your brother or his ox [suffer].* This is a negative commandment. How do I know it is also a positive commandment?—Scripture says, "When you see the donkey of your enemy or ox going astray, etc." (Exod 23:5).

*And Scripture says "And can you [can] ignore it..."* [Indecisive syntax.] For some, this is meant to be read as an exclamatory question. Can you ignore the suffering? [Surely not!]. But for others it is meant to be read as a declaration. You can ignore it. [Surely so!].... This latter reading applies to an elderly and dignified sage. [For it would be considered dishonorable for such a one to be seen to be coming to the aid of an animal]. Nevertheless, if he is a *ḥasid* he will always do more than what is permitted, or less than what is proscribed, by the minimalist reading of the law. And this is the preferred way for all.

A text in *b. B. Meši'a* 30b comments on supererogatory mechanisms and suggests that the Hebrew Scriptures have already advised that they are normative. In this text Exod 18:20 is read so that no part of it is seen to be free of meaning.

*And thou shalt teach them the statutes and the laws, and shalt show them the way wherein they must walk, and the work that should be done.* (Exod 18:20).

Rabbi Yosef interpreted the verse ...

*"And the work,"* this word refers to the actual law,  
*"Which should be done"* means: "go beyond the minimum requirements of  
the law."

Having said all this, I do not find Jesus legislated fences or otherwise in the Sermon at all. The two exceptions are his teachings on divorce and oaths which I take as Matthean additions since they are absent in Luke. The teaching on divorce has been put into the sermon form here but it is taken from a later statement (chap. 19) where Jesus has already turned away from teaching and encouraging but instead argues and debates. But it is these demands upon the pious—that is to say, the meek—to accept a stricter code of behavior that animates the Sermon and the Beatitudes.

I had initially considered the possibility that Jesus' Sermon in Matthew might have anticipated and integrated what later Rabbis termed "duties of the heart." I do not think so now. In form it might seem to imply such duties but in essence it really does not demand much more than the plucking out eyes and cutting off hands, if need be, in order to avoid the lure of sin, hardly serious legislation. Rather, we have a series of mini-sermons introduced by the citation of some scriptural referent or allusion, which is then set aside with Jesus expanding rather than expounding. This is not exegesis at all. Jesus speaks with the tone and certainty of a religious authority who is promulgating law rather than merely teaching it. In the language of the Rabbis we could say he teaches *Midrash Aggadah* but he sounds as though he is teaching *Midrash Halakhah*.

What can historians of religion learn from the Sermon? There are very few fully preserved synagogue sermons, designated as such, in Jewish literature. Matthew has taken some sources and shaped them into the Sermon. In doing so, he shows us that much of what we find in Talmudic literature is closely related in style, structure and content to much earlier preaching. In general, the value of the Gospels as a resource for understanding the continuity of Jewish customs and word usage cannot be overemphasized. Time and again in his important work David Flusser makes this point. Flusser points out, for example, that the custom of the father naming a male child at the time of circumcision, about which we are told in Luke (1:59–64), is not attested in the Talmudic texts.<sup>7</sup> Nor is the practice mentioned by Luke of passing around the *Kiddush* cup of wine, from which those at the table are to drink, attested

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<sup>7</sup> See Basser, "Some Examples of the Use of the New Testament."

to in these texts, either.<sup>8</sup> Only because both of these customs are referred to in the Gospels can it be inferred that they date from the Second Temple period.

Aside from confirming that certain practices mentioned in late Jewish sources (and also certain types of exegesis)<sup>9</sup> were current in the days of the Second Temple period, the New Testament also shows us that certain phrases or words that appear in the late Jewish sources were also being used in this earlier period. For instance, in Acts 21:21 the phrase “the Jews who are *among the Gentiles*,” used by the author to refer to the Diaspora Jews whom Paul is said to be turning away from the Mosaic law, remains unattested in Jewish sources until its appearance in the Babylonian Talmud (e.g., *b. Šabb.* 88b–89a).<sup>10</sup> There Moses is said to have replied to the angels who wanted to possess the Torah:

Of what use is the Torah for you? I ask you moreover, what is written in it? “Thou shalt have no other gods . . .” Do you live *among the Gentiles* who worship idols?

And in *Exod. Rab.* (*Va'era*) 3:7 and *b. Ber.* 9b there is a parallel to the phrase found in Matt 6:34: “Each day has enough trouble of its own,” which reads: “There is sufficient trouble for its time frame alone” (i.e., “Each time frame has enough trouble of its own”).

Also, the word *Hosanna* is found in Matt 21:9, Mark 11:9, John 12:13, and in each case it means “praised be you.” The word is found with other meanings in *b. Sukkah* (a “palm branch” in 31a, 33b, 37a, 46b) and in a midrash (“the Great *Hoshanna*”—the name given to the last day of the Festival of Sukkot) (*Lev. Rab.* 37:2). Only in medieval *piyyutim* do we find that it means “praise to God.” In the current liturgy there is a pertinent alphabetical “*Hoshanna*.” *Midrash Psalms*, chap. 17:5, relates that after the destruction of the Temple a synagogue official stood in the center of the synagogue on a platform while

<sup>8</sup> See David Flusser, *Jewish Sources in Early Christianity* (1989), 10. In chapter 10 of the same work, Flusser demonstrates that some midrashim that surfaced in very late collections are attested to as early as New Testament times.

<sup>9</sup> Louis Ginzberg and Samuel Krauss have noted that midrashic themes appear in the works of the Church Fathers some 700 times. All of these appearances are attributed to Jewish informants and they all appear in the works of the fathers before they appeared in written Jewish texts. See Ginzberg's *Die Haggadah bei den Kirchenvätern und in der Apokryphischen Litteratur* (1969) and his notes to vols. 5 and 6 of *Legends of the Jews* (1948). Also see Kraus, “The Jews in the Works of the Church Fathers” VI (1894), 225–261; and *The Jews in the Works of the Church Fathers: Sources for Understanding the Aggadah* (2007).

<sup>10</sup> There are other places as well where the phrase “Jews among the Gentiles” occurs with this meaning, e.g., *b. Ber.* 59a.

the congregants encircled him. This practice continues to this very day. Praises called “Hoshanna” are now sung and the phrases of the poems are generally begun by the word *hoshanna*.

Finally, I need to say something about my methods in this work as a whole and in chapters 5, 6, and 7 in particular. I have read a large chunk of the various books and articles dealing with the interpretation of the Gospel of Matthew. Moreover colleagues who have looked at my work, and in particular Prof. Dale Allison who also sent me articles and unpublished papers, have wondered about my methods. I seem to use Jewish exegetical materials indiscriminately without care for date or provenance and reject the “blatantly” obvious suggestions offered by scholars that have been current for forty years or longer.

Any scholar faces the following question (since we do not have a tradition handed down from Bultmann from Matthew from Jesus from the Mount of Sermons). Is it better to a) *invent* an exegesis that nowhere exists by using texts that *might* have been available to Matthew’s sources, and to Jesus, from extant Jewish and Hellenistic writings; or alternatively, to b) find an exegesis that *does exist* but comes from any time and any place within the interpretive culture of Judaism? To my mind the latter presents, at the very least, a real possibility of what a Jewish interpreter in the first century might have thought, since someone did cite such a tradition at some point. It was not fabricated by a scholar with Matthew in mind. When the very language and images of Matthew’s story are so visible in these “later” statements that come from deep within the conservative culture of Rabbis who breathed the same civilization (to use Mordecai Kaplan’s apt term) as did Jesus and the early Christians, it seems to me to be the better option. However, there is latitude for speculation as well using Hebrew Bible where the genre of writing indicates one was meant to do that. This is the case in the Beatitudes that begin chapter 5. Hebrew poetic forms are riddles that require the listener or reader to scan Scripture for the language the poet uses and the traditions attached to those scriptures. Of course, all rules of thumb have their exceptions and I have used my own judgments on where to draw lines. The question of method and viable approaches were discussed 85 years ago by Strack and Billerbeck in their “After-Word to the Sermon on the Mount” (*Evangelium nach Mattaus*, 470–74). Around the same time Joseph Klausner noted, “So extraordinary is the similarity that it might almost seem as though the Gospels were composed simply and solely out of matter contained in the *Talmud* and *Midrash*.<sup>11</sup> If modern scholars need convincing and the battle is to be uphill, what better place to begin than with the “Sermon on the mountain”?

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<sup>11</sup> Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth* (1964), 388–89.

## Commentary

*Seeing the crowds, he went up to the mountain, and when he was seated, his students came to him. (v. 1)*

When teachers taught before large crowds they taught outdoors, either on mountaintops or in fields. The teachers sat and those whom they taught also sat. A text from *b. Šabb.* 127a tells us of teachers having whole fields of grain cleared so that space could be made to accommodate audiences too large to be indoors. A text from *'Abot of Rabbi Nathan* (version A, chap. 38) tells us that Rabbi Shimon ben Gamaliel sat when he taught on the Temple Mount, and that those whom he taught also sat. A teacher's students apparently sat at his feet in those days.<sup>12</sup>

But Matthew tells us something more here. Apparently people had heard that Jesus was going to speak, but when they gathered at the building where he was to speak it proved to be too small, and so, realizing this, Jesus went up the hill to speak. As teachers did not sit on the ground when they taught, a seat would have been prepared for him.

*He opened his mouth and taught them (v. 2)*

It may be that in antiquity sermons began with some kind of poem or midrash fashioned from the Book of Psalms or the Book of Proverbs.<sup>13</sup> As documents recently discovered in the Cairo Geniza show, the Targum reciter began with a poem and our midrashim often begin with a citation from Psalms or Proverbs. Let us consider what the phrases "opened and taught" and "opened the mouth," as well as the word "open" by itself, might mean.

In *'Abot of Rabbi Nathan* (version A, addition to chap. 3), the story is told of a man whose death by drowning Rabbi Akiva was sure he had witnessed, only to have the man appear before him alive and well as he stood in court testifying to his death. When Rabbi Akiva asked the man how it was that he had not drowned, the man said that it was his habitual charity that saved him. Then:

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<sup>12</sup> For some other examples of sitting at the feet of the master see *m.'Abot* 1:4; Luke 10:39; Acts 22:3.

<sup>13</sup> The introductory *piyyut* to the daily morning Jewish prayer service begins with beatitudes and is quoted in full in *Tanna Dvei Eliyahu*, 4. Accordingly it may have been composed at the close of the Talmudic period. It appears to be spun out of statements of Mishnah and formulated as a messianic ode.

Rabbi Akiva immediately opened and taught (*patah ve'darash*—in chap. 3 itself the text is “opened and said”—*patah ve'amar*), “Blessed is the Lord God of Israel who has chosen the words of the Torah and the words of the Sages [for] they shall be true for all eternity.” As it said, “Cast your bread upon the face of waters for after many days you will find it” (Eccl 11:1).

“Opened and taught,” the phrase found in this text, is not necessarily the same as “opened his mouth (and taught),” which is what we read in the Gospel. “Opened and taught”<sup>14</sup> seems to be either a technical phrase that indicates that a public lecture is about to begin, or it may mean “opened [i.e., interpreted] the Scriptures and taught,” which is what seems to be happening in this rabbinic text. I have found well over 100 instances of this phrase being used in the rabbinic literature. It is of interest that Rabbi Akiva pronounces a blessing upon the midrashic lesson he is about to deliver.

Conversely, the phrase “opened his mouth” does not mean that something is about to be taught but rather that a blessing (or a curse) is about to be recited.<sup>15</sup> The rabbinic literature has many examples of this phrase, and never is it followed by someone teaching. A text from *Cant. Rab.* 2:4 is instructive here:

Usually when ten men come to a house of mourning not a single one of them is able to “open his mouth” to recite the mourner’s blessing. Then someone else may come and open his mouth and bless the mourner’s blessing.

Concerning the word “open” used alone, scholars have suggested that the word might mean “to explain,” or “to open the mouth,” or “to begin a lecture” or “to talk about the lead verse of a discrete unit in the Torah.”<sup>16</sup>

In the text from Matthew the phrase “opened his mouth and taught” may mean the same as it did in the later rabbinic usages of the phrase “opened and taught”; or it may reflect the fuller version of “opened and taught,” referring to the “opening up and analysis of texts,” that is, “to give a sermon.” It is also

<sup>14</sup> Kris Lindbeck (of Florida Atlantic University) tells me she does not think the phrase occurs anywhere else in the Gospels to introduce Jesus’ teaching nor does even the Greek word *anoigo* in any phrase introducing speech (although it appears other places to refer to opening things which were sealed, e.g., Matt 2:1). As a result, I suspect the passage derives from a source used by Matthew alone.

<sup>15</sup> Rev 13:6: “... and he opened his mouth in blasphemies.”

<sup>16</sup> See “A Distinctive Usage of PTH in Rabbinic Literature” (Basser 1979–80), 60–61; and *In the Margins of the Midrash* (Basser 1990), 17.

possible that Matthew's source here emended the words "opened and taught" in a Hebrew original by adding the object "mouth" to the verb "opened." Perhaps "opened" did mean "interpreted" in the original, but this may not have been clearly understood by the transmitters, who changed it to "opened his mouth." The point is that the original opening of the sermon may have followed a typical Hebrew/Aramaic format.

*Blessed are the poor of spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. (v. 3)*

Matthew begins his sermon by having Jesus offer praise to those he sees as being especially virtuous, and also by having Jesus declare what rewards are to be theirs for being so virtuous. From last to first the list of the virtuous is as follows: the afflicted, the peacemakers, the pure of heart, the merciful, the seekers of righteousness, the meek, the grieving, the poor in spirit (the *anvei ruah*, attested in Dead Sea Scrolls 1QM 14:7). Despite the variety, these virtuous types are all, in essence, "the meek" (Heb. *anavim*).

To play with a word whose meaning is associated with a virtue or with the virtuous by ever-extending its range of meanings is at the heart of rabbinic preaching. Then, once its range of meanings has been extended so that the word comes to be associated with other virtues, the preacher finds suitable proof-texts to confirm that the word can indeed be associated with these other virtues. And so a word in a biblical text is much like a door that opens onto many rooms, all of which can be called by this same word, although the meaning of the word can also shift in accordance with other biblical texts in which this word, though in a different context, is found. Words can operate like magnets and attract similar words in biblical verses into a symphony where the words shuttle the meaning of one verse to another—absorbing the sense in one place and spreading that sense to another, which enhances the meaning of both verses.<sup>17</sup> Then, in the latest stage of a prayer's development, a poet reworks the whole, eliminating the awkward citations of verses (that generated the whole) and filling in catch phrases with specific details. The final product

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<sup>17</sup> Humility and a willingness to suffer are the virtues that Jesus stresses above all in the poem. Matthew's beginning text for this section, which begun at the end of chapter 4, is Isa 61:1–9, which introduces the preacher who proclaims "the good new to the poor...to comfort all who mourn...to call them 'planting of the Lord'...who will reward them...they are blessed." These words will serve as the subject matter of those he praises. The "poor" resonates with Ps 37:11 "But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy great peace." "Poor (in spirit)," "meek," parallel each other, dance together. And the process of words resonating from verse to verse will continue.

will still grow at the hand of others but always with the creative elegance and charm set in motion at first.<sup>18</sup>

This way of turning biblical texts into beatitude form is shown in *Midrash Psalms* (ed. Buber) 25:3. Here the preacher affixes the term “blessed” to a text from Proverbs that enjoins one to act in a certain noble way. It is noteworthy that this text from Proverbs associates “the meek” with “the poor of spirit,” for “the meek” are “the poor of spirit”.<sup>19</sup>

It is better to be low of spirit with the meek than to divide the spoil with the proud (Prov 16:19): Blessed is he who *takes his portion with the meek*.

The Greek *makarioi* (“Blessed are”) translates the Hebrew *ashrei*, which means “fortunate” or “blessed.” Matthew’s poem is composed of a series of beatitudes, each of which singles out a type of virtuous person and/or activity worthy of being “blessed.”<sup>20</sup> Rabbinic teachings also utilize this form. For example, “Rabbi Hanina said to him [Rabbi Eleazar ben Perata] ‘Blessed are you that you have been arrested over five charges and you are to be spared. Woe to me who has been arrested over one charge and I am not to be spared. For you occupied yourself with both Torah-study and deeds of loving-kindness, but I only occupied myself with Torah-study’ (*b. ’Abod. Zar.* 17b).” Another striking example is

<sup>18</sup> I have tried to illustrate the phenomenon in my article “Approaching the Text: The Study of Midrash” (Basser 1986).

<sup>19</sup> Ps 119:1–3 shows us the beatitude form of the Book of Psalms. It is undoubtedly the source for the genre used in the Dead Sea Scrolls, rabbinic literature, and Matthew chapter 5. “Blessed are those whose way is perfect, who walk in the law of the Lord! Blessed are those who keep his testimonies, who seek him with their whole heart, who also do no wrong, but walk in his ways!” One of the more interesting *piyyut* blessings is found in the morning service introducing the standing prayer of Eighteen Blessings (which is the rabbinic prayer *par excellence*) that contains sentences introduced by “truly” a synonym of “amen” and deriving from the same root. “Truly—blessed is the man who obeys your commandments. And Your Torah and Your Word he places on his heart.” The construction of such hymns seems to have been ongoing from biblical times through to Gaonic times, a span of some 1500 years. Matthew’s hymn is about midway in the process.

<sup>20</sup> E.g., Ps 1:1: “Blessed is the man [*makarios aner*].” Émile Puech, in “4Q525 et les Péricopes des Béatitudes en Ben Sira et Matthieu” (1991), 80–106, and “The Collection of Beatitudes in Hebrew and Greek (1Q525 1–4 and Mt 5,3–12),” in *Early Christianity in Context: Monuments and Documents* (Manns, Alliata and Testa 1993), 359–62, argues that Matthew’s form is original to him, preserves accurate word counts and rhythm and that the eight beatitudes do not rework any previous collection. Further, Puech points out the existence of the form *anvei ruah* (“poor of spirit”) in the Qumran Scrolls: 1QM 14:7; 4Q491, 8–10, 9:5; 1QH 6:14.

found at the close of mishnaic tractate *Kelim*: “Rabbi Yosi says, ‘Blessed are you *Kelim*, for you entered in defilement [the subject matter of five defilements in *Kelim* 1:1] and you departed in purity’” (the last word of the tractate). This form is almost that of Matthew’s “Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven” (5:3). The rabbinic forms mention current or imminent reasons “to be blessed” and Matthew refers to a future consequence. In fact, there is no real discrepancy. Jesus’ assurance is that blessedness is guaranteed, as though it had already happened. The beatitudes are therefore prophetic in their tones with a sense of immediacy.<sup>21</sup>

Isa 61:1 has not been directly cited in the poem, because it is the artful style of liturgical poetry to work the biblical text into the poem allusively, leaving it to the reader to recognize the text. As I have pointed out in my comments to 4:23, the phrase “The Lord has anointed me” in this context means that Jesus has been designated son of God “to preach good news to the meek” and “the brokenhearted” (see Matt 11:29 for the juxtaposition of “meek” and “lowly of heart”).

“The meek” are also spoken of in Ps 37:11, which is the source—again not cited—for this first beatitude (as well as the beatitudes in 5:5, 5:6, 5:9, and 5:10): “But the meek shall inherit the land and enjoy great peace.” But there is a problem here. If Jesus is using Ps 37:11 as his source for this beatitude, then why does he say here “Blessed are the poor in spirit” rather than “Blessed are the meek”? The answer is because the two—“the poor in spirit” and “the meek”—are synonymous, as I have said above, citing Proverbs and later Jewish commentary. Matt 5:5 actually supplies the wording we would expect, though surprisingly here “the land” has not been replaced by the “Kingdom of Heaven,” as was the case in Matt 5:3. Some scholars think “poor in spirit” in this case means “contrite” in the spirit of Isa 57:15.<sup>22</sup>

There is a tradition in the *Mekhilta of Rabbi Yishmael (Bahodesh) Yitro* 9 that, drawing on some of the same texts that are the source for the poem, states that especially on the humble does the divine spirit rest. The text reads:

*The people stood far off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was* (Exod 20:21). What enabled him to achieve this great feat [to face God]?—His humility, as stated, “And the man Moses was very humble” (Num 12:3). So this verse informs us that for anyone who is humble, in

<sup>21</sup> I call this feature of hymns “the ‘prophetic now.’” It might be noted in this regard that a Qumran text, the Thanksgiving Scroll, promises rewards to the meek, to the contrite, and to mourners (13:14–15).

<sup>22</sup> Compare with Flusser, *Jewish Sources in Early Christianity*, 62.

the end the divine spirit will rest upon him on earth. And it says, “For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite” (Isa 57:15). And it also says: “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord has *anointed me* to preach *good news to the meek*” (Isa 61:1). And it also says: “The offering of the Lord is a broken spirit” (Ps 51:19).

In 5:3 Jesus substitutes “Kingdom of Heaven” for “Land,” which is what is found in his source, Ps 37:11. For the Rabbis, “inherit the land” is nearly identical in meaning to “inherit the Kingdom of Heaven,” and this would almost certainly have been known to the audience of Matthew’s source (reporting Jesus’ words). *Mishnah Sanhedrin* 10:1 paraphrases, “They shall inherit the land forever” (Isa 60:21) in this way: “All Israel have a share in the World to Come.” In the Matthean tradition, the phrase “inheriting the land” also means “to have a share in the World to Come.” While the concept of Kingdom of Heaven is somewhat amorphous in Matthew, here we know exactly what it means. It is the World to Come where life is eternal and the dead will rise.

In a text from *Pesiq. Rab.* (ed. Friedmann), 36, it is said that the “meek ones” are Israel, who have suffered persecution and worse at the hands of the Romans and others.<sup>23</sup>

Our Rabbis taught that when King Messiah will be revealed, he will *come* and stand on the roof of the Temple. He will inform Israel and say to them, “Meek ones, the time of your redemption has come.”

The people of God are said to be “the meek” in Isa 49:13:

Shout for joy, O Heavens! And rejoice, O Earth! Break forth into joyful shouting, O mountains! For the Lord has comforted his people and will have compassion on his meek.

His people and the meek are parallel in this verse and so are one and the same. This text also speaks of comfort and compassion and joy, which are the themes of verses 4, 7, 12.

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<sup>23</sup> Similarly, *Devarim Rabbah* ([ed. Lieberman]. *Devarim* 21 identifies the meek with Israel: Rabbi Meir said, “In the future world Israel is destined to be meek as it is said, ‘The meek will inherit the land and enjoy great peace (Ps 37:11.’”

*Blessed are those who are grieving, for they shall be consoled. (v. 4)*

Jesus continues his poem with a poetic rendering of Isa 61:2b—"to comfort all who mourn." Though he speaks of mourners, the underlying subject remains "the meek," for it is "the meek" who are spoken of in the texts from Isaiah and the Psalms which shape the flow and content of the Beatitudes.

A rabbinic text that associates mourning with joy in the World to Come is found in *Tosefta Baba Batra* (ed. Lieberman), 2:17. The text reads:

All who mourn over it (Jerusalem) in this world, their heart will be gladdened in the World to Come, as it is said, "*Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad for her; all you who love her; rejoice greatly with her; all you who mourn over her*" (Isa 66:10).

Some have tried to argue that there is a correlation between the structure of the Beatitudes and that of the following section in which Jesus speaks of the laws (vv. 21–48). To my mind the Beatitudes are a poetic introduction to the sermon which stand alone, and with which Jesus exhorts and encourages his hearers in the face of persecution and the suffering this brings. It need not be Matthew's church (did he even have one?) that is being addressed here but rather Jesus' audience, who are the Jews. However, by the end of the Gospel, as Matthew tells, the Jews will have turned their backs on Jesus and his message and will be shown to have been responsible for his death. Without this eloquent sermon, the "Jewish rejection" of Jesus, as Matthew tells it, would not appear unreasonable, but because he has put it into his gospel, the Jews can be portrayed as evil and haughty. That is, by the end of the Gospel the Jews will have ceased to be "the meek" people of God, and their gentile enemies, according to Matthew, will have come to bear this designation. For this reason I seriously doubt whether Matthew was Jewish-Christian. If he was a Jewish-Christian, he can only have been a self-loathing one.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Dale Allison sees the whole thrust of my commentary as looking at Matthew through Jewish tradition. He wonders why I doubt that Matthew was a Jewish Christian. Any number of Gentiles, from the time of Gaius (Philo was amazed at his command of the Torah and even his knowledge of the secret of the pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton) to Peter Schäfer today, have been knowledgeable about Jewish tradition. Matthew himself has good sources and likely learned Jewish informants (as did some of the Church Fathers). Yet I reject that Matthew himself adds any of his own exegesis or knowledge of Jewish law to his writings. Matthew is an artist, and as such succeeds in making his Jesus a Jew among Jews, in order to dramatize the perfidy of the Jews in rejecting his exclusive "sonship."

*Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the Land. (v. 5)*

Here we have sermon material in its pre-Matthean form. That is, except for the addition of the words “Blessed are,” the text is a straight rendering of the phrase concerning the meek inheriting the land in Ps 37:11. I have the impression that at this point Matthew follows a source to the letter, making no substitutions.

*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will shall be given enough to eat. (v. 6)*

At first glance it appears that in this beatitude there is no reference to the meek, and so here Jesus moves away from its main theme; but in point of fact the beatitude is here precisely because it refers to the meek. A text from *Batei Midrashot* (ed. Wertheimer), vol. 2, *Midrash Alpha Betot*, p. 454, asks about food and drink, and finds the answer in Ps 22:7:

How do we know about food and drink? As it says, *The meek shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the Lord! May your hearts live forever!* (Ps 22:27). The word “forever” refers to the World to Come.

In *Gen Rab.* 25:3 there is an interesting text concerning the visitation of ten famines on the world. Nine of these famines are famines of physical want, which have occurred at various times from Adam through to Elisha; the tenth is said to be a famine of the spirit. Moreover, according to the text, which cites Amos 8:11 as proof, the famine of the spirit is to occur in the World to Come: *Not a hunger for bread and not a thirst for water but only to hear the Word of the Lord.*

*Blessed are the merciful, for mercy shall be shown to them. (v. 7)*

A similar understanding of how God repays mercy for mercy is found throughout the rabbinic literature. For instance, a text from *Gen Rab.* 33, on the verse “The Lord is good to all and his mercy is over all his works (Ps 145:9)” takes note of a drought in the days of Rabbi Tanḥuma. The Rabbi decreed three fast days and still not a drop of rain fell. Then he came in and told them:

“Shower mercy for each other and the Holy One will shower mercy upon you.” . . . When charity is being distributed to the poor people it is a welcome sight that a man [although not ordered to do it] gives money freely to his divorced wife.

And a text from *b. Šabb.* 151b reads:

Rabban Gamaliel, the son of Rabbi [Judah the patriarch], says: *And He will show you mercy and will be compassionate to you and cause you to increase . . .* (Deut 13:17–18)—whoever is merciful to others mercy is shown to him from heaven.

*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.* (v. 8)

It is a commonplace in both the rabbinic literature and the Hebrew Bible that those with pure hearts will see God. A text from *Lev. Rab.* 23:13 reads:

Rabbi Menassia son of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: We find that whoever chances to see lewdness and does not “fill his eyes with it” will merit to see the face of God [*Shekhina*]. What is the proof-text? “And closes his eyes from seeing evil” (Isa 33:15). And what follows? “Your eyes shall see the king in his beauty: they shall behold the land that is very far off” (Isa 33:17).

Ps 24:4–6 contains a very similar sentiment.

He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully. He shall receive the blessing from the Lord, and righteousness from the God of his salvation. This is the generation of them that seek Him, that seek Thy face, O Jacob.

*“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called God’s children.”* (v. 9)

Again, though at first glance it doesn’t appear to be the case, this beatitude also refers to the meek, for it too is drawn from Ps 37:11; for Ps 37:11 not only promises that “the meek shall inherit the earth,” but also that “they will be gladdened for the increase of peace.”

In a tradition found in *Pesiq. R. Kah.* 18:6, it is said that in the time of the Messiah people will only ever seek peace. Four texts that follow confirm this:

Ps 72:7: “In [the Messiah’s] days, may the righteous flourish, and abundance of peace till the moon is no more!”

Ps 119:165: “Those who love Your law have great peace, and nothing causes them to stumble.”

Ps 37:11: “And the meek . . .”

and

Isa 54:13: “And all your children shall be learned of the Lord, and your children [shall have] *abundant* (Heb. *rav*) peace.”

As an aside, we note that *b. Ber.* 64a suggests that even now there can be peace by interpreting “your children [shall have] abundant peace” from Isa 54:13 to mean “the disciples of the wise *increase peace* (i.e., not simply have peace) in the world.” The point is that those disciples of the wise who increase peace between their neighbors are called by Scriptures “your children.”<sup>25</sup>

*Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the heavenly kingdom.* (v. 10)

*Anavim* not only means “the meek”; it can also mean “those who are persecuted.” Ps 9:11–12 makes clear: “Sing praises to the Lord, who dwells in Zion; declare among the peoples His deeds. For He who requites blood remembers them; He does not forget the cry of the *anavim*.” And so Ps 37:11 also proves to be the source for this beatitude which brings the liturgical poem to an end.

*Blessed are you when they reproach you and persecute you and speak every evil against you falsely for my sake. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in the heavens, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.* (vv. 11–12)

His poetic “ode to the meekly pious” concluded, Jesus turns to address his disciples directly; no longer does he address all the Jews. His direct address is in the form of an exhortation, a common Matthean device (see 19:6). The device is also known to the Rabbis:<sup>26</sup> *Sipre Deut piska* 306 to Deut 32:1 exhorts:

And is it not reasonable that if these [natural phenomena] when they obey their laws have no ability of getting reward or loss such that

<sup>25</sup> The text explains that *banayikh* (your children) should be read (*bonayikh*, builders, or more likely *bunayikh*, wise) and through their preaching and study they increase peace.

<sup>26</sup> Hillel’s famous speech to a convert (*b. Šabb* 31a) espousing “the Golden Rule” concludes with the imperative “Go! Learn!” *M. Ta’an.* 2:1 contains an exhortation to be sincere in repentance, and not rely on the outer trappings of fasting and sackcloth.

obedience gets them reward or disobedience punishment and they do not worry for their offspring, they do not rebel against their limitations, you humans who, if obedient, do get reward and for disobedience do get punishment and you do worry for your offspring, how much more so you should not rebel against your limitations!

Jesus tells his disciples that the prophets who came before them were persecuted, and because of this, he implies, their heavenly rewards have been great; and so because they too are to be persecuted, they too can expect their heavenly rewards to be great. But in order for Jesus to make this claim, a dramatic shift must occur in the poem. Whereas before when Jesus was speaking of the persecuted ones (v. 10), it is almost certain that he meant the children of Israel. Here it is Matthew's followers who are said to be the persecuted ones, and their persecutors are the Jews. Whether one thinks that this poem came directly from Jesus or from a later hand, still verses 11–12 should be seen as a very late addition to the poem.

*You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt has lost its flavor, how can it be made salty again? It is not capable of anything except to be thrown outside and stepped on by people. (v. 13)*

Jesus' point here is that if his disciples are to fail they should then be as worthless as refuse. It is a harsh statement.

*You are the light of the world. No city built lying on a hill can be hidden. No one lights a lamp and places it under the basket, but on the lamp-stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. So let your light shine before people, so that they may see your good works, and they might glorify your heavenly father. (vv. 14–16)*

That doing good works leads to *Qiddush Hashem*—the sanctification of God's name—is a commonplace in Jewish literature.<sup>27</sup> The following passage from *b. Yoma* 86a, in which Isa 49:3 is cited as a proof-text—"And he said to me, 'You are my servant, O Israel, you through whom I will be glorified'"—is illustrative of this. It is noteworthy that the passage contains several beatitudes (as well as several "woes"), which resemble those found in 5:3–12. The text reads:

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<sup>27</sup> See Menachem Kister, "Words and Formulae in the Gospels in the Light of Hebrew and Aramaic Sources," in *The Sermon on the Mount and Its Jewish Setting* (Becker and Ruzer 2005), 144; 147.

Yitzhak the disciple of R. Yanai said: When a man's companions are ashamed of his reputation, it profanes God's name. Said R. Nahman b. Yitzhak: (What is meant by reputation?) When people have to say of a man: "May his Lord pardon him for his deeds." And Abaye says, this is what we have learned in the following teaching: It is written, "And you shall love the Lord your God" (Deut 6:5). The verse should be read to mean, "Heaven's name should become loved through you"; that is to say, a man must study the written Torah, the oral Mishnah and serve scholars. His interactions with other human beings should be pleasant. What will people then say of him? *Blessed* is his father, who taught him Torah; *blessed* is his teacher, who has instructed him in Torah, and *woe* to those people who have not studied Torah! Behold, the one who has learned Torah, how beautiful are his ways, how perfect his deeds! Of him the verse says the "And he said unto me, 'You are my servant, O Israel, you through whom I will be glorified.'" (Isa 49:3) But if one has learned written Torah and oral Mishnah and served scholars, but is not honest and in his manner of speech with others is unpleasant, then what do people say about him? Behold, the one who has learned Torah, *woe* to his father who taught him Torah; *woe* to his teacher who instructed him in Torah! See the one who has learned Torah, how evil are his ways, how evil his deeds! Of him the verse says, "They profane my holy name, because they said of them, 'These are the people of the Lord, and out of his land are they gone forth'" (Ezek 36:20).

For the Pharisaic Sages, respect for the divine name was of crucial importance. A text from the *Scholian* commentary to *Megillat Ta'anit* (ed. Lichtenstein [Jerusalem, 1986], 81) speaks regretfully of the period when under Antiochus IV the Jews were forbidden even to mention the name of God; and also of the period when the Hasmoneans, who overthrew Antiochus, introduced a policy which led to the repeated desecration of His name.

*On the 3rd of Tishrei they [Sages] annulled the [Hasmonean] edict requiring the divine name to be written in all business documents*—When the evil kingdom of Hellenists (under Antiochus Epiphanes) had issued anti-Jewish decrees against Israel, it was announced, "Deny the kingdom of heaven by showing, 'We have no portion with the God of Israel.'" And so they could not even mention the name of Heaven with their mouths. After their victory against Hellenism, the Hasmonean authorities declared that the name of Heaven must be written in every business document by stating [the name of the high priest] "who is the priest of

Almighty God.” [The passage continues to tell how the sages, on the 3rd of Tishrei, convinced the rulers to annul the decree governing the writing of such documents “with the name of Heaven on them,” knowing these would eventually be thrown into garbage dumps. The date of the annulment of the decree came to be the date of a yearly celebration after that.]

The value of a public sanctification of God’s name over a private one is stressed repeatedly in the rabbinic literature. A text from *b. Soṭah* 36b is illustrative of this:

Rabbi Hanna, son of Bizna, said in the name of Rabbi Shimon the Hasid, “Joseph sanctified God’s name in private [by refusing the advances of Potiphar’s wife (Gen 39:9)], and so the letter *heh* was given from the divine name to his name [i.e. *Jehoseph* (Ps 81:6), so that he had three letters of the Tetragrammaton in his name]. Judah, who sanctified the name of Heaven in public [confessing his misdeeds with Tamar (Gen 38)], has all four letters of the divine name in his.”

The image of light signifying correct teaching is apt, as the following traditions show. In *Derekh Eretz Rab.*, chapter *Haminin* 18, we read:

Those who confess righteously, and those who repent righteously, and those who receive penitents and teach them so that they do not slide back to their old ways, concerning them Scripture says, “Then shall your light shine forth like the dawn” (Isa 58:8).

And from *Midrash Tanh. Num.* [ed. Buber], *Beha’alotecha* 2:2, we read:

It was as if God had said to Moses, Tell Israel it is not because I need your light that I told you to light [Temple] lights but to give you merit. And so Scripture says, “The Lord desires for the sake of his righteous one’s merit that he make the Torah praiseworthy and he make it esteemed” (Isa 42:21) . . . and if you are scrupulous about lighting lights for my name also I will shine for you a great light in the future World to Come. . . . For Scripture says, “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory

will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising” (Isa 60:1–3).

Commentators and theologians repeatedly find that Jesus’ teaching in Matthew (chapters 5–7) is ambiguous. That is, should his teaching be taken as normative for Christians or should it be taken simply as part of Matthew’s technique of storytelling? If it is the latter, Jesus’ teaching is meant to show him in the role of a traditional teacher whose teaching in the end, however, was rejected by the Jews but embraced by the Gentiles. The ambiguous nature of Jesus’ teaching not only troubles modern scholars but it also troubled the early Christians (and apparently some Jews) in antiquity. For they understood that Matthew 5 could be read either as an eternal teaching or else as something that had come to an end when (as the Church Fathers taught) God rejected the Jews, this rejection having been confirmed by the destruction of the Temple. In *b. Šabb.* 116b there is a charming and well-crafted satire which, playing with texts from Matt 5:16–17, pokes fun at the ambiguity inherent in the wider text, and shows how this ambiguity allowed certain Christians to profit from it:

Ima Shalom was the wife of Rabbi Eliezer and the sister of Rabban Gamaliel. There was a “philosopher” [a euphemism for Christian theologian] in their neighborhood who had encouraged the reputation that he did not accept bribes. So the brother and sister wanted to expose him. [She said,] “I will bring him a lamp of gold,” and they went to see him. She said to him, “I wish you to allow me my portion of an inheritance from the estate of my deceased father.” He said to them “divide it!” [The brother said, In short,] the law is written for us, “Where there is a son then a daughter cannot inherit.” He replied, “From the day you were exiled from your land, the Law of Moses has been removed and been replaced by the Gospel. And that says, ‘A son and daughter shall divide an inheritance equally.’ ”

On the following day [when they came back] he [the brother] brought him a Libyan ass. He [the Christian] then declared to them: “I have looked further into the Gospel and it is written there. ‘I have not come to subtract and I have not come to add to the Law of Moses.’ And it is written in this law that where a son exists then a daughter cannot inherit.” Thereupon she exclaimed, “May your light shine like a lamp.” Rabban Gamaliel retorted, “The ass came and kicked the lamp.”

*Do not suppose that I have come to annul the Torah or the Prophets. I did not come to annul but to fulfill. (v. 17)*

The point here is in no way related to Matthew's use of fulfillment texts to illustrate that Jesus' path has been foretold in Scripture.<sup>28</sup> Rather, here Jesus is telling his audience that he is not some kind of unfettered apocalyptic preacher who sees that the Law is about to be annulled because the final days have come. Matthew wants to stress that Jesus was not antinomian (as Paul and John were post-Easter), but an erstwhile student of Torah teaching and a faithful Jewish preacher. When later Matthew's Jesus enters Jerusalem he will speak differently than he does here. Jesus' words show that he is not among the sinners who are reflected in Dan 9:10–11: "For we did not obey the voice of the Lord our God to go in his teachings [Torahs] which he gave us through his servants the prophets. And all of Israel transgressed your Torah and turned without heeding your voice. And you placed upon us the curse and the oath which are written in the Torah of Moses, the servant of God, for we have sinned against Him."

*Amen, I say to you, until the heaven and the earth pass away, not one iota or one flourish will disappear from the Torah, until all things occur. (v. 18)*

"Amen" is the answer to an implied oath; "I say to you" has the sense of "I swear to you." The force of this "Amen" continues throughout this unit of the sermon (5:21–48), appearing again at 5:26 (Jesus says "I say to you" six more times in this unit—5:22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44). The use of these expressions heightens the importance of the words that follow. Such a device is a commonplace in the rabbinic literature.

The phrase "until heaven and earth pass away" should be understood as *reductio ad absurdum* rhetoric—heaven and earth can "pass away" but not even the smallest jot of a letter of the Law can disappear, at least not *until all things occur*, that is, until the world is utterly gone. Compare Job 27:5: "Far be it from me that I should say you are right; *until* I die I will not put away my integ-

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<sup>28</sup> A huge literature deals with Matt. 5:17 as a prelude to Jesus' midrashic expansion of biblical verses, including Daube's *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism*, 60–61. Once attracted to the idea, I now think that, while it has some merit, I am reluctant to speculate on exegesis that is not attested to elsewhere nor explicitly explained as such. To a large extent I have abandoned my earlier position on these issues. I ignore exegetical speculation, although I do embrace authentic materials that illuminate the Gospels. (Even if they are found in medieval writings, at least they are not fabrications of modern scholars.)

rity from me." There is no allusion in this text to Paul's claim that Jesus' death and resurrection has rendered the Law of Moses superfluous, as many used to say. What is meant by a letter of the law passing away is that no part of the Law, however seemingly minor, should be transgressed.

Let us examine several passages from several different periods that can help us to understand what Jesus means to say here. One close parallel to what Jesus says here is found in a text from *y. Sanh.* 2:6 (also *Exod. Rab.* 6.1, *Lev. Rab.* 19:2), as others have also pointed out.<sup>29</sup> I include it here because it is particularly instructive to compare this passage with the ones that follow it:

Our Rabbis said, When [Solomon disregarded] the Torah, the minuscule letter *yodh* (in [*the king*] shall not increase wives, (Deut 17:17) came up to God and prostrated herself and said to him, "Master of the Universe, did you not say not a single letter would ever be annulled from the Torah? Solomon arose and has annulled me [suggesting beforehand the king *had* not increased his wives but now could]. And if today he annuls one letter, tomorrow he will do another until the whole Torah will be annulled!"

God replied to her, "Solomon and a thousand like him will disappear but the smallest speck of a tail of you will never be annulled."

A text from *b. Ber.* 32a refers to the passing away of heaven and earth in order to contrast their temporality with the eternal nature of God's name and word. The eternal nature of God's covenant with Israel is a common feature of the rabbinic literature. The text (which will be discussed in another context in chapter 23) reads:

*Remember Abraham, Isaac and Israel Your servants, to whom You swore by Yourself* (Exod 32:13). What is the meaning of "by Yourself"? Rabbi Eleazar said: Moses said to the Holy One, "Master of the Universe, if You had sworn to them by the heaven and the earth, I would have said, 'Just as the heaven and earth can pass away, so can Your oath pass also away. Now, however, You swore to them by your Great Name. Just as Your Great Name endures for ever and ever, so Your oath endures for ever and ever.'"

That the covenant has cosmic import is sometimes confirmed with a text from Jeremiah (33:25). In *Batei Midrashot, Otiot de Rabbi Akiba*,<sup>30</sup> we read:

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<sup>29</sup> Hermann L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament: aus Talmud und Midrasch: Erster Band, Das Evangelium nach Mattäus* (1922), 244.

<sup>30</sup> Vol. 2 (ed. Wertheimer, Version A), 386.

[The Torah saves Israel from the fires of *Gehenna*], for with it the upper and lower beings endure, as it is said, “So says the Lord, ‘If not for My covenant, the day and the night, the laws of heaven and the laws of the earth I would not have set’” (Jer 33:25). And through it [the Torah] heaven and earth will be renewed in the next world, as the verse says, “For behold I create a new heaven and a new earth” (Isa 65:17). On whose merit? On the merit of Israel who fulfills the Torah.

To fulfill the Torah does not mean to preserve it but rather to keep its commands. This, too, is what Jesus means to say here.

In the following text from *b. Yebam.* 79a, the rather shocking suggestion is made that even the integrity of the Law can be set aside, if this is done for the sake of the sanctification of God’s name.

Rabbi Yohanan said in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yehozadak: It is preferable that a letter be let loose from the Torah if then the name of Heaven would be publicly sanctified.

Jesus places great value on both the Law and the Divine name but he does not weigh them against one another:

*Whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and so teaches people will be called least in the Kingdom of Heaven, and whoever does them and teaches them, that person shall be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven.* (v. 19)

This provides the interpretation of 5:18. The way in which one performs the commandments determines one’s portion in the World to Come.

*For I say to you that unless your righteousness greatly exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven.* (v. 20)

Again the force of the expression “I say to you” stresses something which, though it could never come to be in fact, should nonetheless be striven for. Hyperbole is an important didactic device. The brief text from *b. Ber.* 4b, which states that “all who transgress the words of the Sages are liable to the death penalty,” is not meant to be taken literally; its purpose is to underscore the importance of the behavior the Sages claim the Law requires.

Traditionally there have been three different ways of understanding this unit (5:21–48). The first and oldest way is to see that what Jesus is doing here is

revising certain legal texts from the Bible in accordance with his own “Law of Righteousness.” That is, in this unit Jesus boldly contradicts the Mosaic Law to reveal a Law of the heart. Hence the name with which the unit is often called—“The Antitheses.” The second way of understanding this unit is to see that in it Jesus is citing certain laws verbatim from Scripture and then interpreting them according to a specialized reading of the Scripture.<sup>31</sup> That is, what he repeatedly says in this unit is something like this: “You might think that this law means what it literally says but I tell you that it does not.”

However, the problem with understanding this unit in either of these ways is that in both the assumption is made that Jesus is setting aside the literal meaning of the laws about which he speaks. This is obviously the case in the first way of understanding this unit; for here even anger, for example, is said to be forbidden, so that there is no longer a need to forbid murder. If there is no anger, then there can be no murder. But there can be anger and yet no murder. Would Jesus have overlooked the murder and complained only about the anger? It is absurd to think so. In the second way of understanding the unit, in which it is believed that Jesus interprets the laws according to a specialized reading of the scriptures—which is said to be based on a rabbinic form—what is meant by this is that although it might be thought that a scriptural text says *x*, because of the presence of a certain word in the text it actually means *y*.<sup>32</sup> And so here too the obvious meaning is abandoned. But if it is the case that in this section Jesus puts aside the traditional meaning of the laws about which he speaks, then what he has said in 5:17 would be false: he has not come to fulfill the Law and the Prophets but rather to annul them. Besides that the importance of physical murder and adultery would be pushed aside. No one could seriously think that Jesus meant to teach this.

The third way of understanding this unit is to see that what Jesus is doing here is erecting “fences,” so to speak, around the laws about which he speaks, in order to prevent these laws from being transgressed. That is, if the law enjoins one not to murder, the best way to see to it that one does not transgress this law is to enjoin one not even to become angry at all. It is worthwhile to quote Jacob Neusner here.

We have to distinguish the substance of what Jesus is saying from the form that he gives to his statements. Specifically, Jesus sets forth as his demonstration of how not to abolish the Torah and the prophets but to

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<sup>31</sup> The list of scholars adhering to this view is extensive: Schechter, Abrahams, Smith, Daube, Urbach, Boxel, Sanders, Keener, and others.

<sup>32</sup> Compare with Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism*, 55–61.

fulfill them, a set of teachings that, all together, point to a more profound demand—on the Torah's part—than people have realized. Not I must not kill, I must not even approach that threshold of anger that in the end leads to murder.... “Make a fence around the Torah.” That is to say, conduct yourself in such a way that you will avoid even the things that cause you to sin, not only sin itself.<sup>33</sup>

Neusner goes on to show that many of these very teachings are found in the Hebrew Bible, especially the Book of Proverbs. I do not share the opinion that one can say that what Jesus is doing here is erecting “a fence around the Torah.” (The erecting of a “fence around the Torah” was done in two ways, either through legislation or voluntarily.) Rather, as I have indicated earlier in the introduction to this chapter, I think something else is going on here.

As did certain Rabbis, Jesus also practiced what is known as *mishnat hasidim*; that is, he lived his life according to especially strict purity rules (for more on this, see my commentary to 5:22 below). At some point Jesus, and also these Rabbis, endeavored to find a scriptural basis for the way they were living and for what they were preaching but this was simple homiletics, not serious exegesis. And so I do not think that in pronouncing on these laws in the way that he did Jesus was doing exegesis at all; he was simply making pronouncements on them under familiar scriptural headings. I see no warrant for the claim that Jesus is attempting to supersede the scriptures here. As a preacher, he is telling us what he thinks is the proper way to observe God's will, both written and unwritten. The *Sipra Qedoshim* 1 to Lev 19:2 expresses well the intention behind Jesus' manner of preaching:

*And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to the children of Israel and you shall say to them, You shall be holy* (Lev 19:2). This verse teaches us that the present section was taught to the congregation as a whole since most of the laws of the Torah are dependent on it. “You shall be holy” means, “You shall be *perushim* (abstemious).”

Concerning the popular printed edition of Maimonides' *Book of Commandments* 4, we find that Ramban (Moses Nachmanides) claims, in his included notes, that when Leviticus says “You shall be holy” (Lev 19:2), it means “You shall be *perushim*.” One must endeavor to eliminate all one's unholy characteristics because this is what God wants. In these same notes, Ramban also

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33 Jacob Neusner, *Talmud Torah: Ways to God's Presence through Learning, An Exercise in Practical Theology* (2002), 28.

points to other biblical texts whose purpose is to encourage self-discipline, such as: “And you shall guard all the commandment I command you this day” (Deut 11:8), and others (Deut 8:1, 27:1). “You shall be holy,” though not strictly a command and so not open to legislation, encourages one to ever-refine one’s character so that one acts more and more piously. It is this injunction to “be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy” that underlies all that Jesus says in this unit of the sermon. That is, to be holy it is not enough simply to act in a holy way, but one must also try to be holy within. Again Ramban, commenting on this matter in his *Commentary to the Torah* to Lev 19:2, says that it is perfectly possible to act piously, and so not be liable to enforceable punishments, but to remain impious in mind. The truly pious will be careful in their thoughts and the meek will act in due course according to Jesus’ pronouncements.

The texts from Leviticus and Deuteronomy above are found throughout the Talmud to justify extrajudicial safeguards, but also to foster *imitatio dei* rules that the Rabbis followed, such as visiting the sick and showing mercy to the poor. We shall have more to say about this at the close of this chapter. When later in the Gospel we see Jesus debating with the Pharisees over their Sabbath safeguards, we discover that his position, set out in a very sophisticated way, is in fact the one that is normative in the Talmud. It is only because of the venomous nature of Matthew’s rhetoric that Jesus’ adherence to Pharisaic understanding of Jewish teaching—(or that of pre-Matthean gospel) is kept hidden.

*You have heard that it was said to the ancients, “You shall not murder” (Exod 20:13), and “Whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.”* (v. 21)

The first quotation here is verbatim from Exod 20:13; the second is a paraphrase of Gen 9:6. According to the Rabbis, one could not be punished for any act<sup>34</sup> unless it had been made clear in the Torah that this act was forbidden.<sup>35</sup> This is why, in their discussions concerning the meting out of punishments, both the text that states what is prohibited and the text that makes clear what the punishment is for having transgressed the prohibited act are included. It is also why, before any punishments were meted out, the Rabbis required witnesses to ascertain whether or not the one who was accused of transgressing a law knew of both the law he had transgressed and the punishment that went with having transgressed it (*b. Mak.* 6a; *b. Sanh.* 8b). The following text from

34 In the case of Matt 5:21, “Whoever sheds human blood, by humans his blood shall be shed, because in the image of God, God made humans” (Gen 9:6); and “You shall take no ransom for the life of a murderer... he shall surely be put to death” (Num 35:31).

35 Again in the case of Matt 5:21, “You shall not murder” (Exod 20:13; Deut 5:17).

*b. Sanh.* 6ob is typical of these discussions. Note here how the Rabbis point out that the text indicating the punishment for the transgression is far removed from the place where the text stating the crime is found:

How do we know that prostrating oneself before an idol is punishable by death? The Torah says “and he goes and worship other gods and bow down to them.” And this is followed by, “and you shall take out that man or woman . . . and stone them with stones that they die” (Deut 17:3–5). So now we know a punishment, but where is the actual command found that forbids it? Scripture states, “For you shall not bow down to another god” (Exod 34:14).

Jesus is correct to say that Jewish tradition maintains that this prohibition concerning murder (and the following prohibitions concerning adultery and divorce, and so on) was taught by Moses on divine authority, and then by teachers from Moses down to Jesus. Jesus, and I need to emphasize it time and again, does not teach here that the traditional understanding concerning those who commit murder is wrong in any way, or that this injunction against murder is to be removed from its age-old understanding.<sup>36</sup>

Jesus opens this unit of the Sermon by emphasizing the necessity of abiding by the laws of the Torah, whether great or small, to do which, in effect means to exercise total self-control (5:21, 28, 34, 39, 44). In 4 Macc. 5:16–24 the soon-to-be-martyred Eleazar gives an impassioned speech in which he says much the same thing. In both Jesus’ Sermon and Eleazar’s speech, the importance of the law in molding the model Jew is made clear. This model Jew is not seen to be any different in Philo or in Josephus or in the rabbinic literature as he or she is in Jesus’ Sermon or the speech of Eleazar:

“We, O Antiochus, who have been persuaded to govern our lives by the divine law, think that there is no compulsion more powerful than our obedience to the law. Therefore we consider that we should not transgress it in any respect. . . . To transgress the Law in matters either small or great is of equal seriousness, for in either case the Law is equally despised. . . . [The Law] teaches self-control, so that we master all pleasures and desires, and it also trains us in courage, so that we endure any

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<sup>36</sup> *T. Sanh.* 8:3, *b. Sanh.* 37b and *y. Sanh.* 4:3 all point out that God punishes where the courts are prevented from doing so because of a technicality. Further, the text from *b. Sanh.* claims that the method of divine punishment is similar to what the human punishment would have been, had it been carried out.

suffering willingly; it instructs us in justice, so that in all our dealings we act impartially, and it teaches us piety, so that with proper reverence we worship the only living God" (4 Macc. 5:16–17, 18–19, 23–24).

*But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother (without a cause) shall be in danger of judgment, and everyone who says "Raka!" to his brother shall be in danger of the Sanhedrin, and whoever says, "Moron!" shall be in danger of fiery Gehenna.* (v. 22)

Again, the expression "I say to you" here highlights the importance of the words that follow. The word *raka* means "idiot" or "someone who is devoid of good sense." In a text from *'Abot of Rabbi Nathan* (version A, chap. 16, addition 2), it is the word by which the Rabbis said one's good conscience addressed one's evil urge while warning it against committing serious offenses. The evil urge was addressed in this way to show that it was indeed "idiotic" and/or "devoid of good sense." The text reads:

How does the evil urge work? They said, the evil urge is 13 years older than the good conscience and is with him from the womb. For 13 years if he starts on the path to desecrate the Sabbath there is nothing to stay his hand, to commit murder, there is nothing to stay his hand, to do a lewd act—nothing to stay his hand. After the age of 13 he develops a good conscience and now if he sets out to desecrate the Sabbath, it says to him, "*Raka*, Scripture states: 'Whoever desecrates it shall surely die'" (Exod 31:14). If he sets out to murder, it says to him "*Raka*, Scripture states: 'Whosoever sheds the blood of a person by a person his blood shall be shed'" (Gen 9:6). If he goes to do a lewd act, it says to him, "*Raka*, Scripture states: 'They shall surely die, the adulterer and the adulteress'" (Lev 20:10).

The phrase "without cause," occurring in some late readings of v. 22, is reminiscent of the expression *sinat ḥinam*—"hatred without cause."<sup>37</sup> The courts heard cases involving insults (*m. B. Qam.* 8:1 and *m. Ketub.* 3:7). Name-calling was considered a grave sin, but to be on the receiving end was not necessarily thought to be an "embarrassment," although this would have been up to the courts to decide (*m. B. Qam.* 8:1, and *b. B. Qam.* 86b). A name caller was referred to as *mehkaneh shem ra le-havero* (*b. B. Meṣi'a* 58b), and irrespective of what

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37 The date of a manuscript reading and the frequency of the reading are not guarantees of whether or not a phrase is original to a text or is not. Unless we know why something might have been added or subtracted we cannot form any judgment.

the courts may have decided (if they bothered with the case at all) the Rabbis claimed that such people had permanent places in *Gehenna* (*b. B. Meṣi'a* 58b). The Rabbis considered hatred without cause to be as grave a sin as the sins of idolatry, adultery, and murder combined (*y. Yoma* 1:1; *b. Yoma* 9b). Senseless anger they saw as being tantamount to idolatry;<sup>38</sup> insulting someone as being tantamount to murder.<sup>39</sup>

Jesus says here that to be angry is sinful enough, but that it is more sinful to call someone "*Raka*," and even more sinful still to call someone "*Moros*." The ever harsher punishments he spells out for each of these sins make this clear. He also implies that since it is anger that leads to name-calling and, taking into account verse 21, that it can even lead to murder, it can therefore be said that anger is as grave a sin as murder. Again it might seem that in warning against anger, Jesus is erecting a "fence" (as Neusner remarked) around the law enjoining one not to kill. But I rather think that what Jesus is saying here is something more like this: "Everyone knows that murder is a grave sin deserving of harsh punishment, but you should also know that to be angry and to insult someone in anger are equally grave sins deserving of equally harsh punishments."

Because of the ever-harsher punishment he declares that one deserves for each infraction in ordered progression, Jesus makes plain that the gravity of the sin from being angry through to calling someone "*moros*" only increases; and that cases involving insults (unlike cases of rage) were indeed heard in the local courts. Now it is hard to imagine the Supreme Sanhedrin would ever have heard such cases, which is something Jesus' audience likely would have known, as very likely his audience would have thought that the fires of hell were reserved for far greater sinners than those who simply called others names. But all this is beside the point.

<sup>38</sup> *Otzar ha-Midrashim* (ed. Eisenstein), chap. 15, p. 270, preserves the tradition:

Said Rabbi Yonatan in the name of Rabbi Shimon bar Nachmeni, "Whoever gets angry, all the fury of *Gehenna* will flare up upon him. Scripture states, 'Remove anger from your heart and remove evil from your flesh' (Eccl 11:10). Evil refers to '*Gehenna*,' as it says, 'Yea, the wicked are destined for the day of evil' (Prov 16:4). Indeed one should strive to separate oneself from fury and anger, for all who get angry are as if they worship idols.

We also find in this anthology of midrashim (p. 84) the Talmudic account (*b. B. Meṣi'a* 58b) that three people can never get out of *Gehenna* and the one who insults another publicly is prominent on the list.

<sup>39</sup> So we find in *b. B. Meṣi'a* 58b: 'A memorizer of tradition stated to Rabbi Nachman bar Yitzhak, 'Whoever embarrasses his fellow publicly is as if he spilled blood.'

Jesus' use of hyperbole here was the accepted homiletic way to point out how serious was the effect of a certain kind of immoral behavior. We do not have here the case of a *hasid* going beyond the measure of the law or of a legal midrashist finding that biblical texts dealing with murder are really speaking of anger and insult. That is, Jesus is not saying here that the law prohibiting murder should be interpreted more stringently than it has traditionally been interpreted. Rather he is saying, as I point out above, that just as murder is a grave sin, so are anger and name-calling. Indeed, the Rabbis did find scriptural warrant both to prohibit name-calling and to punish a name-caller. Indeed Rabbis also compared name calling to be "like murder." Just as punishable murder required intent to kill, so punishable name-calling required intent to insult (*b. B. Qam.* 86a). Clearly such legislation is intended for a society with more sensitivity and less tolerance for insult than is the case today.

The early medieval sage and ethicist Rabbenu Yonah, in his classic work *Sha'arei Teshuva* (3:140), states that committing an act of public ridicule is so serious an offense that one is obligated to sacrifice one's life rather than transgress it. What lies behind this kind of thinking also lies behind what I consider to be the most radical teaching found in all of the rabbinic literature. A tradition in *t. Ter.* 7:20 states that it is forbidden for the Jews in a city to hand over to their enemies—that is, the Romans—another Jew for execution, even if it has been made known to these Jews that every last one of them in the city shall be killed if this is not done. What is so radical about this teaching is that the lesser matter was the fact that hundreds of Jews (if not more) should end up being slaughtered for the sake of a single Jew whom they would not turn over and who, in any event, would be slaughtered along with all the others Jews in the city. The fact that the moral character of the Jews was thought to be compromised by the handing over of one of their own to the Romans was the greater matter. This was more important than life itself.

Now this teaching was clearly from *mishnat hasidim*, or the "Mishnah of the Pious." For in this tradition from the Tosefta it says further that the Jews of a city *could* hand over to the Romans one of their own for execution, but only if this Jew who was to be handed over was already deserving of execution according to Jewish law as well. This, of course, seems the more practical approach in that it allows the saving of Jewish lives while forfeiting a life that in any event deserved to be forfeited. In *y. Ter.* 8:4 (var. *Gen. Rab.* 94:9) there is also a text concerning the matter of the Jews handing over one of their own to the Romans, and in which also the tradition from *t. Ter.* 7:20 is referred to. It is of interest to note that in this text Elijah upbraids Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi for

handing over to the Romans the Jew they had been seeking, that is, for not acting according to the *mishnat hasidim*. It should be said, however, that no court would ever have imposed penalties for not adhering to *mishnat hasidim*. The text reads:

Ulla bar Koshev was wanted by the Roman authorities and he fled to Lod, to the house of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi and they came after him in force to the city. They said, “If you don’t give him to us we will slaughter the city.” Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi went to him and convinced him and he surrendered himself to them. Elijah used to regularly appear to the rabbi but then he failed to appear. He fasted numerous fasts and finally he appeared to him. [Elijah] said to him—“Am I to appear to *traitors* [who hand Jews over to the Romans]?” He said to him, “Did I not do the *teaching* [i.e., from *t. Ter.* 7:20, which states one is permitted to hand over to the enemy a criminal if the enemy asks for him by name so that everyone else might be saved]? Elijah replied “Is this the *mishnah of the hasidim* [*Genesis Rabbah* adds, “which is sufficient for others but not for you”]?”

The normal way of hasidic teaching is to be seen in the tradition from *Pesiq. Rab.* 23 (also *y. Šabb.* 15:3) that follows. A biblical text from the Decalogue concerning the Sabbath (*Exod* 20:9) is first stated, which is then followed by the teaching from Rabbi Aivo. This teaching from Rabbi Aivo also concerns the Sabbath. His demand for scrupulousness far exceeds the traditional understanding of the biblical text. The point of including the biblical text is simply to show the lower limit of what Scripture can be seen to demand of the common person. What follows is a sermon which is not suggested either by the biblical verse or by any other known law.

No version of the *Pesiqta Rabbati* midrash includes the phrase from *y. Šabb.*—“Just as God ceased from thinking . . .” It is almost certain that this is a gloss that has been inserted into the text of *y. Šabb.* to explain the connection between the rabbi’s dictum—“Cease from non-Sabbath thoughts!”—and *Exod* 20:9, which is present in all versions of the tradition, and that this gloss has been taken from another tradition based on *Exod* 31:17 (which will be discussed in greater detail below). In all probability the original tradition included the biblical text from Exodus as a way of indicating the topic of the sermon to follow and nothing more. The biblical text was used as a kind of peg upon which Rabbi Aivo set his teaching in order that it might seem to carry with it divine sanction, for what Rabbi Aivo teaches has no scriptural basis; hence the impulse to create a seeming connection between it and Exodus 20. All versions of the tradition make plain that what Rabbi Berekhiah says in it is based on

the teaching of the ḥasid: “Do not do labor on the Sabbath; do not even think about it.” (To me this hasidic way of teaching is the basis for understanding the teachings of Jesus in this unit concerning anger and lust etc., which he introduces first by quoting the appropriate biblical texts from the Decalogue.) The text from *Pesiq. Rab.* 23 (*y. Šabb.* 15:3) reads:

“And the seventh day is a Sabbath for the Lord your God (you shall not do any work)” [Exod 20:9]. Rabbi Aivo [*y. Šabb.* 15:3 reads Abahu] said, “Cease from [non-Sabbath] thoughts!” [*y. Šabb.* 15:3: “Just as God ceased from thinking of his work—(of creation), so you cease from your thinking about work.”] Rabbi Berekhiah said [to illustrate the teaching], “It happened that a ḥasid took a walk in his vineyard on the Sabbath to see its condition and he saw a breach in the fence. He thought he would repair it after the Sabbath but then he said, ‘Since I thought about the repair on the Sabbath, I will never ever repair it.’”

By telling himself that he will never mend his fence, the ḥasid is censuring himself for having transgressed a teaching not of the Law but of the exceptionally pious concerning certain activities on the Sabbath.

The above mentioned gloss in *y. Šabb.* 15:3—“Just as God ceased from thinking”—comes from a tradition based on Exod 31:17 that is found in *'Abot of Rabbi Nathan* (version B, chap. 21). Here the prohibition against thinking about non-Sabbath activities on the Sabbath is derived from Exod 31:17. Again it sounds like something from *mishnat hasidim*—the law of the ultra-pious.

This story was told about the seemingly bizarre custom of Rabbi Josiah. He used to empty out his house to another of all the utensils at the onset of the Sabbath, or even from one corner to another corner. People asked him, “Rabbi, why do you do this?” He answered, “So that the Sabbath can have full precedence for us.” Scripture states, “It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he ceased and stopped” (Exod 31:17). [There is no redundancy.] “He ceased” means “from physical work,” and “stopped” means “from thinking about work.”<sup>40</sup>

Let us now return to the *hasid* who left his fence in disrepair for the rest of his life. According to rabbinic law it was not necessary for him to do this. For

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40 A paraphrase to what R. Josiah said is found in *Midrash Aggadah* [ed. Buber] to Exod 31:17, “The Sabbath must not be absent at all.”

according to the law, in times of emergency or when it was necessary to expedite the fulfillment of the Torah, some measure of nonlaborious activity was permitted on the Sabbath for the sake of something that was to be done once the Sabbath had passed. However, the product of any *physical* work done on the Sabbath, even if this work were to have been done by a Gentile, was forbidden to be made use of by a Jew. This exegesis is based on the idea that whatever constituted rest for God on the Sabbath must also be what constituted rest for the Jews on the Sabbath. A text from *m. Šabb.* 23.4 confirms the above:

One can spend Sabbath waiting for nightfall at the Sabbath boundary (beyond which the Rabbis forbade leaving) to later supervise the needs of a bride, the needs of a funeral—to bring one a casket or shrouds. If a (well meaning) non-Jew brought mourning pipes into the boundary on the Sabbath they cannot [ever] be used by a Jew, unless of course they came from close by. If the non-Jews constructed [on the Sabbath] a casket for someone or dug out a grave for some [gentile], a Jew may be buried in it [after the Sabbath]. Yet if such things were done for the sake of a Jew, no [Jew] can ever be buried in it.

The Rabbis, of course, could not make rules governing gentile behavior, so the measure forbidding the Jews from using the product of gentile labor done on the Sabbath was designed to prevent the Jews from bypassing the Sabbath laws. Hence the products of gentile labor made on the Sabbath, even if this was for the purpose of helping a Jew to fulfill a sacred duty, were not to be used at all. If Matthew's concern was Jesus discussing the Sabbath in the Sermon, he might well have had Jesus say something like this: "You have heard what was told to the ancients, 'And the seventh day is a Sabbath for the Lord your God. You shall not do any work on this day.' But I say unto you: Do not even think about doing work on this day."

In his discussion under the rubric "You shall not murder," Jesus goes on to explain (vv. 23–25) why it is necessary to refrain from being angry and from causing others to be angry. It is true that hatred leads to murder (Lev 19:11). But what is more important is that one's sacrifice to God is of no account if, while offering that sacrifice, one is either angry with another or knows that another is angry with him. That is, if one wants to be forgiven by God, one must first forgive one's fellow man and/or see to it that one is forgiven by one's fellow man (compare Prov 16:7, *m. Abot* 3:10).

*If you are offering your sacrifice upon the altar, and remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and*

*first go, be reconciled to your brother, and then go and bring your sacrifice.*  
 (vv. 23–24)

I take this to be the salient point of the discussion on anger, rather than seeing it as a directive from Jesus to “behave beyond the measure of the law.” Jesus is not doing exegesis here, nor is he erecting “fences around the Torah.” Rather he is speaking of rules of pious behavior that have only a very loose connection to the biblical texts he uses to introduce his sermons within the larger Sermon.

These verses make clear what is implicit in 5:22.

*Be quickly on good terms with your accuser [debtor], while you are still with him on the road [to trial], lest your accuser hand you over to the judge and the judge to the attendant and you will be thrown into prison. (v. 25)*

The model here is Prov 6:1–5:

My son, if you have put up security for your neighbor, have given your pledge for a stranger, if you are snared in the words of your mouth, caught in the words of your mouth, then do this, my son, and save yourself, for you have come into the hand of your neighbor: Go, hasten, and plead urgently with your neighbor. Give your eyes no sleep and your eyelids no slumber; save yourself like a gazelle from the hand of the hunter, like a bird from the hand of the fowler.

Using this text from Proverbs as a proof-text, a tradition in *Gen. Rab.* 93.1 states that among other things one should “cleave” to peacemaking. This tradition also suggests that if in debt one should cast oneself down before one’s debtor and acknowledge his superior position, as Judah did before Joseph (*Gen 44:18–34*).

*Amen, I say to you, you will never get out of there until you have repaid the last quadrans. (v. 26)*

Jesus states here that to be reconciled with one’s accuser is in the end far less costly than to refuse to be so. The legal process described here sounds like the one in which the Roman military tribunals in Palestine judged the Jews according to laws that would never have been applied to Roman citizens. And so Jesus also seems to be saying here that one should avoid being judged by the Romans. Better to be at the mercy of your fellow man than to be at the mercy of the Romans.

*You have heard that it was said, “Do not commit adultery” (Exod 20:4, Deut 5:17), But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman to covet her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (vv. 27–28)*

The language Jesus uses here, although rhetorical, borders on the language of the decree. Jesus says that one can commit adultery with the eyes, that is, with one's imagination. He also points out that in sinning with the eyes, one is also sinning in one's heart.<sup>41</sup> Much the same thing is said in a tradition attributed to Shimon ben Lakish, in which he is commenting on Job 24:15. The tradition, from *Lev. Rab.* 23:12, reads:

“The eye of the adulterer also waits for the twilight, saying, ‘No eye will see me’; and he veils his face” (Job 24:15). Shimon ben Lakish says no one should think that only one who engages in physical adultery is termed an adulterer. One who commits “adultery in his eyes” is also termed an adulterer.

Neither Jesus nor Shimon ben Lakish recommends corporal punishment for having committed adultery in this way.<sup>42</sup> But Jesus does say that for those who sin in this way, the gates of hell are opened.

This prohibition against sinning with the eyes is different from the prohibition against some of the moral and ritual sins instituted by the Rabbis because these sins were in terms of deed too, much like biblical prohibitions. I speak of rabbinic prohibitions against mild forms of usury, rabbinic laws against Sabbath work, rabbinic laws against theft, rabbinic amounts for tithes, rabbinic defile-

<sup>41</sup> *Num. Rab.* 9:11:

*There are six things which the Lord hateth, yea seven which are an abomination unto Him (Prov 6:16).... A heart that devises wicked plans (Prov 6:18a): The adulterer and the adulteress always have thoughts about when they will sin and tell each other which place and which time ... [and] feet that make haste to run to evil (Prov 6:18b): For a certainty they will now rush to accomplish the sinful act.*

<sup>42</sup> As far as punishments are concerned, the courts had the authority to punish beyond the measure of the law, and also “to repair a breach.” The Aramaic term for repairing “a breach” is “*migdar milta*.” *B. Yebam.* 9ob has a number of cases in which the courts administered punishment in order to “repair a breach” (e.g., “There was another incident when a man had relations with his wife under a date tree. They brought him to court and flogged him. No—in point of law, he did not deserve that punishment but the times required it.”) *Migdar milta* provisions were exceptional. They tended to be performed in times of religious slackness.

ments and others. Certain acts that Torah law permitted the Rabbis forbade because they resembled, or might lead to, violation of divine prohibitions.

*And if your right eye offends you, remove it and throw it from you. For it is to your advantage to destroy one of the parts of your body than for your whole body be thrown into Gehenna. And if your right hand offends you, cut it off and throw it from you, for it is to your advantage to destroy one of the parts of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into Gehenna.* (vv. 29–30)

In relation to either the eye or the hand, the full meaning of “offends” here is “offends in a sexual way.”<sup>43</sup> When Jesus speaks of either removing the eye, or cutting off the hand, that offends, he is of course speaking rhetorically. Minor tractate *Kallah Rab.* 2.5 mentions three types of hands it would be better to cut off: the hand that sins through the penis; the hand that (habitually has dangerous material on it that) causes blindness ; and the hand that commits murder.

*It was said, “Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a bill of divorce-ment.”* (v. 31)

It is almost certain that this brief section on divorce (vv. 31–32), and the one that follows on the swearing of oaths (vv. 33–37), were originally absent from the Sermon. They are Matthean insertions, since there is no Lukan parallels to either of these sections in the form Matthew has them.

What Jesus says here is a loose paraphrase of Deut 24:1. It might have made more sense to include what follows in 24:2: “And when she is departed out of his house, she may go and be another man’s wife.” This paraphrase of Deut 24:1 cuts through much legal detail on divorce to present the normative Jewish practice: a man gives his wife a bill of divorce and the marriage is dissolved. Jesus does not engage in biblical hermeneutics here as he will in chapter 19.

*But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of her sexually immoral behavior, causes her to commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery himself.* (v. 32)

43 Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth Millenarian Prophet* (1998), 175–81, lists references and parallels to the cutting off of limbs in order to save one from sexual lusts to show that this type of hyperbole was widespread. See also “The Meaning of ‘Shtuth,’ Gen R. 11 in reference to Matt 5:29–30” (Basser 1985).

No rabbi ever suggested that anyone who gave to his wife a properly executed bill of divorce would be guilty of causing her to commit adultery on account of her remarriage. Even if the grounds for the divorce were not sanctioned by his construal of the laws of divorce, it would nonetheless be final and the parties to it free to remarry.

In 19:7–9 there is an exchange between Jesus and his Pharisaic interlocutors:

“Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?” He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.”

Jesus’ telling his disciples in 19:11, who have questioned his saying on divorce—“Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given”—might suggest that that this saying is *midah hasidut* (see *b. Šabb. 120a*; *b. B. Meši'a* 52b; *b. Hul.* 130b).<sup>44</sup> For practical reasons, Jesus explains, Moses allowed divorce, regardless of the grounds. But Jesus says that divorce should be permitted only in the event that the wife has been sexually immoral. Jesus is essentially setting aside (for those who can hear it) the Mosaic laws on divorce in favor of what he contends is God’s original law on divorce, which was different from and preferable to the Law of Moses. The Pharisees made no distinction between the Divine and the Mosaic legislation (*y. Ber. 1:4*).<sup>45</sup> In the Mosaic law, as understood by the Rabbis, sexual immorality on the part of the wife was only one of the reasons a man might give for divorcing his wife, whereas Jesus sees that it is the only reason. The Rabbis agreed that sexual immorality on the part of the wife should lead to divorce (there is no option here).<sup>46</sup> But it seems in Matthew 19 Jesus forbids polygamy—quoting from Gen 2:24, he says that “the two become one flesh”—and so remarriage by a man is adultery, except in the one case in which the man has come to be divorced as a result of the

<sup>44</sup> *Midah hasidut* is a rabbinic concept of the higher behavioral standard expected of pious rabbinic scholars. *Mishnat hasidim* refers to a collection of teachings intended exclusively for those who are capable of living an extra-pious life.

<sup>45</sup> *Y. Ber. 1:4*: Rabbi Matnah and Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman both said it was proper to continue to read the Ten Commandments daily. So why do we not read them? Because of the anxiety over Christians—that they not say (you people also agree) “these alone were given to Moses on Sinai.”

<sup>46</sup> See the discussion in Phillip Sigal, *Halakhah of Jesus of Nazareth According to the Gospel of Matthew*, (1986), 97ff.

sexual immorality of his wife. In this case alone is he free to remarry. Jesus says nothing in this dialogue about the remarriage of a woman who was divorced for having engaged in unfaithful behavior.

Matthew 5:32 seems to have been added by Matthew to his received list of *mishnat hasidim*. His source for 5:32 was the synoptic version of Matt 19:7–9, which he reworked, but this seems to have been somewhat different from the text we have.

The differences between 5:32 and 19:7–9 are interesting and instructive. In chapter 19 Jesus' teachings on divorce focus on the man. In 5:32 the focus of Jesus' teaching on divorce is still on the man but here he also speaks of the woman, stating that a man who divorces his wife for any reason that the Mosaic Law allows can cause her to stumble into an adulterous relationship. Also in 5:32 there is no suggestion that polygamy is not allowed. All that is said is that a woman who has been divorced for any reason but unfaithfulness remains married to her husband. Thus if she has had relations with another after her divorce, Jesus says she is still legally married to her husband. Then she is an adulteress and the man with whom she has been sinning is also an adulterer. This would be the case under Mosaic Law as well (as the Rabbis understood it): a woman who has not been divorced with a proper bill of divorce is forbidden to all but her husband (and to him too if she has been unfaithful, but it is not adultery for her to be with him even so). She and the man with whom she has been unfaithful (even if living as man and wife) are both guilty of adultery. What is at issue then is what constitutes a proper divorce. We do not know if Jesus means that both the woman and the man are subject to the death penalty (not necessarily administered) or rather that what Jesus says is adultery is so only in the eyes of God but not in the eyes of humans.

There is another issue to consider here, namely, the somewhat haphazard way in which in this text Jesus makes reference to Deut 24:1 and 2; but we shall leave this until our discussion of chapter 19, in which Jesus also refers to these verses from Deuteronomy but more directly, even if they are dismissed as concessions.<sup>47</sup>

*Again, you have heard that it was said to the ancients, “You shall not swear oaths deceitfully,” (Lev 19:12) [And you might think it means] But you shall perform to the Lord your oaths. (v. 33)*

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47 For background to the scholarly discussions on this passage see Markham Geller, “Early Christianity and the Dead Sea Scrolls” (1994), 82–86. The claim is that 11QTemple Scroll (LVII 17–19, CD IV 20–21) forbids divorce and polygamy. I remain unconvinced that divorce is at issue in these texts, as I wrote in my “Response to Marcus Bockmuehl” (Basser 2004).

LXX renders Lev 19:12 “*kai ouk homeisthe tō onomati mou en’ adikō*,” which literally translates as, “And you shall not declare an oath by My name unjustly.” The Hebrew reads: *ve-lo tishave’u vi-shemi lashaqer*, which translates as: “and you shall not declare an oath by My name dishonestly.” Matthew condenses this to *ouk epiorkesais*—“You shall not swear an oath deceitfully.” As a result of this injunction from Leviticus 19 it was common for people to swear by something other than God’s name, though this something else was usually something of value. What these other things were varied. In the introduction to this chapter (in discussing the use of hyperbole) we saw some fairly ridiculous examples of what people swore by.

Jesus introduces the text from Leviticus, and then by way of a paraphrase of Num 30:2 states what one might deduce from this text—that it is fine to swear an oath so long as it is fulfilled. But this is not Jesus’ position at all. In fact, his position is precisely the opposite. Avoid swearing oaths at all, he says (v. 34). In like fashion (v. 43) Jesus will state that, from the ancient saying, “Love your neighbor as yourself [Lev 19:18],” one might conclude that one can then hate those who are not one’s neighbors. But this, Jesus says, is not what should be deduced from this at all, but again just the opposite. In neither of these cases does Jesus transcend the written law, but he does reject the facile assumptions that one might reasonably make based on these laws.

Consider the following text from *Midrash Aggadah* (ed. Buber), Lev 5:1, in which, like Jesus, the Rabbis make clear that it is best not to swear at all:

*And when a person sins, [and having heard the voice of an oath, and he was witness, or saw, or knew—if he does not declare it, he shall bear his iniquity] (Lev 5:1).* Our Rabbis said, even if done honestly it is not good for a person to take an oath. One should not become reckless in respect to taking oaths (and then suffer horrid consequences).<sup>48</sup> It once happened there was a royal mountain on which two thousand cities were situated. These were all destroyed on account of a truthful oath [perhaps sworn “on the life of the king.”]. How did it happen? Each person swore an oath [of an unnecessary nature] with his friend, “I will go and eat!” “I will go and drink!” and they went and did so. But if for this [seemingly harmless taking of an oath] for the sake of eating and drinking which oath they swore and performed [the royal cities] were destroyed, then consider how much more so, on account of people who swear to no purpose whatsoever, [will havoc ensue].

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<sup>48</sup> Josephus, *Ant.* 3:91, warns against frivolous oaths in paraphrasing the third commandment from the Decalogue.

*But I tell you not to swear any oath, neither by heaven, because it is the throne of God [Isa 66:1].* (v. 34)

The form here is familiar from the rabbinic literature. A general rule with a broad sweep is stated, which covers all the lesser cases; and even though one might think that the rule allows for a lesser case because this lesser case has become common practice, this is not so. Therefore the Rabbis state the rule and then, although they say that it is not necessary to speak of any of the lesser cases that would contravene the rule, still they do speak of the lesser cases that would contravene it, to make clear that the rule remains wholly operative. The Rabbis used the form: "This is the case . . . and I need not have mentioned that one also [but I did]."<sup>49</sup>

With regard to the swearing of oaths, Jesus says here that one should not assume that Lev 19:12 means that, because it says one should not swear falsely, it is acceptable to swear honestly. That is, even though this might seem to be an acceptable exegesis for this verse, Jesus says rather it is best that one should not swear at all.<sup>50</sup> Now because Lev 19:12 states that one should not swear falsely by God's name—and it was the custom not to swear by his name<sup>51</sup>—one might think there were at least several other reasons contained within the verse that would allow one to swear an oath. First, Lev 19:12 only forbids the swearing of an oath that is not meant to be kept; and, second, the prohibition against swearing an oath applies only to those sworn in God's name but not to those sworn by any of the other conventional things that people swore by in first century Palestine and later, such as heaven and earth, as Jesus indicates here.<sup>52</sup> But again Jesus denies both of these things.

49 *B. Hor. 2a–b* shows the two forms used in the Mishnah where there is no point in mentioning the obvious. The Talmud points out that rabbinic masters taught in certain rhetorical styles.

50 That one should always be very cautious about swearing oaths is stated in Sir. 23:9–11; Philo, *On the Decalogue* 84–86; Josephus, *Ant.* 3.91; *Num. Rab. Numbers* [ed. Buber], *Mattot*, 30:2; and *b. Šebu.* 35a.

51 *Mekhilta of Rabbi Yishmael* to Exod 21:17 refers to substitutes for the divine name in oaths and their admissibility (p. 268 n. 4 in the edition of H-R discusses the issues of the names). *B. Ned.* 22a and *Pesiq. Rab.* 22 speak of the seriousness and dangers of making vows. In *Pesiq. Rab. piska* 22.6, it is said that even an oath affirming a certain olive tree is an olive tree is taking God's name in vain.

52 In his *On the Special Laws*, Philo also mentions that people swore by the sun, the stars and the universe. In *b. Šebu.* 35a, it is said that people also swore by *Adonai*, the Almighty, The Lord of Hosts, etc.

Concerning what one was able to swear by, the Rabbis finally formulated a rule: if something by which one swore could at times be understood to be a reference to God, but at other times could be understood to be a reference to something else, then unless both parties agreed to accept that by which the oath was sworn, the oath could be retracted (*b. Šebu.* 35a–b). But Jesus claims that, either because these conventional things—such as heaven and earth—were not circumlocutions but in fact did refer to God, or that because it was not clear if the oath taker intended to refer to God by these circumlocutions, they should not be used at all.

Much of the parallel material from the rabbinic literature that discusses the things Jesus mentions that people commonly swore by and the rationales for their popularity has now been collected and any scholarly commentary provides these sources from this literature.<sup>53</sup> The benefit of our knowing these sources is that now we can see that what Jesus says here concerning the swearing of oaths was in no way revolutionary.

*Nor by the earth, because it is his footrest [Isa 66:1], nor by Jerusalem,<sup>54</sup> because it is the great King's city (Ps 48:3). Nor should you swear by your head, because you are not able to make a single hair white or black. (vv. 35–36)*

*M. Sanh.* 3:2 speaks of swearing by the head. *Lev. Rab. Metzora*, 19:2 states that if everyone in the world were to gather together in an effort to find a way to make a (the tone of the text suggests that one should add here—a single feather of the) raven's wing turn from black to white, they would not be able do it.

*Let your speech be “Yes, yes,” and “No, no.” More than this comes from the evil one. (v. 37)*

Here too the commentators mention all the relevant parallels, such as *b. B. Meši'a* 49a and *Ruth Rab.* 7:6. For the righteous, yes is yes and no is no. According to *Derekh Eretz* 5:1, oaths should always be avoided by saying instead “Yes, yes” and “No, no.” Rava derived this same teaching from Gen 9:11, where God swears that never again shall he bring a flood to destroy the earth: “I establish my covenant with you, that never again . . .” A covenant is an oath and the Aramaic Targums regularly translate “covenant” (Hebrew: *brit*) as “oath” (Hebrew:

53 See Lachs, *Rabbinic Commentary*, 100–103.

54 *T. Ned.* 1:2–3 discusses oaths and vows in which one vows by Jerusalem and/or the Temple. See also *b. Ned.* 11a and *y. Ned.* 1:3.

*shevuah*). For example, *Targum Onqelos* renders both the oath in Gen 26:3 and the covenant in Deut 8:3 as *qeyama*. So Rava finds that in Gen 9:11 God swears an oath because not once but twice in Gen 9:11 he says “no.” “[And I will establish my covenant with you], No—cutting off of all flesh any more by the waters of a flood. No—more waters to be a flood to destroy the earth” (*b. Šebu.* 36a). For Jesus, the law of piety demands that one should not swear oaths and this was also the teaching of scrupulous Jews of his time, and such is the practice of pious Jews to this day.

*You have heard that it was said, “Eye for eye and tooth for tooth” (Exod 21:24). (v. 38)*

We must understand that Matthew’s source materials were not simply various unedited texts. To the contrary, Matthew used established materials that are found in the Jewish oral traditions. For instance, most of the ordered list found in 5:38–41—i.e., 1) eye, 2) cheek, and 3) coat—can be found in the rabbinic literature though not in Hebrew Scriptures. Laws concerning the penalty to be paid for the damaging or destroying of someone’s eye and/or for the slapping of someone’s cheek are found in Hammurabi’s Code (c. 1750 B.C.E.).<sup>55</sup> That is, at least part of this list had a very long history in the ancient Near East before it came to appear in Matthew and in the rabbinic literature.

*But I say to you, do not oppose the evil one, for whoever slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. (v. 39)*

It is best to deal with verses 38–41 as a unit, since altogether these four verses proclaim one message, which is that one should forego one’s claim to justice. A tradition found in *t. B. Qam.* 9:29 contains a similar sentiment:

Concerning injury to one’s fellow: Even if the one who perpetrated the attack did not ask forgiveness from his victim, the injured party must pray for the other’s welfare. Scripture so states, “And Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech [who had wronged him]” (Gen 20:17)].

The Rabbis also discussed waiving payments that one could claim in court. A text from minor tractate *Derekh Eretz* 6:3 reads:

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55 D. W. Thomas, *Documents from the Old Testament Times* (1958), 27–37, particularly 34.

Whoever forgives payments due him, he is forgiven retribution against all his sins. Scripture states, “*Who is a God like you, forgiving iniquity and foregoing trespass?*” (Micah 7:18) [Read the verse to mean] Whose iniquities does He forgive? The one who foregoes payment due him [from others’ trespasses against his body or property].

Yet the rabbinic literature also contains much detail about what sort of restitution, if any, one needed to make for having either injured and/or humiliated another. The literature also speaks of the many ways in which one can injure and/or humiliate another, but the main examples are injuring the eye (which for the Rabbis meant both damage as well as physical pain); slapping (which meant pained embarrassment); and garment-taking (which meant embarrassment). For our purposes it is sufficient to look at *m. B. Qam.* 8:

(1) When one injures another he becomes liable to pay for five categories of damage. How so? If he blinded his eye, etc . . . (6) If he slapped his face he gives him a flat rate of 200 *zuz*, if backhanded [on the right cheek]—400 *zuz*; . . . if he removes his garment from him he gives him 400 *zuz*.<sup>56</sup>

We now turn to the ordered list in Matt 5:38–41:

[38] “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’

[39] But I say to you, Do not oppose evil. But if any one strikes you on the right *cheek*, turn to him the other also;

[40] and if any one wins a lawsuit against you (so Syriac) to take your *coat*, let him have your cloak as well;

[41] and if any one forces you to *walk* one mile, walk with him two miles.”

The examples of injury suffered and/or humiliation received appear in order of diminishing severity. The further down the list the injury and/or the humiliation appears, the less severe the one or the other is. This is also the case in the list from *m. B. Qam.* above.<sup>57</sup> While the list from *m. B. Qam.* and the list from

<sup>56</sup> See also *b. Qam.* 92a.

<sup>57</sup> At first glance one might think this is not the case. The one who is slapped is to receive 200 *zuz* and is mentioned earlier than the one who loses his garment but receives 400 *zuz*.

Matthew are similar in structure, what is meant by the garment being removed in the list from the Mishnah has nothing to do with its having been taken away as a result of a judgment, as in Matthew (v. 40), but rather it concerns one who shames another either by lifting up, or else tearing, another's garment. In other words, Matthew deviates from the pattern here.

Matthew 5:40 in the Greek reads: “And to the one who desires to go to law with (or to stand trial with) you and to take your shirt, grant him your coat as well.” The Syriac version is clear that the one who is being accused is told not to resist the plaintiff: “And if any one wins a lawsuit against you to take your *coat*, let him have your cloak as well.” As I say, this example seems out of place in Matthew. Losing a court case (or being sued) is hardly the same thing as suffering violence and the point of this clause is not entirely clear. To be consistent with the supererogatory ethic of the entire list, we should expect to read here something like: “And if one should grab your coat, give him your cloak too.”

The final example on the list, which concerns the one who forces another to walk with him, is not seen to be either an injury or a humiliation in any of the Jewish legal codes and seems to have been added to Matthew’s list to complete a series of three instances in which one is to forego any claim to justice. Verse 38, which introduces the list, seems to carry with it the rabbinic notion that either injury suffered and/or embarrassment received requires monetary, not corporal, redress because Jesus says nothing about “if someone pluck out your eye.”<sup>58</sup> The assumption then remains that whoever forces another to walk with him is also liable for damages.

It is instructive to note that Matthew’s language in 5:30 approximates the expression found in Lam 3:30 whereby one is to “give one’s cheek to the smiter; one is to be filled with insults.” The parallel of cheek/insults drives home the point that Matthew’s “striking the cheek” is an expression of insult rather than physical damage.

*And to the one who wishes to take your shirt in a judgment, give him your coat as well. And whoever forces you to go a mile, go with him two. Give to the one who asks from you, and do not turn away anyone who wishes to borrow from you. You have heard that it was said, “Love your neighbor” (Lev 19:18) and [you might infer from this that it also means to] hate your enemy. But I say, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” (vv. 40–44)*

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However, the order of descending stringency is in the categories while in each category the order moves from the more frequent to the less frequent without regard for the size of the fines or liabilities.

58 See here the discussion in Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism*, 259–63.

We would do well to approach this unit (vv. 43–45) carefully, for it is of a different order than the other units in this section of the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>59</sup> For unlike in the other units, here Jesus gives a full sermon on the biblical text that introduces the unit (Lev 19:18)—the commandment to love one's neighbor. In this sermon it is not the written law to love one's neighbor that Jesus objects to; rather it is the inference that one might draw from the verse, that loving one's neighbor means that one should hate one's enemy.

We begin our discussion with an explanation of how the Rabbis went about transforming the meaning of certain laws that seemed to them no longer acceptable to their cultural sensitivities and world view. The method used to transform the meaning of these laws might be characterized in this way: “literal unacceptable; stretch apt.” For with this method the literal meaning of a biblical text was rejected for whatever reason, after which the text was then reinterpreted in such a way that a new meaning was found for it that was more in keeping with the current world view of the Rabbis. In the rabbinic literature this three-step exegetical method appears like this: 1) the text is given; then 2) the plain meaning of the text is stated, followed by objections to this meaning; then, 3) the new meaning is established. To show how this method worked, and also to show how it was that both the Rabbis and Matthew’s Jesus used this same method to interpret both biblical and oral law, we shall first present several examples of it from the rabbinic literature, before turning again to the Gospel text. Our first example is from *b. Zebah*. 22b:

The prophet Ezekiel proclaimed: “Thus says the Lord: *Any stranger, uncircumcised in heart, and uncircumcised in flesh, shall not enter into my sanctuary*” (Ezek 44:9); And also: *In that you have brought strangers, uncircumcised in heart, and uncircumcised in flesh, to be in my sanctuary, to profane it, my house* (44:7) . . .

The Rabbis taught: 2. *Any stranger*—might I think Ezekiel literally means a stranger [a non-Israelite, who could under no circumstances officiate in the Temple]? The Scripture states his disqualification, “uncircumcised in heart.” [So it was not a non-Israelite Ezekiel was speaking of here, but a Jewish priest who was “uncircumcised in heart,” that is, whose intentions

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59 While my approach rests essentially on my own constructions, there are a number of older works that should be mentioned: Moritz Guedemann, *Naechstenliebe, ein Beitrag zur Erlkaerung des Mathaeus-Evangeliums* (1890), and Taylor, *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* (1886), 8–10.

were impure.] 3. So why call him “stranger”? It means “one whose characteristic behaviors have estranged him to his Father Who Is in Heaven.”

For the Rabbis the “stranger” in this text from Ezekiel, who was not to enter the Temple, did not mean a non-Israelite, which is what it originally meant. Rather for them it meant an Israelite, who because of his being “uncircumcised in heart” was “estranged” from God. The Rabbis used this text from Ezekiel to make known that a Jewish priest with an impure heart was as unfit for divine service as any non-Israelite would have been. Both circumcised flesh and a circumcised heart were required for a priest to officiate in the Temple.

As can be seen in this example, in reinterpreting the legal texts from the Scriptures and the oral documents to fit the needs of their current worldview, the Rabbis stretched the meaning of the words in the texts far beyond what the context would seem to allow. It was never the texts alone they were interpreting but rather the value system of their current worldview that provided the context for their interpretations. But this “stretching” of the meaning of the words in these texts was in no way seen to be a violation of the texts, since it was done using the standard hermeneutical methods universally accepted by the Rabbis. That is, for reasons that were wholly intelligible to the community, the Rabbis set aside the literal meaning of these biblical texts and replaced them with a new meaning that was, if not opposite to, at least far removed from the original meaning of it.<sup>60</sup> Let us take a look at another example of this three-step interpretive method from the rabbinic literature (there are hundreds to choose from), this one from *b. Menaḥ. 99b*. The three steps—statement of the verse; objection to its literal meaning; then reinterpretation—are clearly apparent in it.

1. And thou shall set upon the table show bread before Me *continually* (Exod 25:30). It was taught: 2. Rabbi Yosi said [the literal is impractical], If the old show bread was removed after a part of the morning and the new set down during a part of the evening, there would be no problem. 3. So what meaning do I establish for the words of Ex. 25:30, “before me *continually*?—That the table not rest [for a whole night or day] without bread on it.

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60 Sometimes a similar principle is said to be “If it does not suit its immediate scriptural context find another where it will fit,” e.g. *b. Šabb. 70a*; *b. Pesah. 23b–24a*; *b. Yoma 32b*, and innumerable other places in the Talmud and halakhic midrashim.

Said Rabbi Ammi: From the words of Rabbi Yosi we can derive that even if one reads a mere chapter of Torah in the morning and a chapter at night he can fulfill Joshua 1:8: “This book of the Torah shall not depart out of thy mouth; [but you shall meditate in it *day and night*].”

In interpreting Exod 25:30, Rabbi Yosi determined that the show bread did not need to be on the table at all times, as the literal biblical text stipulated it should be. New loaves did not have to be placed on the table before the old ones were removed in order to fulfill the requirement that the bread be “before [God] continually.” Rabbi Yosi’s objection to the word “continually” is not made clear. Nevertheless his understanding of “continually” is far removed from what is normally meant by the word. One consequence of Rabbi Yosi’s interpretation is that Rabbis such as Rabbi Ammi could find justification for shortening the time they devoted to daily Torah study while nonetheless fulfilling the directive that their Torah study be continual, i.e. “day and night.” It should be noted that Rabbi Yosi’s interpretation of Exod 25:30 regarding the show bread was not accepted, but we can infer from it that his intention, as usual, was to avoid and alleviate unnecessary strain and hardship in the community.<sup>61</sup> This was often the motive for uncovering new meanings in these legal texts.

Let us now turn back to the Gospel text, in which Jesus applies the same exegetical method to Lev 19:18, and determines that the word “neighbor” also means “enemy.” Here is the text with the each of the three steps, differing only slightly from the examples from the rabbinic literature above in that the order of the steps is 1–3–2:

1. (Matt 5:43) You have heard that it was said, “Love your *neighbor*” and [by implication] hate your enemy.
3. (Matt 5:44). But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...
2. (Matt 5:46) If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?

Since Scripture has no need to talk about loving one’s friend and/or one’s neighbor, Jesus suggests that the real point here concerns hating one’s enemy. The text from Leviticus does not explicitly state that the corollary of loving one’s

61 Basser, “Uncovering the Plots: Image of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai,” in *The Mathers’ Lectures and Other Papers in the Study of Judaism at Queen’s University* (2001), 53–56.

neighbor is hating one's enemy, but this is inferred and presented as though it did.<sup>62</sup> Scripture commands love of one's neighbor, and God will reward the fulfilling of the commandment. But why should he bother to reward what comes naturally between friendly neighbors, who by definition like each other and get along well? Since it is unnecessary for Scripture to command what people will do anyway—love friends and neighbors towards whom they are already favorably disposed—Jesus must establish a radically different and more difficult meaning for this directive, namely, “love your enemies.”<sup>63</sup>

*So that in this way you will be children of your heavenly father, because he causes his sun to shine upon the evil and upon the good, and it he sends rain upon the righteous and the unrighteous both.* (v. 45)

The homiletic mechanisms Matthew uses to generate the arguments Jesus makes in this unit—you must love one's enemies because that is what God does, and you are to be like him—are fairly complex. (We will examine these mechanisms in greater detail.) What Matthew wants to develop here are the sermonic materials that will affirm the argument Jesus is making. We must therefore take a wider look at Jesus' argument that humans must emulate God.

I begin with what most would consider a very late text from *Exod. Rab.* 46:4, which expounds on Deut 14:1: *“You are children of the Lord your God.”* It teaches that the children of Israel must be like God because they are also his children. In its present form the midrash is somewhat corrupt but for our purposes we need look only at a short parable from it. The text reads:

A parable. There was a *synkletos*-officer [i.e. a senator] who had children who associated with riffraff and turned to evil ways.... [T]he father claimed they were not really his children.... [B]ut he was told: Everyone knows they are your children for they are similar to you. The key to the

<sup>62</sup> Similarly, *b. Qidd.* 29b quotes Deut. 11:9: “And you shall teach them to your sons—and not your to your daughters.” “And not to your daughters” is an inference, not part of the scriptural verse.

<sup>63</sup> A text from *Abot R. Nat.* A, chap. 16, mulls the scope of the commandment of loving one's neighbor. Challenging the possible inference that a “neighbor” is someone who is like oneself, it concludes that “love your neighbor” is not limited to scholars if one is a scholar, or disciples if one is a disciple. “Neighbor,” however, does exclude those who are “apostates, renegades, and those who hand Jews over to the Romans”—enemies whom one is allowed to hate.

parable: The *synkletos* symbolizes God; “his children” symbolize the children of Israel, as it is said, *You are children of the Lord your God* (Deut 14:1).

The point of this parable seems to be that in the end, Israelites will be redeemed because, as God’s children, they innately share in his goodness. Although living among the nations has corrupted them, God will welcome them back because he is their father and they are “similar” to him. The parable does not inform us in what ways Israel is “similar” to him.<sup>64</sup> We are told only that the key to the parable’s meaning is found in Deut 14:1, where Israel is set apart from the nations because, as God’s own children, they are deserving of salvation.

Another midrash, from *Tanh. Deut., Ekev* 5 which also refers to Deut 14:1, states that the Israelites are God’s children only when they are obedient to His commands.

“You are children of the Lord your God” (Deut 14:1). When are you My children? When you are of the Lord your God by obeying My commandments.

In still another midrash, from the *Mekhilta of Rabbi Yishmael Beshalah* 3 (*Shira*), to Exod 15:2 (see also *y. Pe’ah* 1:1 and *b. Šabb.* 33b), it is said that to be like God means to be generous in spirit as he is.

*This is my God, and I will glorify Him; [my father’s God, and I will exalt Him]* (Exod 15:2). Abba Shaul says, “Be similar to Him (*hidameh lo*). As He is kind and merciful so you also be kind and merciful.”

Note here the juxtaposition of “kind” and “merciful.”

Finally, in a text from *Tanh. Gen., Vayishlah* 10 (condensed here), which serves as a midrash on Deut 13:5 and Deut 8:6, the command to imitate God is reinforced by several citations from the Scriptures.<sup>65</sup>

When Moses told Israel “after the Lord your God you shall go” (Deut 13:5) and “to go in His ways” (Deut 8:6)? (They said: who can go in His

64 The sermon, of which this parable is but a small part, is so inscrutable that R. Ze’ev Einhorn, one of the greatest commentators on *Midrash Rabbah*, declared it to be far beyond his grasp.

65 *B. Sotah* 14a tells us that Rabbi Ḥama, son of Rabbi Ḥanina, knew another version of this idea: “Why is it written ‘to go in his ways’ (Deut 13:5). Can anyone really go after the *Shekhina*? Does Scripture not say, ‘For the Lord your God is a consuming fire’ (Deut 4:24)? But Deut 15:5 means to follow after the attributes of the Holy One.”

ways . . . ?) Moses said to Israel: That is not what I said to you—rather [follow] His ways which are kindness and truth and charity as it is written, “All the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth” (Ps 25:10), and charity. . . . So you also, go after these traits of the Holy One.

In Luke 6:35, Jesus gives us a reworking of Deut 14:1: “And you shall be a) *children of* b) *the Highest*, c) for *He is kind* to the thankless and the wicked” (blanket universal statement); this is followed by: “Be therefore *merciful*, as your *Father* also is *merciful*” (6:36). That God is kind to the ungrateful and unworthy is obvious. Although biblical texts could have been offered to support this claim, Luke’s Jesus does not make use of them. Using empirical data is sometimes preferred by midrashists even when biblical texts are readily available to them.<sup>66</sup> The midrashic themes concerning *imitatio Dei*, which we saw in the examples from the rabbinic literature above, are simply stated by Jesus in Luke 6:35 as the conclusion of a somewhat intricate exegesis of Deut 14:1. Matthew’s approach is different and we shall examine it in further depth shortly.

Finally, we should also consider *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* to Lev 22:28. This biblical text reads: “And whether it be cow or ewe, you shall not kill it and its young both in one day,” concerning which the Targum comments:

My people, the children of Israel, just as our [var. your] Father is merciful in heaven [var. in heaven is merciful], so shall you be merciful on earth.<sup>67</sup>

The substance of Luke 6:35–36 was likely available as a midrash, not unlike *Tg. Ps-J.* to Lev 22:28. As noted, Jesus does not cite any verse for his assertion that God is kind to the thankless and the wicked, relying instead on the well-known fact that God is kind, which he appends to his paraphrase of Deut 14:1: “You shall be children of the Lord your God.”

Likewise in Matt 5:45, Jesus does not cite any scriptural verse as a proof-text for his assertion that God loves those who do not love him, but uses the

<sup>66</sup> See, e.g., *b. Pesah.* 21b.

<sup>67</sup> “As I am merciful,” is also reflected in *y. Ber.* 5:3. In this text R. Yosi, from the fourth century, complains about the midrashic addition to Lev 22:28 in the Targum: “Rabbi Yosi, son of [Rabbi] Bun, said: They do not do well who make the injunctions of the Holy One, Blessed be He, into traits of mercy and render (Lev 22:28): ‘*My people, children of Israel, just as I am merciful in heaven, so shall you be merciful on earth.*’ Yet Matthew’s sermon’s reference to “your father” has a sound basis. In the Maher edition of *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, he points out that the text in the London library reads: “Children of Israel, just as our father is merciful in heaven.”

well-known fact of God's beneficence toward all, including the wicked, as sufficient proof that He is indeed kind to His enemies. However, in the next sections of Chapter 5 (46–48) Matthew goes beyond Luke to find Scriptures and traditions that bolster the claim that God is perfect and kind and so people ought to be. Luke is cited at length here because the sections that follow will show Matthew's stunning ability to simplify complex exegesis in going beyond Luke's version.

*For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your siblings, what especially are you doing? Do not the Gentiles do the same? (vv. 46–47)*

Jesus has made the case that the command to love to one's neighbor does not mean that one should hate one's enemy, but rather just the reverse. To confirm this claim Jesus gives several examples of what loving one's neighbor was generally construed as—loving those who love you in return, and greeting those whom you already know; he explains why there is nothing special about doing either of these things. How can there be reward, he asks, if both the Gentiles and the despised Jewish tax collectors do it too?

Since “neighbors” cannot refer to friends, then Jesus infers that it must refer to enemies. This interpretive method is called *im eyno inyan*—*tehei inyan* (e.g. b. Pes. 24a). What makes this particular interpretation of “neighbor” as “enemy” plausible is that the word *le-rei'akha* has an adjectival pronominal possessive suffix (your) attached to the noun *rei'a*. This noun often means another person who is your friend and that usage is the one Jesus wishes to rule out. It is possible that loving your *rei'a* means loving your friend, and it would follow that you may then hate your enemy. But the sense of *rei'a* is not limited to a friendly “other,” since essentially the word means “another person”. Generally for Sages, *rei'a* is interpreted as referring to a fellow Israelite but not always, especially when it is clear that the text means otherwise. The feminine form, *rei'ut*, occurs in Esth 1:19: “Let the king give her royal estate *le-r'utah* (literally—unto the “other one” of hers) better than she.” It is clear here there would be no affection at all between these women but neither would there necessarily be any enmity either. The Talmud shows some embarrassment regarding the Sages restricting the term to Jews. Yet that was the understanding *consacrée par l'usage*. In a biblical legal passage involving limited liability when one's animal initially gores another's animal the claim was made this limitation only applies to the advantage of Jews (Exod 21:35: *re'eihu*).<sup>68</sup>

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68 See y. B. Qam. 4:3.

But Jesus makes the point here that, even if the term's exclusivity might be justified also as *consacrée par l'usage*, in the case of love of another the text clearly means otherwise. He argues there is no logic in commanding one to love one's neighbor (*der Nächste*), that is only natural, and hence this other (*Andere*) must of necessity refer to one's enemy.<sup>69</sup> Although the form is apodictic, matching such other pronouncements in this chapter: "But I say, 'love your enemies,' Matthew affixes powerful justifications for the assertion. The biblical term itself is neutral. Although usually, from early times, translated as "neighbor" and still today understood as such, it should be more precisely be rendered as "other." As is the Greek *plēsion*, which is used by Matthew, the sense of *rei'a* is ambiguous, and therefore assigning the meaning "enemy" after ruling out "friend" is plausible and perhaps necessary.<sup>70</sup> Matthew provides us with a wide range of demonstrations of the assertion that one should love one's enemy from the philological (the contextual meaning of "neighbor") to the theological-mystical (becoming an extension of the divine).

It is interesting that Jesus groups together "the Gentiles" with "the tax collectors" here. Early in Matthew's Gospel Jesus shows an anti-Gentile bias; but after a time he shows increasing antipathy toward Jews, which comes to dominate. But here Matthew presents Jesus as a completely loyal Jew who has no sympathy for pagans. As we proceed into chapter 8 we will find the Gentiles are destined to dine with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob at the great feast in the next world while the Jews will be kept out, gnashing their teeth. Progressively, Jesus turns away from the Jews until he orders that Scribes be made of all the nations, all the Gentiles.

*So you shall be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect. (v. 48)*

Here Jesus tells his listeners that in loving their enemies, they will become perfect, in a way in which God is.<sup>71</sup> They must not be like "Gentiles" and "the tax collectors," whose imperfection is that they love only those who love them.

Jesus' argument here is essentially that of Luke's Jesus (6:35–36): be like God; God loves his enemies (those who are "ungrateful and the selfish"); therefore to

<sup>69</sup> The German terminology in brackets comes from Felix Perles, "Das Jüdische in Cohen's Ethik" (Perles 1906), 193, citing the eye-opening word study of Hermann Cohen in his *System der Philosophie* (v.2, 207).

<sup>70</sup> Cf. Luke 10:33.

<sup>71</sup> See William Klassen, "The Authenticity of the Command: 'Love Your Enemies'" in *Authenticating the Words of Jesus* (Chilton and Evans 1999), 385–407 and Kister, "Words and Formulae" (Becker and Ruzer 2005), 127–33.

be like God means to love one's enemies. But unlike in Luke, here in Matthew Jesus also states that the proof of God's love for those who do not love him is found in the fact that he does not withhold the sun and rain from them, when certainly he could.<sup>72</sup> Moreover in Matthew Jesus ends his sermon not with a syllogism, as he does in Luke, but with a close paraphrase of Deut 18:13.

Matthew's literary achievement in this brief unit is masterful, but especially here in this final verse in which he brings into play the various rabbinic midrashim which had come to be associated with Deut 18:13. In Matthew's version of Deut 18:13—"So you shall be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect"—the text demands *imitatio dei*. Let us take a closer look at what lies behind Matthew's rendering of Deut 18:13.

First, to see the way Deut 18:13 was written in the various biblical texts from antiquity will be helpful here. The Masoretic version of the text reads: "You shall be perfect with the Lord your God." The Hebrew for perfect, *tamim*, is used in the Scriptures to mean either "without blemish," which gives the word a passive sense (e.g., "If his offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he shall offer a male without blemish ['*tamim*']" [Lev 1:3]); or to act kindly or justly, which gives the word a more active sense (e.g., "The Rock, his work is perfect ['*tamim*'] for all his ways are justice" [Deut 32:4]). The Septuagint and Peshitta (the Syriac version) give us: "You shall be perfect before the Lord your God." That is, before God be both without blemish and also act kindly and/or justly toward others. The *Targum Onqelos* gives us "You shall be perfect in the fear of the Lord your God," which gives us an essentially submissive sense to the word; whereas *Targum Neofiti* has "You shall be perfect in good deed with the Lord your God," which gives the word a somewhat more active sense.<sup>73</sup> The Vulgate brings together both the completely active and passive senses of "*tamim*" in its version of the text: "You shall be perfect and without defect with the Lord your God." As can be seen, none of these versions of Deut 18:13 above is very close to Matthew's version of it.

Now let us return to the Masoretic version of Deut 18:13: "You shall be perfect with the Lord your God." The word "with" in Hebrew is "*im*," but "*im*" can also mean "even as," in the sense of being "similar to." For example, a tradition found in *Tanh. Gen., Vayera* 23, states that before Abraham went up the mountain with Isaac he said to his servants, who had just before responded to a question of his in such a way as to make their obtuseness obvious: "Stay here

<sup>72</sup> B. *Ta'an.* 7a records in the name of Rabbi Abbahu: The day of rain is greater than the resurrection of the dead. The resurrection of the dead is reserved only for the righteous *but rain falls both on the righteous and on the wicked*.

<sup>73</sup> M. *Abot* 3:9 puts fear of God and good works on the same level.

with (*im*) the donkey (Gen 22:5), for you are *even as* he is.”<sup>74</sup> That “*im*” can mean “even as” explains why in *Midr. Ps* 119:10, Deut 18:13 is rendered as: “You shall be perfect with [*im*] the Lord your God—even as He is perfect.”

In another tradition from *Midrash Psalms*, but from 119:3 (some texts 119:10), it is said that the word “*im*” from Deut 18:13 means “similar to,” and not “before,” as in the version of the text in either the LXX or Peshitta. The midrashist then reminds that one should be perfect, and states that it is in being perfect that one is “similar to” God, for God too is perfect (however the proof-text he uses here to confirm his claim that God is perfect is not entirely apposite, for in it the word “perfect”—(*tamim*)—does not in its biblical context refer to God but to his work. The midrashist has purposely read the verse only partially to make his point):

Blessed are the *perfect* ones of the way who go in the instruction (Torah) of the Lord (Ps 119:1).

King Solomon said: “The righteous one who walks in his perfection, his children are blessed on account of him” (Prov 20:7). Now if his children are blessed [only] on his account, he himself all the more so [is blessed]. . . . And likewise Moses said to Israel, “You shall be perfect with the Lord your God” (Deut 18:13): “*Before*” the Lord your God is not written here but rather “*with/similar to*” the Lord your God. *If you would be perfect then you would be with/similar to the Lord your God.*—Why is this?—because He is also perfect. This is as it is said: *the Rock, his working is perfect* (Deut 32:4).

The following variant from *Midrash Psalms* 119:10 goes out its way to try to harmonize the meanings for “*im*” that we have seen in several of the versions of Deut 18:13 above—“before” (in the LXX and Peshitta), and “even as” (in Matthew and in *Midr. Ps.* 119:3):

For perfection is congenial [*yafeh*] before God, as it is said: *You shall be perfect with the Lord your God—even as He is perfect.* This is as it is said: the Rock, His working is perfect (Deut 32:4).

<sup>74</sup> Gen 30:8 seems to know this meaning for *im*; at least Onqelos and Rashi assume so: “Then Rachel said, ‘God has heeded my requests in my pleadings, in my dearest prayers, that I might have a child even as [*im*] my sister, yea it was given to me’; so she called his name Naphtali.” Numerous other examples of texts in which “*im*” means “even as” or “similar to” are found in *Bereshit Rabbah*, ed. J. Theodor and Ch. Albeck (Jerusalem, 1965), 893 (at the bottom).

The similarities are obvious between Matthew's rendering of Deut 18:13 and that which appears in *Midrash Psalms* above: *So you shall be perfect even as [Greek *hos*] your Father in heaven is perfect.*

Both Matthew and the Rabbis in *Midrash Psalms* produced such a similar rendering of Deut 18:13 because they both had in mind Lev 19:2, whose opening injunction, "You shall be holy," is a close parallel to "You shall be perfect" of Deut 18:13. Moreover the latter part of Lev 19:2 reads: "for [ki] I the Lord your God am holy." Now the Rabbis understood that like "*im*," "*ki*" could also mean "even as"; this is why in a tradition found in both *Tanh. Lev., Qedoshim 2* and *Yalkut Šim'oni Lev. 604* we read:

[God said,] "Tell Israel, 'And you shall be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exod 19:6).—Why? Even as (*ki*) I the Lord [your God] am holy so you shall be holy....' As it is said, 'You shall be holy, for (*ki*, even as) I the Lord your God am holy'" (Lev 19:2).

The clearest proof that both Matthew and the Rabbis understood that Deut 18:13 was a close parallel to Lev 19:2 is found in an antique source, *Sipra to Qedoshim (parashah 1)*. In discussing Lev 19:2, Abba Shaul says: "[Israel is the family] of the King—and so how must she act? She imitates the King." This midrash is also very much like the midrashim we have seen in the rabbinic traditions concerning Deut 14:1, in which we are told that the children of Israel are to imitate God because they are also his children.

It now remains to show, finally, that Lev 19:18—"And you shall love your neighbor as yourself [I am the Lord]"—which was the starting point for this sermon, has also been made part of the network of traditions concerning Israel's call to imitate God. Lev 19:18 concludes with the declaration from God that "I am the Lord," and this declaration connects with the phrase "the Lord your God" found in all the other biblical texts that lie behind this sermon on love of one's neighbor in Matthew—Deut 14:1, 18:13; and Lev 19:2. The traditional exegesis of these latter texts connects with the commandment to love one's neighbor by way of the declaration from God that "I am the Lord." (Lev 19:18). In his sermon here Jesus has found the connection between these two latter parts of Lev 19:18. "I am the Lord" is the pointer that explains that "your neighbor" refers to both the righteous and the wicked; for which reason Jesus can intimate that because God loves both then everyone else should love both too.<sup>75</sup>

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75 I am grateful to the panel of the Society of Biblical Literature (annual meeting, Washington, D.C., November 2006) for mentioning the importance of this point while discussing my

For Luke it was enough to incorporate the substance of Deut 14:1—“You are children of the Lord your God”—to establish the principal that one should act as God does (Luke 6:35). By including in his version of the sermon a paraphrase of Deut 18:13—“You shall be perfect *with/as* the Lord your God”—Matthew not only goes beyond Luke; he also greatly enhances the sermon. He suggests one is to be God-like.

In essence, then, Matthew does give us here (v. 48) a midrash that incorporates the rabbinic understanding of Deut 18:13, which he then combines with a paraphrase of Deut 14:1—“You are sons of God”—to drive home the point that because God is Israel’s father, it is necessary for Israel to imitate him.<sup>76</sup> Thus Deut 18:13 is to be rendered precisely as Matthew has it.

Full appreciation of Matthew’s literary skill here suffers if we avail ourselves only of the English translations of the verses. The richness of the midrashic traditions associated with these various texts allows us to see Matt 5:45–48 as part of a complex and ongoing homiletic performance. Indeed his text here is nothing short of sheer poetry constructed from various biblical texts and the midrashim associated with them, whose overall purpose is to show that the word “neighbor” must be stretched so that it can also mean “enemy.” The sermon here throws light on what Jesus intends meek and pious to mean throughout the sermon—imitating God and choosing the higher standard.

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paper, “*Imitatio Dei: A Note on the History of Exegesis Based on Luke, Matthew and the Rabbis.*”

<sup>76</sup> David Flusser (*Jewish Sources in Early Christianity*, 63) confirms my approach: “In these midrashim, various Biblical verses which have some similarities between them, were combined. Once a conclusion was drawn from one of them, it was possible to pass on to another verse for additional proof of what had been said in the first, and thus some long midrashim were created in the New Testament. This shows that this method was already employed by the Sages in their biblical exegesis of that period.”

# Chapter 6

## Introduction

Over the course of Chapter 5, the Matthean Jesus speaks of several different types of virtuous people—the humble, the meek, the merciful, the persecuted, the forgiving—and of how one can come to be as virtuous as these are. Then, at the close of the chapter, he focuses on love of neighbor that, as he later states, is the second of two great commandments (Matt 22:34–40). In chapter 6 he focuses on what he calls the first great commandment, the love of God. To say that these two commandments are “great” is to say that all the other commandments are there for the sake of these two commandments. That is, it is in fulfilling all the other commandments that one thereby comes to fulfill either of these two “great” commandments. In Chapter 6, the Matthean Jesus speaks of the ways in which one must fulfill several of these other commandments in order to fulfill the greater commandment that one must love God.

The command to love God is from Deut 6:5: “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being and with all your substance.”<sup>1</sup> Now for the Matthean Jesus this love of God is shown through acts of charity, prayer, and fasting, each of which is underlain by faith: charity, which by giving to another affects one’s substance or wealth; prayer, which comes from the heart; and fasting, which refines one’s being. Moreover Jesus says that each of these acts of love is to be done modestly and in secret.

It is noteworthy that Jesus speaks of three acts of love here rather than, say, four or five, for the triad has been a favored stylistic feature of Jewish (and also non-Jewish) rhetoric from very ancient times to the present. In *y. Sanh.* 10:2, for example, the Rabbis state that in order to prevent a catastrophe from occurring about which one has been warned in a dream, one should “seek three things”: prayer, charity, and repentance (which, once one comes to realize that repentance involves fasting, are the same three “things” that Jesus speaks of here in chapter 6). The proof-text for this tradition is 2 Chron 7:14: “If My people, which are called by My name, shall humble themselves, and *pray*, and seek *My face* (by giving charity), and *turn from their wicked ways*; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.” Another well-known triad is found in *m. Abot* 1:2: “On three things the world stands: on Torah, on Sacrifice (prayer), on Charity.”

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<sup>1</sup> *M. Ber.* 9:5 suggests it applies to one’s resources: wealth or one’s lot in life. God is to be served through the entirety of one’s wherewithal.

Rabbinic literature values Torah study as the supreme virtue. "If you have studied much Torah, your reward will be abundant" (*m. Abot* 2:21). But in his discussion here of these acts of love upon which one should base one's religious life, Jesus makes no mention of Torah study. And so here we encounter that which divides Matthew's world from the Rabbis' world. In Matthew's world faith is the ultimate value, whereas for the Rabbis, faith is of course necessary, but Torah study is the virtue *par excellence*. (Both Philo and Josephus also see Torah study as a prime virtue.) But Jesus' audience here is almost certainly the Galilean *am-ha'aretz*, that is, the hard-working people of the peasant class who were loyal to what they knew but ignorant of the finer legal matters associated with pious observance. They were people of faith but they were also distant from, and perhaps even antagonistic toward, the scholarly class.

It is also in this chapter, of course, that what has come to be known as the "Lord's Prayer" is found. In discussing the Lord's Prayer we must keep in mind that until at least the eighth century the Jews did not use prayer books for public prayer. Rather the custom was that a trained reader would recite the prayers aloud and his audience would repeat after him or else right along with him. As a result, we can only speculate as to the form, genre, and content of prayers in the Second Temple period. We presume that there were fixed prayers and fixed times of the day at which people said prayers, and that for those living outside Jerusalem it was necessary to face that city when praying. The Book of Daniel tells us: "He went into his house; and his windows being open in his chamber toward Jerusalem, he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he had done in the past" (6:11).

Jesus' prayer shows us that many of the conventions found in rabbinic prayers go back to the period before the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. One of the texts upon which the glorification of God (in prayer texts) was based was the prayer of the *seraphim* from Isa 6:3 (another being the song of Israel sung at the parting of the sea in Exodus 15). Structurally the prayer of Jesus in Matthew (and in Luke, too) also appears to be based on this angelic prayer from Isaiah, known as the *Kedushah de Sidra* or *Trisagion*: "And they called out to each other, and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of Hosts; all the earth is full of His glory.'"

The early liturgical history of the *Trisagion* is unclear but at some point with the addition of poetic glosses it was turned into a prayer of consolation and messianic hope, as we shall cite the text below. The threefold use of the word "holy" in praise of God<sup>2</sup> gave rise to a threefold sanctification of 1) God's

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<sup>2</sup> The point is that nothing said by God or angels is merely aesthetic repetition without some further sense.

name, 2) the heavens and the earth, and 3) messianic hope. From the designation of God as “Lord of Hosts” more elaborate praises for Him were developed. And the final phrase of the *Trisagion*—“all the earth is full of his glory”—was expanded to become a doxology that referred to heavenly peace and the time when this peace would finally prevail on earth. This threefold Universe of the Upper Realm, the Lower Realm, and the Next World, read through Isa 6:3, Ezek 3:12, and Exod 15:18,<sup>3</sup> was to become the backbone of prayer-structures in Judaism that echo the angels.

The *Kaddish*, which hallows God’s name, extols God’s power in creating heaven and earth according to his will, and anticipates the messianic era, was recited at the close of sermons and midrashic lectures in the study halls, fulfilling the requirement that learning sessions devoted to Scriptural interpretation and oral law conclude by looking forward to final redemption. Such prayers came to be known as prayers of comfort (*nechemta*). Verses of “consolation” from the prophets were recited before the consoling prayer that was built around them (e.g., Isa 59:20, “And a redeemer will come to Zion, and to them that repent from transgression in Jacob, says the Lord”). Eventually the daily prayer services incorporated these prayers and others that were said in private, which were known as *Kedushah de Sidra*, or the “*Trisagion* praise of the study session.”<sup>4</sup>

The previously mentioned liturgical proto-*piyyut*, expanding each of the three utterances of Holy, was incorporated into the Targum, or Aramaic translation, of Isa 6:3. Here the Targum and *Kedushah de Sidra* read:

*Holy—in the highest heavens above—the Dwelling [House] of His Shekhina [Gr. Logos=Divine will].*<sup>5</sup>

*Holy—on earth—the work of His Power [Heb. Gevurah/ Gr. Dynamis].*<sup>6</sup>

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3 The verses from Isaiah and Ezekiel relating angelic praises introduce the *Shema* recitation in the morning service, while the verse from Exodus, the redemption praise, follows it and introduces the Eighteen Benedictions.

4 For the text of the *Kedushah de Sidra* in English, see the *Complete ArtScroll Siddur*, 157–58: “A redeemer will come to Zion.”

5 The Targum to Ezek 3:12 is reflected in this expansion.

6 I assume this reflects the Targum of Isa 60:21: “And your people are all righteous, they shall inherit the earth, planting of my delight, *the work of my Power*.”

*Holy*—forever—and ever and ever is the Lord of Hosts.<sup>7</sup> *The whole world is full of the splendor of His Glory* (*Isa 6:3*) [Heb. *Kavod*/Gr. *Doxa*].

What I have put into brackets are the Greek terms—*Logos*, *Dynamis*, *Doxa* (Power)—that were part of the Judeo-Hellenistic world's theological system, as explained by Philo of Alexandria (*On Abraham* 97–103; see *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 2:233). But Jewish midrash also utilized the royal imagery associated with God and his cohorts. And so *Mekhilta of Rabbi Yishmael (Beshalah 4 (Shira))* to Exod 14:21, states that “when the Holy One was revealed with his *Glory* and with his *Power*, the Sea began to flee, as it is said, ‘The sea saw [Him] and fled’” (*Ps 114:3*). But we have strayed from the texts of our *Kedushah de Sidra* liturgy.

As we can see, in this *piyyut* in the Targum the threefold repetition of “Holy” has been transformed into three manifestations of the Divine. The *Kedushah de Sidra* as real proto-*piyyut* is still a midrash and shows us how this poem in the Targum came to be. In midrashic custom the proof-text reference is sometimes hidden. In the poem, parts of two other texts in their targumic form, which are explicit sources for this poem, were inserted after each “Holy” of the *Trisagion*. These texts are Ezek 3:12: “Then the Spirit lifted me up, and I heard a great rumbling sound behind me, ‘Blessed be the glory of the Lord from His place,’” which the *piyyut* cites verbatim, and then renders “*Blessed is the Glory of the Lord from the Place of the Dwelling [House] of his Shekhina*”,<sup>8</sup> and Exod 15:18: “The Lord will rule for ever and ever,”<sup>9</sup> which the *piyyut* cites verbatim and then renders: “*The Lord, his Kingdom is for ever and ever and ever.*” The poet expands the *Trisagion* so that the three realms he specifies—the heavenly, the earthly, and the final kingdom—are not only seen as the sacred locations of divine history, but also as the very holy name of God, the Lord of hosts, and then cites other biblical praises in order to elaborate upon the heavenly *Shekhina* and the coming kingdom. We shall leave for the commentary our detailed discussion of the *Kaddish* recitation that is another form of liturgy inspired by the *Trisagion*.

Now looking again at Jesus' prayer in Matthew, we can see that it contains roughly the three themes of the *Kedushah de Sidra* in a reworked order: *Holy (hallowed) be thy name*—thy 3) kingdom come, thy will be done 2) on earth,

<sup>7</sup> The Targum to Exod 15:18 is reflected in this expansion. This verse is recited after the three “holies” and their interpretations are given.

<sup>8</sup> Meaning the angels praise God in his heavenly temple.

<sup>9</sup> For the Rabbis of the Targum it was not proper to ascribe actions to God. Actions were turned into descriptions—e.g. God really does not rule forever; his kingdom endures forever.

1) as it is in heaven. Even Jesus' mention of repentance in the prayer is also part of one of the consoling verses (Isa 59:20, as we have seen) that introduces the *Trisagion* hymn in the *Kedushah de Sidra*. The concluding doxology, which appears in some of the later texts of Matthew—"For thine is 3) the kingdom and the 2) power and the 1) glory, forever. Amen"—shows us that the content of religious poetry varied and that different communities possessed different versions of the same prayer. The *Didache*, in which Jesus' prayer concludes with the phrase "for thine is the power and the glory forever" (8:2), also shows us this.<sup>10</sup> The "coin of prayer" (as the Rabbis called a prayer's fixed format) still allowed for the addition of poetic glosses and also for the rephrasing of the too obvious into something more subtle.

It is noteworthy that the conclusion of the eschatological prayer found in the Rosh Hashanah liturgy makes numerous references to God's kingdom and also includes the targumic rendering of Exod 15:18, which speaks of God's rule: "The Lord, his kingdom will be forever and ever." In the prayer this text is used as the proof-text for its assertion that "Yours is the kingdom." The text reads:<sup>11</sup>

*For to you every knee will bend, every tongue will swear,*<sup>12</sup> before you O Lord our God they will kneel and fall and they will give praise to the glory of your name. And all of them will accept the yoke of Your kingdom and may You soon rule over them forever. For *Yours is the kingdom* and forever you

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<sup>10</sup> I. Elbogen, *Ha-tefila Be-yisrael Be-hitpathutah Ha-historit* (1988), 80, thinks that the concluding section of a prayer (following the evening *Shema* recitations, which are still recited to this day) preserved in *Siddur Rav Amram Gaon* was originally from an earlier classic messianic hymn. The emphasis of the mini hymn is on "thine is the kingdom." After citing the words of Exod 15:18, "The Lord will rule for ever and ever," the Targumic form of which, as we have seen, reads, "The Lord, his kingdom is forever and ever," the poet expands the idea of this reign: "For thine is the kingdom and for all ages thou wilt rule in glory for we have no king but thee. Blessed art thou, the king in his glory, always let him rule over us forever and over all his works."

<sup>11</sup> The date and provenance of this hymn are unknown. It certainly dates from the third century as *terminus ad quem*. Nevertheless, its forms and references may be more antiquated. It exhibits features that are common to prayers of hope for the end of time.

<sup>12</sup> Isa 45:23, which is the text from which these opening phrases are taken, reads from the Hebrew: "To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance." The same text from the LXX reads: "To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall confess to God," which is the version of the text that has shaped what seems to be an excerpt from a Christian liturgical hymn in Philippians 2:10–11 (of course in the hymn the text has been glossed so that it conforms to a Christian message): "That at the name of Jesus *every knee shall bow*—of beings in heaven, and beings on earth, and beings under the earth; *And that every tongue shall confess*—that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

will rule in glory, as it says in your Torah, “The Lord will rule forever and ever” (Exod 15:18).<sup>13</sup>

One would have reason to suspect that a first-century Christian eschatological hymn might well have ended in more or less the same way. That is, there is no reason to doubt that Jesus’ prayer in Matthew may at one time have appeared in a form (not recorded in the Gospel) that ended with something like this same assertion. That certain scribes added this assertion to Jesus’ prayer in certain later texts of Matthew indicates that they were aware of an earlier version that had such an ending (as we have seen from the *Didache*). On these grounds then we might argue for an early date for the existence of a proto-version (lacking later expansions with sophisticated themes) of Jesus’ prayer which preserves a subtle reference to the themes read into the *Kedushah* poem now found in the Isa 6:3 Targum. In its most primitive form the prayer might have looked something like this: “Hallowed be thy name, for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory.” It may be of interest to note that when God’s name was mentioned in the Temple, everyone responded by saying: “Blessed be the Name of—the Glory of—his Kingdom forever and ever” (*y. Ber.* 9:5). The vocabulary of these adorations is drawn from Ps 145:11–13:

They will speak of the Glory of your Kingdom, and talk of your Power, to make known to the sons of men his deeds of Power, and the Glory of the majesty of his Kingdom. Your Kingdom is an everlasting Kingdom, and your Dominion is for all generations.

We now have to consider the requests or petitions that follow the *Trisagion* section of the *Kedushah de Sidra*. They are drawn from a rather long list of scriptural citations that are anchored in two initial requests—avoiding temptation and, when one is unable to do this, obtaining forgiveness. They are: 1) Guard against the (evil) inclinations in the heart of your people and direct their heart to you; 2) forgive sins without anger; 3) deliver us, He will answer us; 4) He gave us the Torah of truth and planted everlasting life in our midst; 5) to do his will and serve with whole heart; 6) to do your law in this world, inherit good in the days of the messiah, and life in the next world; 7) trust in God, he will not desert those who seek him.

Jesus’ prayer in Matthew also asks for protection against temptation and for forgiveness. We shall consider his poetic elaborations in the commentary proper. What we lack in *Kedushah de Sidra* is a request for food but instead we

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<sup>13</sup> *Targum Onqelos* renders this: “The Lord, his kingdom endures always, and for all eternity.”

get an emphasis on learning and doing the laws of the Torah. We must remember that Jesus' prayer was for the Galilean peasant and not the rabbinic scholar of the study house. Jesus continues his sermon with the message of trust and faith in the beneficence of God, which is a theme found in the final section of the *Kedushah de Sidra*. Indeed, such doxologies are all variations on the same theme and embedded in recitations of biblical verses extolling the glory of the divinity.

### Commentary

*Take care not to perform your righteousness before people, in order to be seen by them. Otherwise, you will not have a reward from your heavenly father.<sup>14</sup> (v. 1)*

The verse that underlies this chapter is Micah 6:8: “[He has shown you, O man, what is good.] And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk *hatzneah* with your God.” The word *hatzneah* (literally “hidden”) means “to do something modestly and in private.” The Rabbis understood that this text from Micah referred to those people who performed their acts of righteousness in public when they should have been doing them in private. They also understood this text to mean that, if possible, they should do even more privately still what acts of righteousness they were already doing in private (*b. Sukkah* 49b). Finally the Rabbis understood that because the Hebrew for “with” in the phrase “privately with your God” from this text is “*im*,” this phrase actually meant, “even as God is privately with you” (*Eliyahu Rabbah* [ed. Friedmann], end of chap. 26).<sup>15</sup> So Jesus introduces this entire section of the Sermon by saying that the proper way to fulfill the commandments is to do them as privately as one can. We might call this section of the Sermon the “Laws of *Tzeniut* [modesty and privacy].”

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<sup>14</sup> Compare minor tractate *Derekh Eretz* 6:2 ([ed. Cohen] 7:2–3): A scholar must be modest in his manner of eating, drinking, washing, anointing himself, putting on his shoes, in sexual matters, in his manner of walk, his manner of dress, his speech, his spittle, his good deeds: but he must be public about his pleasant demeanor, seeking truth and eschewing falsehood, dealing uprightly and not deceitfully, modestly and not showing off, peaceful and not divisive, adhering to the counsel of elders and not youngsters, fixing his gaze even after a lion rather than after a woman.

<sup>15</sup> This has already been discussed at length in my commentary to 5:48.

In Jewish tradition it is understood that only once does one get punished for having committed a single sin, and only once does one get rewarded for having done a single good deed. The rationale for performing the commandments as privately as one can is based on the idea that, whether for punishment or reward, it is always better to be dealt with by God than by man.<sup>16</sup> To be praised by man for performing a commandment is to receive the only reward one can receive for performing it; that is, it is to forego receiving any reward from God.

Jewish tradition also suggests that the one who gives charity in view of others is liable to judgment, as in *Midrash Sechel Tov* (ed. Buber), *Gen. Vayigash*, chap. 47, but this is obviously hyperbole. Conversely, in commenting on Exod 12:33 (*Midrash Sechel Tov*, Exodus [Bo], chap. 12), the Rabbis assure us that the one who gives charity in secret will, like the one who does other righteous acts in secret, be rewarded openly. The proof text for this assertion is Prov 21:14: “A gift in secret subdues anger.” From the same chapter in Proverbs we also read that: “The proudly arrogant man—‘Mocker’ is his name; he behaves with wrathful pride” (21:24).

What happens when Micah’s advice is ignored and people do not walk in secret with God is what Jesus explains next.

*When you give alms, do not blow a trumpet to announce your presence as the ‘impersonators’ do in the synagogues and in the streets, in order to receive people’s praise. Amen,’ I say to you, they have received their reward.* (v. 2)

Throughout the following brief sermons on charity, prayer, fasting, and gaining rewards, Jesus first begins, as he does here, with the counter-model—“Do not do X”—followed by the exhortation—“but do Y.” This form of persuasion can be traced back to Antigonos of Soho (third century B.C.E.), who said, “Do not be like slaves who serve the master on condition that they receive a daily allotment. But be like slaves who serve the master not on condition of receiving any daily allotment” (*m. Abot* 1:3).

The word for “impersonators” in the Greek is *hypocritai*—“hypocrites”—and for Matthew the “hypocrites” are those who make a very public display of their alms-giving. That is, the type of hypocrite to which Matthew refers here is not the one who seeks monetary gain by way of a pretense, and which the Rabbis

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<sup>16</sup> While 2 Sam. 24:14—“But let us fall into the hands of the Lord, for his mercy is great. Do not let me fall into human hands”—refers to punishment, the principle certainly holds for rewards as well.

knew as *hanafim*;<sup>17</sup> nor is it the one who harshly condemns others but who is also a sinner himself, about whom both Marcus Aurelius in his *Meditations* 1:11, and the author of the Psalms of Solomon 4:1–12<sup>18</sup> write. Rather, the type of hypocrite to which Matthew refers, and which the Scriptures (Hab 2:5, Prov 21:24) know as the *yahir* (“haughty” and/or “arrogant”), is captured by the rabbinic *gassei ruah* (presumptuous, haughty).<sup>19</sup> This type of hypocrite is the exact opposite of the humble and/or the poor in spirit whom Jesus praises in the Beatitudes. It is of interest that what Matthew says here of this type of hypocrite is what, though much more harshly, the Rabbis say of the Gentiles in *b. B. Bat.* 10b (though the text does imply that all people, including Jews, who

<sup>17</sup> This is the word used by the Syriac translator.

<sup>18</sup> Psalms of Solomon 4:1–12 reads:

“Wherefore sittest thou, O profane (man), in the council of the pious, seeing that thy heart is far removed from the Lord, provoking with transgressions the God of Israel? Extravagant in speech, extravagant in outward seeming beyond all (men), is he that is severe of speech in condemning sinners in judgment. And his hand is first upon him as (though he acted) in zeal, and (yet) he is himself guilty in respect of manifold sins and of wantonness. His eyes are upon every woman without distinction; His tongue lieth when he maketh contract with an oath. By night and in secret he sinneth as though unseen. With his eyes he talketh to every woman of evil compacts. He is swift to enter every house with cheerfulness as though guileless. Let God remove those that live in hypocrisy in the company of the pious, (Even) the life of such a one with corruption of his flesh and penury. Let God reveal the deeds of the men-pleasers. The deeds of such a one with laughter and derision; that the pious may count righteous the judgment of their God, When sinners are removed from before the righteous, (Even the) man-pleaser who uttereth law guilefully. And their eyes (are fixed) upon any man's house that is (still) secure, That they may, like (the) Serpent, destroy the wisdom of [the wise] with deceptive words, his words are deceitful that (he) may accomplish (his) wicked desire.”

Dan 11:32 also notes the technique of the deceptive flatterer. “He will flatter and win over those who have violated the covenant. But the people who know their God will be strong and will resist him.”

<sup>19</sup> Over time the biblical “*yahir*” (arrogant) slowly evolved into the rabbinic “*yohara*.” The Rabbis also made a distinction between the types of “*yohara*.” The term “*yohara*” alone referred to the former type of hypocrite above; the term “*akin to yohara*” (i.e., *mechze keyo-hara*). See *b. Ber.* 17b and *b. Pesah* 55a) referred to the latter type of hypocrite. The Roman Empire as a whole was termed “arrogant” (*zed*—a word used in Prov 21:24 together with *yahir*). In *Tanh. Deut.*, *Ki tetsei*, 8, Rabbi Bana'ah interprets Prov 11: 1–2: “Deceptive scales are an abomination to the Lord, but accurate weights are his delight.’ When the Arrogant One (*zadon*) comes, then comes disgraceful behavior, but with the *tzenuim* comes wisdom.” The arrogant one for him is Rome and he notes that when you have a generation who is deceitful it is due to the influence of Roman culture. The *tzenuim* are those who deal modestly and in private fashion as we said at the start of this chapter.

perform acts of righteousness only so that they can be seen to be doing them are doomed to perdition):

All the charity and kindness that the *Gentiles* do are sins for they do them only to show off (*lehiyaher*). All who show off fall into *Gehenna*, as is said, “The proud showoff (literally ‘haughty’ in biblical Hebrew)—‘Mocker’ is his name; he behaves with wrathful pride” (Prov 21:24). “Wrathful” is always used [by Scripture] to refer to *Gehenna*, as it says, “That day is a day of *wrath*, [a day of trouble and distress, a day of ruin and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness]” (Zeph 1:15).

The problem Jesus addresses here is not so much the sin of hypocrisy but rather the need for praise that motivates the hypocrite’s public displays of piety. This type of hypocrite may be sincere in his wish to act righteously but what mars his acts of righteousness is his need to call attention to the fact that he is doing it. That is, Jesus does not suggest here that this type of hypocrite pretends to give charity; he does give it. But Jesus does say that for having given charity in this way he will not be rewarded by God, since he is being rewarded by men. For the Rabbis, it is not just that this type of hypocrite does not receive any reward for his act of righteousness; it is much worse, for he will be severely punished because of the ostentatious way he has behaved. The use of hyperbole here makes plain that the Rabbis considered such ostentatious displays of piety to be completely unacceptable. For them, the Jews must not behave this way.

Matthew also speaks of the sounding of trumpets and, thinking that this refers to some ancient Jewish practice, most commentators exhibit much ingenuity in attempting to explain the occasions during which the sounding of trumpets might have accompanied the giving of alms, or else they speak of the trumpet as being some kind of horn-shaped vessel that the Jews in antiquity used to collect coins.<sup>20</sup> But what “the sounding of trumpets” refers to here is the way in which those whom Jesus calls the “impersonators” draw attention

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<sup>20</sup> My favorite outrageous comment on Matt 6:2 (with no evidence to substantiate it) comes from the Internet site <http://www.cathctruth.com/catholicbible/matt6.htm>: “*Therefore when you do an alms-deed, sound not a trumpet before you. Syr. do not blow a horn.* When the Scribes and Pharisees were about to give away alms in the public streets they either sent a trumpeter before them, or else blew a horn themselves, under the pretext of drawing together by that means crowds of poor persons, who might run and receive alms, but in reality out of ostentation, and that their liberality might be seen and talked of by those who flocked together.”

to themselves as they perform their acts of righteousness, so as to ensure that they will be seen and praised by others for having done them. That is, the sounding of the trumpets here is a metaphor for the attention-getting devices the “impersonators” use to draw attention to themselves and to what they are doing.

Finally, the synagogue was a place in which before he said his prayers the one seeking forgiveness from God could give alms in order to gain credit with Him.<sup>21</sup> It is also the case that in some locales both streets and market-places were used as places in which prayers were said (*y. Ber.* 4:6;<sup>22</sup> *y. Meg.* 3:1). However, by referring to synagogues and streets, Matthew might mean here those places where the poor would come to be near the crowds who were being exhorted by preachers to give alms.

*And when you do give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing* (v. 3)

In a very memorable way Jesus says here that one should give alms in utter secrecy. That is, one should give alms in such secrecy that not even one's left hand should know that one's right hand is giving it. The Rabbis understood that the one who gives alms with the one hand in this world can expect to receive his reward with the other hand in the next world.<sup>23</sup>

*So that your alms will be in secret, and your father who sees in secret will repay you.* (v. 4)

<sup>21</sup> *b. B. Bat.* 10a.

<sup>22</sup> *y. Ber.* 4:7 in the English translations of J. Neusner.

<sup>23</sup> *Midrash Proverbs* 11:21 (ed. Buber) interprets Prov 11:21 as, “Hand to hand, the wicked one shall not be held innocent: but the seed of the righteous shall be delivered” as follows:

“Hand to hand’ [That is to say,] one hand is meant to do good deeds and the other will then receive the reward for them. Now if you have not done good deeds in this world where you live, how can you claim reward [in the next]? What do people really do with these two hands I created? With one they sin and with the other do righteousness and so it is written, ‘The wicked one shall not be held innocent.’ So do not think you will escape from the judgment of *Gehenna* [because the good one did well], since the evil one will nevertheless not be held innocent. Rabbi Yoḥanan commented on this interpretation saying: ‘Here is a parable. A man went and sinned and paid a prostitute. Even before he got out the door he met a poor man who said to him, ‘Give me charity!’ He gave him and left on his way. That man thought—May it be that God find appeasement here to atone for my sin.’

This verse brings the first brief sermon of this section of the Sermon to a close. What Jesus says in verse 1 about performing acts of righteousness—that they should be done in private or in secret—he now says here concerning a particular kind of righteousness. This conclusion of the *inclusio* draws out the finer implications of the text from Micah which, as we say, underlies this whole section of the Sermon: What acts of righteousness you do in secret, though they are not seen by men, are seen by God, since He is with you in secret, and it is from Him that you receive your reward for doing them in this way.

*And when you pray, do not be like the impersonators, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues, and in the corners of the wide streets, so that people will see them. 'Amen,' I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your back room, and, closing the door, pray to your father in secret, and your father who sees in secret will repay you. (vv. 5–6)*

In verses 5–6 we have another brief sermon, concerning how one should pray. And as in verse 4, so again in verse 6, which marks the conclusion of a second *inclusio*, there is an echo of what Jesus says concerning acts of righteousness in verse 1, only this time concerning the act of prayer. The idea of praying in private is not as exceptional at it might at first appear. For as well as taking part in public prayer, which had fixed times and a more or less fixed liturgy, most Rabbis also prayed in private. When praying in public, the Rabbis kept their prayers short and their emotions in check, while privately they often prayed with real fervor. A tradition from *Tosefta Berakhot* (ed. Lieberman) 3:1 tells us that when Rabbi Akiva prayed with the assembly, he was brief and restrained but when he prayed in private he prayed with utter passion.

When Jesus speaks of those who love to stand in the synagogues and the streets to pray, he has in mind those who stand apart from all others—that is, the “impersonators”—and pray in a conspicuous way. The phrase “stand in prayer” echoes the phrase “*omed ba-tefillah*,” which is a reference to what the Rabbis referred to as “The Eighteen Blessings” (see *y. Ber.* 3:5). This was considered the central prayer *par excellence* and had to be recited, under normal circumstances, while standing erect. Its order and wordings were arranged at the academy of Yavneh after the Temple’s destruction in 70 C.E., but its roots are more ancient.<sup>24</sup> The tradition of standing in prayer clearly is ancient, as 1 Sam 1:26 testifies. The Rabbis find in Hannah’s behavior in this verse the perfect model for effective prayer.

<sup>24</sup> See Louis Finkelstein, “The Development of the Amidah” (1925–26) and Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History* (1993).

Since, as we say, Matt 6:6 marks the conclusion to the second *inclusio* in this section, we must see that what immediately follows concerning how not to pray (vv. 7–8), and then the Lord’s Prayer itself (vv. 9–15), were initially separate from the Sermon. In verses 7–8 the matter concerns not the ostentatious way one prays but rather something else. Moreover here it is the Gentiles who are held up as the countermodel, whereas in verses 2 and 5, and again in verse 16, it is the “impersonators,” who are Jewish, who are the countermodel (the positive model being, obviously, the way in which Jesus says that one should pray and also Jesus’ prayer itself). Nevertheless the form here is identical to what we have seen in verses 2 and 5—“Do not do or be like X, do or be like Y.”

*When you are praying, do not blather like the Gentiles; for they think they will be listened to because of their many words.* (v. 7)

*Mishnah Menahot* concludes with a very fine exegesis in which it is said that the burnt offering of a large animal, the burnt-offering of a small bird, and the meal offering, in spite of the difference in cost and quality of each, nonetheless have in equal measure a “savor pleasing to God” (Lev 1:9, 1:17, 2:9); for which reason the exegesis concludes with this exhortation: “It is all the same whether one does much or little, only let a person direct his mind to heaven” (*m. Menah.* 13:11). Prayer came to be known as “service of the heart.”<sup>25</sup> *B. Ta'anit* 2a finds the biblical injunction “You shall serve God with your whole heart (Deut 11:13)” to refer to prayer.

Jesus does not say that to pray using many words is a sin. Rather he says that it is not necessary to pray in this way, for God sees into the hearts of men and knows the needs of the one who prays even before he opens his mouth to pray. The Rabbis also felt that there was no reason to pray at length. A text from *b. Ber.* 55a states:

All who are verbose in their prayers and protract it—at the end they will come to heart-ache, as it says, “Stretched out appeals makes the heart sick” (Prov 13:12).

The Rabbis also did not see that there was any good reason to pray aloud, as though God needed to hear the voice: “Whoever lets his words be audible in prayer is of those of little faith and those who raise their voice in prayer are of

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<sup>25</sup> See *Mekhilta of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai* to Exod 23:25. I find 1 Cor 14:19 to be similar. “In the church I would rather speak five words with my mind, so as to instruct others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue.”

the false prophets" (*b. Ber.* 24b). The Talmud also has other things to say about how one should pray. For instance, if in private one needs to pray aloud to keep one's concentration that is fine; however, in public prayer one should only ever pray in a whisper. The Talmud also tells us why one should pray in this way in public—it causes others to lose their concentration as they pray. The priests of the pagan god Baal stood a long time shouting aloud to be answered, whereas Elijah's prayer was soft and direct (see 1 Kings 18:28).

*Do not imitate them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.* (v. 8)

In his *Life of Moses* 2.217, Philo says something similar to what Jesus says here about the foreknowledge of God. He says that God is "the judge who knows all before He hears it." The common source is very probably Isa 65:24: "And it shall come to pass, that before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear."

*Pray, therefore, like this: 'Our Father who is in Heaven: Hallowed be your name.* (v. 9)

I dealt with the structure of Jesus' prayer in the introduction to this chapter. The Jesus prayer is sometimes compared to the *Kaddish* liturgy of the Rabbis, a prayer of hope for the end-time when God's name will be blessed forever, which itself has various forms and uses. In the introduction of a form of the *Kaddish* in Aramaic, which is perhaps an addition from an earlier and shorter supplication, the words are given: "May our prayers and requests be acceptable before our Father who is in Heaven." So there is perhaps reason to think that Jesus was suggesting here that one say this prayer in Aramaic, the language he spoke. On the other hand, this introduction is also known in Hebrew from another very brief supplication. "May be it be willed before our Father who is in Heaven that Joseph's eyes be restored to their place" (*Midrash Psalms* [ed. Buber] 25:13). The *Kaddish* in all its forms has the words "hallowed be His great name."

*May Your kingdom come, may Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.* (v. 10)

Matthew's words are reflected in the *Kaddish*'s hope that God's "kingdom may endure" (literally, "come to rule... speedily and in short time"). A sentiment reflecting Matthew's desire that God's will be manifested on earth is sometimes

placed as the final line of the *Kaddish*. It may be an addition as it is phrased in Hebrew while the *Kaddish* itself is in Aramaic. This line shows a similar sentiment to the Jesus prayer. “He who creates harmony in the heavens, may he create harmony over us and over all of Israel.”

*Give us today the bread that we need today.* (v. 11)

There is nothing in the *Kaddish*, or in any other Jewish prayer of this genre, in which the wish for the establishment of God’s kingdom on earth is expressed and which also contains a request for a personal basic need.<sup>26</sup> Eschatological song serves to project the emotions into a sense of wholeness, a mood envisioning the complete mending of the rift between God’s harmonious social world and that of the tyrant. There can be no sense of lack or need in this mood. In a sense the prayer to establish this kingdom obviates the need to ask for physical and spiritual gifts since in this world nothing is lacking. The human condition is other than it is now. There can be no awareness to ask for things now when we cast ourselves into the future realm of peace. Other genres of prayer certainly mandate the petitioning of food, forgiveness, redemption, and even the speedy advent of the Messianic Era, for the mood is that of the here-and-now requirements. This petition, unlike the messianic odes, comes from an empty stomach as it were. The Jesus prayer seems to blend the two as if the petitioner stands in the space between two moods, two worlds.

In the introduction to this chapter, I suggested that the core of Jesus’ prayer was contained in the phrases in the form most are accustomed to “hallowed be thy name, for thine is the kingdom, etc.” Why then were additions made to this prayer in the form of requests, such as this request for bread, or for the forgiveness of sins? The answer is given in the declaration Jesus makes later in

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26 Which is not to deny that prayers containing requests for sustenance and messianic redemption were/are standard fare in Jewish practice. “And satisfy us from [the earth’s] bounty,” followed by “Sound the great horn for our freedom and raise the banner to gather in our dispersion” is the center of the “Eighteen Blessings” standing *Amidah* prayer (the essential of daily services). The rabbinic grace after bread-meals says, “Have mercy, O Lord our God, on Israel your people, and on Jerusalem your city, and on Zion the dwelling place of your Glory, and on the *kingship of the House of David your anointed*, and on the great and holy House upon which your name is called. O Lord our God, *sustain us, feed us, provide for us, and nourish us, and give us relief*.” However, these petition prayers and praises do not utilize numinous vocabulary (e.g., his Great Name) nor address at once the worlds above, below and future but rather speak to the desire for immediate redemption to restore the glory of Israel. In this way, there is a divide between “petition-prayer” and “messianic-prayer.” The Jesus prayer combines the two genres.

the sermon concerning what human beings must do above all: “But seek first his *kingdom* and his *righteousness*, and all of these things shall be given to you also” (6:33).

Verse 6:33 also contains the rationale for the inclusion of the supplications “Your kingdom come” and “Your will be done” in Jesus’ prayer. Thus, Jesus says here that one must seek God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness. But to seek his righteousness means first to seek repentance and one first seeks repentance by asking God for pardon from sins. But why ask God for bread, then, if it is to be freely given to the one who seeks His kingdom? In 6:34 we hear that what Jesus says about the benefits one is to receive by seeking first God’s kingdom is somewhat exaggerated; what he says here is that one should not ask today for what one may need tomorrow. This helps to clarify that the bread about which Jesus speaks in 6:11 is the bread one needs for today.<sup>27</sup>

In writing about 6:11 in his commentary to Matthew (*On Matthew 1*, de Santos 21), Jerome tells us that in the “Gospel According to the Hebrews” (which he regarded as the original Hebrew, or Aramaic, Gospel of Matthew) the bread about which Jesus speaks here was said to be bread “for tomorrow”:

In the Gospel which is named *According to the Hebrews* (*secundum Hebraeos*), instead of “supersubstantial” (spiritual) bread I found “*ma[h]ar*,” which means “of tomorrow,” so that the sense would be: “Our bread for tomorrow,” that is, “[for] the future give us this day.”

In this text the word that modifies bread in the Greek is “*epiousios*,” which means, as we have seen, something like “for today.” Apparently the reading of this word in 6:11 in the “Gospel According to the Hebrews” was copied from a Greek variant that read *epiousa* (next day) as opposed to *epiousios*.

Two possibilities can be suggested to get behind the rather odd usages of the Greek term. We can suggest an explanation for the Greek usage of *epiousios*. The expression *kedei hayyav* (sufficient for sustenance) occurs in many places in the Talmud e.g., in *b. Beṣah* 21b. It appears in *b. Git.* 59a but as *mipnei hayyekhen* (on account of their sustenance) in the Yerushalmi parallel, *y. Git.* 5:8. The term is reported in the name of scholars who cite Rabbi Yoḥanan, a Sage who taught in the Land of Israel in the third century. The upshot of all pertinent discussion is that the expression refers to food provisions sufficient for one day (this day

<sup>27</sup> The Syriac version says, “Give us *bread* for our need this day.” The Syriac translators apparently took the Greek *epiousios* to mean “extremely essential,” a possible understanding of this unusual Greek term.

or the next).<sup>28</sup> The *Rosh*, Rabbi Asher ben Yehiel (c.1300, Germany and Spain), in his comments to *b. B. Meši'a* 16a, attributes the understanding of *kedei hayyav* as “sufficient for his needs this day” to Rabbi Hai Gaon. Others (commentary of Ramban to *b. B. Meši'a* 16a) disagree with this view but the context of many of the Talmudic passages lends weight to the argument. Elsewhere, Rabbi Yoḥanan seems to use another expression, *mipnei ḥayyei nefesh* (*y. Demai* 4:5), to mean something similar.

I suggest that *mipnei* and *kedei* are synonymous since they interchange from Talmud Yerushalmi to Talmud Bavli in the Gittin parallels. *Ke-dei* is literally “as much as to suffice for” and so then *mipnei* must likewise expresses a limited amount of food consumption. The word *ḥayyei*, *nefesh*, and *hayyav* (*hay* literally refers to “life”) in these passages refer to one’s livelihood, one’s needs. Yet *nefesh* has a wider range of meanings including “one’s physical substance or essence,” and also “one’s spiritual being, the life of the soul.” Thus *mipnei ḥayyei nefesh* might mean limited provisions to ensure the welfare either “of one’s body” or “of one’s soul.” The former is clearly the better sense of the expression as used by the Rabbis but this does not preclude a spiritual understanding by others in different contexts. *Mipnei* or *kedei* limits the amount to a daily or two-day amount of food according to long tradition extending down to the Gaonic commentaries on the Talmud. The Greek *epiousios* literally translates *mipnei ḥayyei nefesh* (on account of the sustenance of the essence/soul). If so, all ancient renditions of the Greek term are intelligible when traced back to these expressions. Unfortunately, the usage of the expression is not common knowledge among New Testament scholars. One can see how the versions have traditions rendering the Greek (which literally reproduces “sufficient need for the soul/person”) as “for today,” “for the [next] day,” or “for the soul.”

A tradition from *b. Sanh.* 108b tells us that, upon taking the olive branch in his mouth, the dove which Noah sent out from the ark prayed to God: “Master of the Universe, I prefer a morsel of poor bread served from your hand rather than delicacies served from human hands.” This tradition also refers to Prov 30:8, “[F]eed me with the food I need,” which is a close parallel to the translation of Matt 6:11 in the Syriac: “Give us bread for our need this day.”

The Rabbis understood that it was meritorious to pray for bread every day (*b. Yoma* 76a); for in the wilderness God provided only enough manna to meet the needs of the Israelites each day so that his people might realize how dependent they were on him and so how necessary it was to pray to him daily.

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<sup>28</sup> A very complex discussion of the passages and sources concerning *kedei hayyav* can be found in Zwi Moshe Dor, *The Teachings of Eretz Israel in Babylon* (1971), 203–10.

A collection of short prayers in the Talmud gives us this interesting excerpt in *b. Ber.* 29b (*t. Ber.* 3:7; *y. Ber.* 4:4):

Give to each one sufficient for his livelihood and suffice every individual the extent of one's essential requirements.

Scribes freely inserted the above well known and popular prayer together with proof-texts into some traditions as shown by its complete substitution for another praise formula in near parallels. Compare the above with *Mekhilta of Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai* to Exod 18:12:

God of the heavens, blessed be He, who gives to each one sufficient for his livelihood and suffices every individual the extent of one's essential requirements—as it said “He gives food to every flesh.” (Ps 136: 25)

*Mekhilta of Rabbi Yishmael, Yitro, Amalek* 1, states:

At every minute He supplies food for every living creature sufficient for its needs “and fills the will for every living creature.” (Ps 145:16)

*And forgive for us our sins, as we ourselves have forgiven those who have sinned against us.* (v. 12)

Although the matter of forgiveness as it is expressed here seems to belong to a kind of “theology of reciprocity”—that is, as we have forgiven others, so may God forgive us—in fact it does not. The idea that one receives good for having done good or, conversely, receives ill for having done that, might seem sufficient to understand what is being said here in the prayer. Indeed there are numerous passages in the ancient literature in which the concept of “measure for measure” is spoken of (e.g., Matt 7:2, *m. Soṭah* 1:7, and others).<sup>29</sup> But Matthew’s point here (and many Talmudic passages concur with this) is that the showing of mercy represents an exceptional case, for the one who shows mercy to others receives mercy not from others but from God. That is, the act of showing mercy to others overrides the theology of reciprocity, which states

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<sup>29</sup> One of the most interesting passages in this regard is found in a later midrash. *Deut. Rab.* [ed. Lieberman], *Devarim*, 23: “Honest scales and balances are from the Lord; all the weights in the bag are of his making” (Prov 16:11). The Holy One does not withhold payment from any person but with the measure that person measures to others is it measured back to him.”

that because I have injured another, I now deserve to be injured by another in turn. But if I have forgiven either what another owes me, or else what another has done to me, then it is God who shows mercy on me.

If we were to choose a Semitic term for what Matthew's Jesus means here by "forgive," it would likely be "*mehillah*," which is also the word used in expressions concerning the forgiving or foregoing of collection of loans. Later Jewish prayer did not ask for forgiveness in the way it is asked for in Jesus' prayer. Rather the "Eighteen Blessing" prayer simply requests, "Forgive us, for we have sinned." Matthew says more about this theme of forgiveness in verses 14–15.

*And do not lead us into trial, but rescue us from the evil one. (v. 13)*

The form of the Greek *poneru* is ambiguous. It can be either the genitive case of the neutral gender word *poneros*, meaning "wicked" or "evil," or it can be the genitive of the masculine gender "evil one," as we have here. The use of the word "but" in this verse is similar to the way it is used in the antitheses in chapter 5: "You have heard that it was said that you must do X, *but* I say do Y." Yet perhaps what Jesus really means to say here is something like this: "O Lord, do not ensnare me to test me; *yea*, save me also from Satan's snares."

In the Jewish prayers from antiquity it was common for one to ask to be delivered from "evil," which can have meant either "evil" events, or "evil" people, or the "evil" urge, or the "evil" of Satan. In *b. Ber.* 6ob several prayers are found in which there are close parallels to this request in Jesus' prayer for the deliverance from evil. One of them is a private prayer that is said as one retires for the night:

May it be thy will, O Lord, my God, that you guide me to lie down in peace and place my portion within thy Torah. *And lead me to the hands of good deeds and do not lead me to the hands of sin. And do not bring me—[not] to the hands of iniquity and not to the hands of transgression; And not to the hands of Trial and not to the hands of disgrace.* And may my good urge rule over me and may my evil urge not rule over me, and *deliver me from evil mishap and from terrible diseases.*

Another prayer from this same source is said at the daily morning service in the synagogue:

May it be thy will that you habituate me into thy Torah and help me cleave to your commandments. *Do not bring me to the snare of sin or to the*

*snare of transgression—nor to the snare of trial or disgrace.* Encourage my evil urge to be subservient to You. Keep me far from *evil* people and *evil* neighbors. *And (on the contrary) induce me to cleave to my good urge and good neighbors who are in your world.* And give me this day and every day, grace, mercy and kindness in your eyes and in the eyes of all who see me.

Also in *y. Ber. 4:2* a very moving prayer contains something like the request that is being made in Jesus' prayer here. Though the text says that Rabbi Tanḥum alone recites it, his use of the plural throughout indicates that he is speaking on behalf of his community.

Rabbi Tanḥum bar Iskolastika would pray, "May it be Thy will, O God, and God of my fathers, *that you break the hold of the evil urge from our hearts.* For you created us to do your will and we are obligated to do your will. You want this and we want this. What holds us back? The leaven in the dough. It is well known to you that we have not the power within us to withstand it. But may it be Thy will, O Lord, my God, and God of my fathers, that you silence it from [provoking] us and force its submission, so your will may be done as our will with a perfect heart."

Another example of a Jewish prayer from antiquity includes the request that God deliver the community from Satan. This prayer is said in the evening service just before the recitation of the "Eighteen Blessings." It is likely a very early prayer, a form of which is found in *b. Ber. 4b*. The version of the prayer we include here is from *Seder Amram Gaon*:

Save us for Your name's sake and remove from us *plague, war and suffering.* Break the power of *Satan* from before us and from behind us and guard our comings in and goings out from now and forever more. For You are our protector and deliverer.

Finally, in Jesus' prayer there is the suggestion that because one has performed certain acts of righteousness, one is in the position thereby to ask God to be protected against temptation from sin and against being delivered over to evil. A tradition in *b. Ned. 40a*, in which Ps 41:1 is cited—"Blessed is he who has regard for the weak; the Lord delivers him in times of trouble"—contains a similar sentiment. Then in this same tradition it is asked what rewards are to be given to the one who performs such goodness in this world, the answer to which is drawn from the following verse in the same psalm: "The Lord will

protect him and preserve his life; give him well-being in the Land and will not deliver him to the desire of his enemies” (Ps 41:2).

*The Lord will protect him*—against the [temptations of] *evil urge*. *And preserve his life*—from unbearable suffering. *Give him well-being in the Land*—that all will respect him. *And will not deliver him to the desires of his enemies*—such as the likes of Rehoboam (son of Solomon) who created the [tragic] rift in Israel’s united kingdom.

This broad sampling of Jewish prayers from antiquity in which are found parallels to certain phrases in “the Lord’s Prayer” makes plain that certain themes within it had a long history and likely were already well known by the first century C.E.

As we have said, in some manuscripts of the Gospel of Matthew Jesus’ prayer concludes with an eschatological glorification: “For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.” We have already seen that the *Didache* ends with a similar glorification, the difference being that the phrase “for yours is the kingdom” is absent (8:2). It is likely that this phrase was removed from communal prayers because it was too obviously a challenge to Rome’s power, and the entire doxology was very probably removed from some of the Gospel sources for this same reason.

*For if you forgive people their transgressions, your heavenly father will forgive you yours. And if you do not forgive people, neither will your father forgive your transgressions. (vv. 14–15)*

Something very similar to what Jesus says here is found in *Midrash Tannaim* (ed. Hoffman) to Deut 13:18.<sup>30</sup>

And He will give you ‘Mercy’ [a gift meant for you to apply]—and He will be merciful to you” (Deut 13:18). [The meaning is—] If you are merciful, mercy will be extended to you. And if you are not merciful, mercy will not be extended to you.

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<sup>30</sup> *B. Šabb.* 15b knows a variant phrasing: “All who have mercy on all other beings, they will receive mercy from heaven. And all those who do not have mercy on all other beings, they will not receive mercy from heaven.” Here it is made clear that habitual behavior is being spoken of, not something that is only occasional.

*Whenever you fast do not be sad-faced like the impersonators are, for they ruin their faces in order to show people that they are fasting. ‘Amen,’ I say to you, they have received their reward. (v. 16)*

This verse returns to the brief sermon form we encountered earlier in the chapter (vv. 2–4, 5–6), namely, “Do not do or be like X, do or be like Y.” When fasting, Jesus says, one should not make it obvious by either refraining from washing one’s face or not anointing oneself with oil, forms of neglect of which were a clear outward indication to all that one was indeed fasting.

*But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face. (v. 17)*

In contrast to usual practice, Jesus asserts that those who fast *should* wash and anoint themselves, so that only God will know they are fasting. He will give the rationale for this in the next verse.

In Judaism there are two types of twenty-four-hour fasts. There are public fasts that are required by Jewish law, such as those observed on the Ninth of Av and on the Day of Atonement. Other fasts are strictly voluntary and are undertaken for personal reasons, usually for repentance. A tradition in *t. Ta'anit* (ed. Lieberman) 2:4 explains some of the differences:

What are the differences between private fasts and public fasts? On public fasts one may eat and drink as long as it is still daylight—which is not the case on an individual’s fast. On a public fast day it is forbidden to work, *to wash oneself, to anoint oneself*, to wear leather sandals, to have sexual intercourse—which is not the case on an individual’s fast day.

This text tells us that while on a private fast one might do whatever one wishes except partaking of nourishment, while a public fast requires more than simply abstaining from food and beverages. The additional prohibitions on public fast days are intended to deny pleasure or cause significant discomfort, since these days are either days of repentance or days for mourning the loss of the Temple (of course, not working or not wearing leather sandals was common for many in antiquity, and so there would have been many who, although not fasting, would have been, as a matter of course, barefoot and/or idle). Private fast days are not governed by rules requiring prohibitions beyond fasting itself, since these fasts are voluntary. Jesus must be speaking here only about these private fasts; on public fast days it would have been well known that all were fasting and so there would have been no point for anyone to hide it.

*So that you are not showing that you are fasting to people, but to your father who is in secret, and your father who sees in secret will repay you. (v. 18)*

Here ends this section of the Sermon that is made up of the three brief sermons Jesus gives to explain fully what he says in 6:1. In what follows Jesus continues to use the form he has repeatedly used in this section—*do not do X but do Y*—with the difference that he no longer provides either models or counter-models. For the most part the advice he now gives is straightforward and does not require much analysis. Perhaps it is worth pointing out that with this verse this brief sermon on fasting concludes in the way the other brief sermons in this chapter have concluded, by forming an *inclusio* with 6:1.

*"Do not store up treasure for yourselves upon the earth, where moth and tarnish destroy and where thieves break in and steal. But store up treasure for yourselves in heaven, where neither moth nor tarnish destroy and where thieves neither break in nor steal." (vv. 19–20)*

A tradition from *y. Pe'ah* 1:1<sup>31</sup> describing certain activities of King Monbaz (Monobazus II of Adiabene, praised by Josephus in *Ant.* 20.95–96, who ruled about the year 60 CE), contains a number of parallels to what Jesus says in the above verses:

King Monbaz abandoned all his properties to the poor. His relatives summoned him and complained: Your ancestors added to their inheritance and to that of their ancestors and you have abandoned your own and that of your ancestors. He replied: My ancestors stored on earth and 1) *I stored in heaven....* My ancestors stored treasures that do not bear fruit and I stored treasures that bear fruit.... My ancestors stored away in a place where others could reach it but 2) *I stored away in a place where no other could reach it....* My ancestors stored material wealth and I stored people.... My ancestors stored to enrich others and 3) *I stored to enrich myself....* My ancestors stored in this world and I stored for the World to Come.

The parallels are so similar that one suspects that Matthew and the Rabbis drew upon an earlier common source that would be further developed in Talmudic tradition. The equivalent passage in Luke is much more rudimentary:

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<sup>31</sup> This tradition is also found in *t. Pesah* 4:8 and *b. B. Bat.* 11a.

"[Y]ou have so many good things stored up for many years, rest, eat, drink, be merry!" But God said to him, "You fool, this night your life will be demanded of you; and the things you have prepared, to whom will they belong?" Thus will it be for the one who stores up treasure for himself but is not rich in what matters to God. (Matt 12:19–21)

The texts of both Matthew and the Rabbis have more in common with one other than either does with the text from Luke.

The theme of temporal, material wealth being contrasted unfavorably with eternal, spiritual wealth has a long history and is a well-known theme in biblical wisdom literature. A tradition from *b. B. Bat.* 10a includes a discussion of two texts from this literature that are almost identical. These texts are Prov 11:4, "Stores of wealth will be of no avail on the day of wrath, but righteousness saves from death," and Prov 10:2, "Treasure chests of evil gain will be of no avail, but righteousness saves from death." In this tradition it is explained that performing a certain type of righteous act protects one against a torturous death while another type saves one from the judgment of Hell.

*For where your treasure is, there will be your heart as well. (v. 21)*

One's heart is on what one value's most. Hence the injunction in Numbers not to stray after one's heart and/or one's eye (in the next several verses Jesus speaks of the eye): "And it shall be a tassel for you to look at and remember all the commandments of the Lord, to do them, not to follow after your own heart and your own eyes, which you are inclined to whore after. So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and be holy to your God" (Num 15:39–40).

A tradition from *Abot R. Nat.* A, chap. 20, which comments on a verse from Psalm 19, is relevant here:

It is written in the Book of Psalms by David, King of Israel: "The precepts of the Lord are upright, illuminating the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes" (Ps 19:9). Hence, anyone who does not put words of Torah on his heart will have many fantasies—hungering fantasies, nonsensical fantasies, lewd fantasies, fantasies provoked by the evil urge, and fantasies provoked by wanton women.

*The eye is the body's lamp. If, then, your eye is sound, your whole body will be illuminated. But if your eye is wicked, your whole body will be dark. So if the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! (vv. 22–23)*

"The eye is the body's lamp" is a statement that stands alone, and means simply that the body needs the eye to see its way forward. The light of the eye lights the way of the body (in Hebrew "eyesight" is "*m'or 'eynayim*," literally "the shining of the eyes"). Proverbs 4:25 assumes it to obvious, "Keep your eyes on what is in front of you, looking straight before you."<sup>32</sup> But in what he says subsequently, Jesus interprets the statement to mean that the eye, rather than lighting the way for the body, actually lights up the body itself. The eye is something like person's inner character or spirit, and if that inner spirit is illuminated, then the *whole* person is filled with light. Conversely, if the inner spirit is dark, then the *whole* person is filled with darkness. For Jesus, then, a good eye means a spirit alight, and the one whose spirit is alight is the one whose character is marked by generosity (this is also the meaning of the one whose spirit is alight in the rabbinic literature as well), whereas the character of the one whose spirit is dark is marked by the reverse. A tradition from *m. Abot* 5:19<sup>33</sup> says much the same:

Whoever possesses these three traits is of the students of our father Abraham, and [whoever possesses] three other traits is of the students of the wicked Balaam. [Those who have] *a good eye*, a humble spirit and a lowly spirit [are] of the students of our father Abraham. [Those who have] *a wicked eye*, an arrogant spirit and a haughty spirit [are] of the students of the wicked Balaam. What is the difference between the students of our father Abraham and those of wicked Balaam? The students of our father Abraham enjoy this world and inherit the World to Come, as it is said, "There is for those who love Me to inherit (i.e., in the World to Come), and their storehouses (i.e. in this world) I will fill" (Prov 8:21). But the students of the wicked Balaam inherit Hell and descend into the pit of destruction, as it is said, "And You, Lord, will bring them down to the pit of destruction, men of blood and deceit; they will not live half their lives. But I will trust in You" (Ps 55:24).

Jesus would also have understood that the one who has the good eye, by virtue of his having it, is also "humble" and of "a lowly spirit," whereas the one

<sup>32</sup> Num 15:39–40 makes eyes and heart near parallels: "[A]nd remember all the commandments of the Lord, to do them, not to follow after your own heart and after your own eyes, which you are inclined to whore after. So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and be holy to your God."

<sup>33</sup> ed. Albeck, var. 5:22 or 23 in some editions.

who has the wicked eye, by virtue of his having it, is also “arrogant” and of “a haughty spirit.”

*No one can be a slave to two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Mammon.* (v. 24)

This verse refers back to verses 20–21. The rabbinic phrase is somewhat different: “Not everyone can manage to eat at two tables” (*b. Ber.* 5b). God must be served with one’s whole heart (Deut 6:5), so there is no way one can also serve Mammon—material wealth—which is personified (and demonized) here.

The division between the material and the spiritual in the Gospels is sharp whereas in the rabbinic literature this division is not so clear cut. In 7:18 we shall hear that a corrupt tree cannot bear good fruit. On the other hand *b. Ber.* 5b insists that the goal of living in this world is to seek to suppress the evil inclination by means of the good.<sup>34</sup>

*Therefore I say to you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat, nor about your body, what clothes you will wear. Is not life more than nourishment, and the body more than clothes?* (v. 25)

Exodus 21:10 makes plain that under no circumstances can a man withhold food and clothing from his wife, for these are the necessities of life.

*Consider that the heaven's birds neither sow nor reap nor gather grain into barns, and your heavenly father nourishes them. Aren't you worth more than they?* (v. 26)

A teaching attributed to Rabbi Simeon b. Eleazar, found in *b. Qidd.* 82b,<sup>35</sup> makes plain that the point Jesus is making here is both ancient and well known. By way of conclusion Rabbi Simeon explains why most people now need to work.

Rabbi Simeon b. Eleazar said: Did you ever see a wild beast or bird with a trade? I have never in all my life seen a deer drying fruits in the field, a lion carrying heavy burdens, or a fox who kept a shop, and yet none of them die of hunger. Now, if these, who have been created to serve my needs are

34 This is the theme of Hugo Odeberg's *Pharisaism and Christianity* (1964).

35 See also *m. Qidd.* 4:14, *t. Qidd.* 5:15, *y. Qidd.* 4:11.

able to support themselves without trouble, how much more reasonable is it to expect that I, who have been created to serve my Master, should be able to support myself easily, without trouble. However, my deeds were evil and I have therefore ruined my livelihood.

*And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? Concerning clothing, why be anxious about it? Look at the wildflowers in the field, how they thrive. They neither labor nor spin. But I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory was arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the wild-grass in the field, which exist today and are thrown into the oven tomorrow, will he not clothe you much more, you of little faith?*  
 (vv. 27–30)

In *b. Sanh.* 90b Rabbi Meir speaks of how the dead will be resurrected in finest robes: “If a grain of wheat, which is buried naked, sprouts [clothed] in many robes, how much more so will the righteous [be clothed], who are buried in their clothes already.”

Traditions attributing or comparing certain things are compared to Solomon or to how they would have been done in Solomon’s time (such as banquets, in *m. B. Meši‘a* 7:1), or in which it is said that the people of a certain generation or time were “of little faith” (such as the people of the generation of the Exodus, in *b. Pesah.* 118b), are standard in rabbinic literature. Arguing from the complex to the simple is also a standard feature of this literature.

*So do not be anxious, saying, “What will we have to eat?” or “What will we have to drink?” or “What will we have to wear?” For the Gentiles seek after all these things, but your heavenly father knows that you seek all of these.*  
 (vv. 31–32)

Some Rabbis thought in the way Jesus does here. For example, what is said by Rabbi Eleazar in a tradition from *Midrash Sekhel Tov* [ed. Buber] to Exod 16:4 is very like what Jesus is saying here.

Then the Lord said to Moses [“Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a day’s portion on its day, that I may test them, whether or not they will walk in my Torah” (Exod 16:4)], “Gather a day’s portion on its day.” He who created the day created its sustenance with it. He intended that people never feel they do not need to pray and receive mercy. “That I may test them.” From here Rabbi Eleazar

ha-Moda'i said, "Whoever has something to eat today and asks, "What will I eat tomorrow?" is [one] of those of little faith."

*But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all of these things will be given to you also.* (v. 33)

Here Jesus makes absolutely clear that his theology was centered on "kingdom" (by which he meant "doing God's will in this world") and "righteousness" (by which he meant "being free of sin"), in contrast to the Rabbis, for whom the essential thing was Torah study. Indeed, in a tradition from *Eliyahu Zuta* (ed. Friedmann), chap. 17, what Jesus says shall be given to those who seek God's kingdom and righteousness Rabbi Eliezer says shall be given to "those who labor in the Torah for its own purpose." But the Rabbis were also aware that righteousness went further than simply mastering the legal traditions. In a tradition from *Esther Rabbah* 6.1, in which Ps 106:3 is discussed—"Blessed are the keepers of justice who do righteousness at every moment"—the Rabbis asked: Who performed righteousness at every moment? They answered that it was not those who taught the written and oral law, since at least some of the time they ate and slept; nor for the same reason was it those who wrote sacred documents. Rather for the Rabbis those who performed righteousness every moment were those who raised orphans in their homes.

While sharing the values and language of the later Rabbis, Jesus passes over this central feature of the Jewish religious life of the Second Temple period and later. Of course Jesus teaches about the Scriptures, and later in the Gospel he will also cite oral tradition to defend his actions and those of his students on the Sabbath. But he does not encourage either his audience or his disciples to study Torah,<sup>36</sup> perhaps because his audience and disciples come from the Galilean peasant class.<sup>37</sup> Still, the almost complete silence in Matthew about

36 Kingdom and righteousness alone without Torah study and national or social institutions would later prove to be a disastrous recipe. For example, those communities that sustained schools of study and fixed days to mourn the fall of Jerusalem and funds for the poor provided a framework for Jews to live (even if persecuted and impoverished) creative, spiritual lives within their own communities aspiring to return to their homeland. Every Jewish movement which abandoned these Jewish boundary markers ended in calamity and this trend will likely continue to be the case. The Jews are a nation, and the Torah and the aspirations of homeland are the links that hold them together.

37 J. Klausner, in his book *Jesus of Nazareth*, 389–98, has pointed out that Jesus' agenda in his sermons could never have been relevant for his implied audience. Its exaggerated demands are simply not realistic for those living in small peasant communities. Jesus'

deteriorating social and political life under the boot of Rome sets the Gospel apart from Jewish writings of the period.

The second part of the same tradition, from *Midrash Sekhel Tov* to Exod 16:4 above, tells us that some should be ahead of others when it comes to studying the Torah.

*Whether or not they will walk in my Torah:* Rabbi Joshua said: One who learns two laws [of oral law] in the morning and two at night and works a full day in between, Scripture considers him as if he has learned the entire Torah. Yet, from this very verse, Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai argued [against him]: The Torah was only given to the eaters of the manna for them to expound and secondly to those dependent on tithes from foods. How is this? If a man sits and expounds but does not know from where he really receives his food and his drink, from where he receives the garment which covers him [then he will fail in his studies]. Thus you see that the Torah was only given to the eaters of manna to expound and second to those dependent on tithes from foods [who see that God provides for them].

It is inconceivable that Jesus would not have identified fully with the covenantal outlook of his times. Nevertheless the teachings of Jesus that Matthew and the other Gospel writers provide are so selective as to confirm that Judaism and Christianity had already moved in separate directions by the time these writers set these teachings down.

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teaching is devoid of the national aspirations inherent in being a “holy nation before God.” His teaching is always polemical and directed against some group or other whose members act as straw men for his teaching, for which reason it often seems driven by anger and the need to utter threats rather than love and/or compassion. But Klausner’s main point is that the teachings of Jesus do not address the needs of a nation that must support national institutions, law courts, synagogues, celebrations, and mourning days. The impossibly high expectations of the gospel’s ethic never seriously served the political ends of Christian countries and rulers, which eventually turned to cruelty and oppression (feeling little or no guilt for the hardships and persecutions they initiated). The reported teachings of Jesus ignore the social, political, and religious needs of Jews seeking to live fully the rich religious life pictured in Torah and tradition. For Klausner, that was actually the goal of Jesus—to discard the essential nationhood of Israel, and all that celebrated it, in favor of the divine kingdom that posed a challenge to any human kingdom. He thinks that that was why in the end it did not appeal to most Jews, and the Gentiles it attracted had little interest in taking the Jesus’ teaching seriously. A new theology had to overlay the original Jesus movement for it to take hold.

*Therefore, do not be anxious for tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for today is today's evil.* (v. 34)

Both *b. Ber.* 9b and *Exod Rab (Shemot)* 3:6 contain an adage almost identical to what Jesus advises: "Each trouble is enough for its own time." The clear implication is that one ought to deal with immediate problems, rather than worrying about those that may arise in the future.

# Chapter 7

## Introduction

Jesus' Sermon as a whole is essentially a thematically organized anthology of Jewish teachings. In this section of the sermon in particular Jesus teaches lessons based on scriptural texts that are embedded in the Jewish homiletic literature. However he has removed the texts upon which these lessons are based in this literature, and which are regularly cited in them, so that he appears to teach—at times with surprising bitterness—on his own authority or on divine authority without acknowledgements: “I say to you.” That is, the charm of the rabbinic literature, with its schoolhouse dialectics and focus on scriptural proof-texts, is replaced here not only by the Matthean Jesus’ concision, but also his severity. Nonetheless it is clear that Matthew considers Jesus’ audience to be familiar with the style of discourse within the various schools of the scribes and sages, for Jesus addresses his audience according to this style.

Because in this section of the sermon Jesus offers a number of reproofs and moral injunctions, we might call it “The Proverbs of Jesus.” In the first several verses Jesus again speaks in terms of the theology of reciprocity, only now in a kind of “negative” way. Whereas in Jesus’ prayer the one who prays asks God to forgive him because he has also forgiven others, in these first several verses Jesus warns against doing certain things to others—such as judging them—so that others do not also do these things to you. What underlies Jesus’ thinking here is the understanding that everyone has faults and so everyone should be concerned first with his own faults rather than another’s. That is, it is best not to accuse others of what it is that ails you.<sup>1</sup> In verse 5 he calls the one who does such things *hypocrita*—“hypocrite” or “impersonator”—after which, in verse 6, he warns that one should be careful about what one teaches and to whom. Those who are not worthy of the teaching will pervert the wisdom it contains.

In verses 13–14 we encounter Jesus in the role of gatekeeper to the Kingdom of Heaven. Here he offers advice on how to gain admission into the kingdom, or states what it is that will leave one outside it. Jesus appears to be the only one who has this knowledge.

In spite of the demanding exhortations found throughout, the overarching theme in all of the rabbinic literature is the hope found in the unconditional love of God for Israel. That is, while the concept of “measure for measure” is

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<sup>1</sup> b. *B. Meši'a* 59a.

taken seriously in this literature, it is mitigated by the notion that God will never completely abandon His people. The Rabbis often posed problems concerning God's relationship with the Jews. Scriptures appeared to be inconsistent on the matter. The Rabbis usually resolved these difficulties by claiming that although individuals *qua* individuals may be judged harshly, collective religious interaction will eventually be answered with grace and love.<sup>2</sup> And so prayer offered by the community in the framework of corporate membership has much merit. By phrasing his prayer in the plural (using "our," "us"), Jesus, in Matthew's eyes, does not separate the individual from the nation and his theology, at the surface level, seems to be close to that espoused by rabbis. However, this first impression needs to be examined in greater detail as Matthew's anti-Israel rhetoric increases as the Gospel progresses until he intimates that Israel will be replaced by another.

### Commentary

*Do not judge, so that you will not be judged. (v. 1)*

The word "judge" here means to articulate a private estimation of another's character. As is made clear in verse 5, Jesus is actually addressing his critics here and not the wider audience, reminding them of their own teachings and their own failings. As he points out, they are not qualified to judge him. Be that as it may, it is difficult to reconcile what Jesus says here with the language he uses to describe the Jewish religious leaders, calling them at times "hypocrites" (7:5) and at times "vipers" (23:33).

What guides Jesus' thinking here is again the widely held principle of "measure for measure," though at first he begins with a sweeping statement about judgment—that one simply should not judge. He does not say here what he

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<sup>2</sup> In b. *Ta'an.* 8a, Shmuel the teacher considers the issue and explains that those teachers who teach that God's anger is difficult to assuage are seemingly contradicted by Psa. 78:36–37: "But they flattered him with their mouths; they lied to him with their tongues. Their heart was not steadfast toward him; they were not faithful to his covenant." But then the Psalm states in the next verse: "Yet he, being compassionate, forgave their iniquity and did not destroy them; he restrained his anger often and did not stir up all his wrath." He explains that there is no contradiction. The teachers speak about how God attends to the prayer of the *individual*, requiring him (in his private prayer) to repent fully or be punished, while the Psalm discusses the way God deals with the prayers of the assembly which may not be completely sincere. Still, God loves and Israel and will always forgive His people.

suggests following, that in order to be judged kindly one must judge kindly in return.

According to a text from *b. Ta'an.* 8a, the rabbis considered it presumptuous for anyone to judge himself as righteous. The text reads:

Rabbi Ammi taught: Whoever holds himself as being fully righteous in the earthly realm will be held liable according to the full standard of justice in the heavenly realm. And so Scripture teaches, “Truth (more properly: *full righteousness*) springs up from the earth, and justice (*tsedek*) looks down from the heavens” (Ps 85:11).

*For in the judgment with which you judge you will be judged, and in the measure with which you measure out—it will be measured out to you.* (v. 2)

In *b. Šabb.* 127b it is said that the one “who judges benevolently will be judged benevolently” (the text of *Otzar Midrashim*, p. 162, adds: “and one who judges maliciously will be judged maliciously”). And in *'Abot R. Nat.A* 8:5 something similar is said: “Just as you judged me favorably so God will judge you favorably.”

Klausner points out that many of the sayings of Jesus also appear in the rabbinic literature, but in a somewhat different form,<sup>3</sup> but yet there are some sayings of Jesus that appear in that literature almost word for word the same. The saying of Jesus here is found word for word in *m. Soṭah* 1:7, with the difference that (and this is a significant difference) in Matt 7:2 Jesus is addressing his critics, so that the last word in the saying is directed at them—“in the measure with which you measure out—it will be measured out to *you*”—whereas in *m. Soṭah* the rabbis are simply stating a rule, so that the last word in the saying here is directed at an anonymous “him”—“in the measure with which a person measures out—it will be measured out to *him*.”

*Why do you see the speck in your brother's eye, but you do not notice the beam in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me remove the speck from your eye,' while look—there is a beam in your own eye?* (vv. 3–4)

The rabbinic version of what Jesus says here appears in both *b. B. Bat.* 15b, though here the speck is said to be in a man’s “teeth,” and *b. 'Arak.* 16b. Ruth 1:1, which reads literally, “And it was in the days of judging those who judged . . .,” is

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<sup>3</sup> Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 385.

cited to introduce the tradition in *b. B. Bat.*, giving it a judicial setting not found in the tradition from *b. Arakhin*. The tradition from *b. B. Bat.* 15b reads:

If the judge said to a man, “Take the splinter [tiny fault] from between your teeth,” he would [justifiably] retort, “Take the beam [large fault] from between your eyes.”

People are quick to find faults in others but not so quick to see their own. In this text the man who “retorts” to the judge may indeed have faults but he is aware that the judge has even more serious faults than he. In the same way, Jesus is in the position here of the one who has been told that he has faults, to which he now responds by pointing out how much larger are the faults of his critics; for as I say, at this point in the sermon Jesus is addressing the more learned sages who have undoubtedly rebuked him and his followers. Jesus answers in the way that the Jewish narrative expects him to. Without knowing the Jewish sources in the background here we would not hear the bitter tones.

The following story is instructive in showing that judges should not condemn others for doing what they themselves were guilty of. The example shows how the Rabbis, realizing that many judges were putting themselves above the law, interpreted the Torah in such a way as to point out that only honest judges would be appointed. According to *Tanh. Deut., Shoftim*, 3:16:

“Judges and officers” (Deut 16:18) tells us that the judges must be vigorous in their good deeds. . . . It is told of Rabbi Ḥanina ben Elazar that he had a tree, which while planted on his property, had limbs that stretched over into an adjoining property. One day a litigant came [with his neighbor] to complain to him that his neighbor’s tree was overhanging his own property. Then [remembering his very situation] the judge asked him to leave and return the next day. He retorted that the judge was being unfair since he adjudicated the cases of all the others who came before him on the spot while this case he pushed off to the morrow. But what did Rabbi Ḥanina need to do first? He sent workmen to remove the tree that was on his property and whose branches encroached upon another’s. Then the following day the neighbors returned to him for a judgment. He ordered the defendant, “You must remove it!” That one replied, “Why so, your own tree has branches that encroach on another’s property!” The judge replied, “Go and see for yourself—whatever you see has been done to my property you will have to do to your own.” He immediately went and did so.

*Impersonator, first remove the beam from your eye, and then you will be able to see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye. (v. 5)*

The word “impersonator” here actually refers to those hypocrites who would criticize others for faults they themselves have. It is here in this verse that we discover that Jesus is addressing his adversaries in this brief section of the sermon (verses 1–6). It is the first time in the sermon that he actually tells us to whom his remarks are being addressed. Prior to this it was, as Matthew has told us, the crowds and his disciples whom Jesus was addressing. Here Matthew allows Jesus to explicitly address his audience.

*Do not give what is holy to the dogs, nor throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them under their feet, turn around and attack you. (v. 6)*

The word “holy” in this verse is almost certainly a mistake. The Aramaic *qadashin* means “rings” (*Targum Onqelos* to Num 31:50, singular *qedasha*, a “ring”),<sup>4</sup> but the translator must have confused it with the similar but different *qadishin*, “holy things” (*Targum Onqelos* to Lev 11:44, singular *qudsha*, “something holy”). Both words could be spelled in the same way, yet pronounced somewhat differently. The proper reading of the verse, then, should be: “Do not give *rings* to the dogs, nor throw your pearls before pigs,” which is corroborated by the Syriac rendition of this verse. Our retroversion of the Greek into what must have been the Aramaic original here seems to indicate that at least a part of the sermon in Matthew is based on an Aramaic tradition.

In this verse Jesus offers the Jewish teachers of his day their own advice, which is more fully explained in *Kallah Rab.* 5:3 (which tradition also explains the cryptic saying in the *baraita* called *Kinyan Torah* [now printed as *m.Abot* 6:2]):

“Anyone who does not take to heart their Torah study is called ‘needing rebuke’,<sup>5</sup> as the verse says, ‘As a golden ring in a swine's snout, so too is a beautiful woman who has turned from sound reason’ (Prov 11:22)”

<sup>4</sup> Fitzmyer, in his book, *A Wandering Aramean*, 15, points out that in 11Qtg Job 38:8, from Qumran, the very same word—*qedasha*, “ring”—also appears.

<sup>5</sup> One of the methods used by the Rabbis to explain texts (or items in dreams) is called in the Greek *notorikon*. In this method the first two letters of the first word in a phrase is joined to the last letter of the last word in the phrase. Then the three letters are read as a new word that is meant to shed light on the phrase as a whole. In our case “NZM (ring) B'AF (in the nose)” yields “NZF.” “NZF” is a strong word signifying one who deserves extreme rebuke, to the point

(*m. Abot* 6:2). [Commentary]: “Golden [ring]” refers to Torah. . . . “(In the nose of a) pig”—refers to one who reads it on rare occasions. God says, “What purpose is there in casting [my Torah] before a pig? Look—my Torah is beautiful and I made it to be meditated upon [constantly], but this one does not constantly meditate upon it to the extent that he wipes out [its purpose].”

While it is tempting to think of “dogs” and “pigs” as the terms used by the Jews to deprecate their non-Jewish enemies, it was in fact the case, as this tradition makes clear, that the rabbis themselves used these words to refer to those Jews who neglected the Torah. And so here Jesus asks that those whom he has just called “hypocrites” recall their own advice, which is that one should not “sully the Torah.”

Jesus’ address to his critics ends here. Like all populist leaders, Jesus mocks the current leadership of his day and treats its members as “enemies” while at the same time espousing most of their values. For him it is not so much what they teach that is wrong; it is rather that they do not abide by what they teach.

*Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened up to you.* (v. 7)

Now Matthew continues his address, picking up from where he left off in Matt 6:34. The rabbis accepted that prayer was always heard.<sup>6</sup> In a tradition from *b. Bek.* 44b, in which this belief is maintained, Deut 7:14, or at least a part of it, read in a most creative way, is the proof-text. Deuteronomy 7:14 reads literally: “There will not be in you a barren (masc. sing. ‘*aqr*’), or a barren (fem. sing. ‘*aqarah*’), and in your cattle.” The tradition reads:

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said, “or a barren (fem. sing.)” means that your prayer will not be barren before God. [The tradition interprets the conjunction “and” to mean “namely.”] When will this occur? When you make yourself (as simple, guileless) as cattle.<sup>7</sup>

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even of being ostracized from the community. The message is that anyone who treats the Torah casually sullies it and becomes an object of censure himself.

<sup>6</sup> See Strack and Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament*, 450–58.

<sup>7</sup> The first use of the word “barren”—*aqr*—in the biblical text, which is masculine and so meant to refer to a man, was (also) taken by the rabbis to refer to a male student who was uncommitted to his Torah studies. The second use of the word “barren”—*aqarah*—in the text, which is feminine and is meant to refer to a woman, was (also) taken by the rabbis to

There is an ancient tradition preserved in *b. Meg.* 6b for which the rabbis endeavored to find a context. Rabbi Isaac suggested that it had to do with success in Torah study, but the statement has the mark of a popular saying and in form it resembles Matt 7:7. The text reads:

Rabbi Isaac said: If someone says to you, “I took the steps but I did not find”—do not believe. “I did not take any steps but I did find”—do not believe. “I took the steps and I found”—believe. The saying refers to learning Torah.

That God answers prayers is also a common-place in the Hebrew Scriptures (Psa. 37:4; also Isa 55:6).

*For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds and it will be opened to the one who knocks.* (v. 8)

In the Book of Esther, Mordecai is said to be “ben (son of) Kish” (Esther 2:5). A tradition in *b. Meg.* 12b wonders why he was called this when his father was called Yair, the answer to which contains a fairly close parallel to what Jesus says here.

Son of Kish (i.e. ‘the knocker’): [Mordecai] would knock on the gates of mercy and they would be opened to him.

*For what person among you, when his child asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he or she asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If then you who are wicked know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly father give good things to those who ask him?* (vv. 9–11)

Here Jesus makes the argument that God gives to people what they ask for. The argument runs as follows: Human beings have the ability to be cruel yet still they give to their children what they ask for. *Human beings are God's children. God has no evil within him, so how much more does he give to human beings what they ask for.* The argument is in a rabbinic style of logical inference known as

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refer to the feminine singular for prayer—“*tefillah*”—and so a barren, unanswered prayer. The reason the rabbis found meaning in the verse beyond the traditional one has to do with their notion of biblical economy. The shortest way to express the idea that no one would be barren is to say, “No one will be barren.” Why then does the biblical text say what it does and not mention the word “people”? The rabbis assume in such cases that there is another meaning to be found in these seemingly extravagant wordings of the verse.

*qal v'ḥomer*, that is, from the lesser to the greater. A text from *Lev. Rab.* 34:14 contains a similar sentiment in the same argumentative style:

[During a drought] Rabbi Tanḥuma raised his face to the heavens and said, If a person of cruel flesh and blood who owes nothing to his divorced wife but when he sees her naked and in great pain will feel pity for her and provide her requests, we who are the children of your renowned ones, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and you are responsible for our food, how much more so [will you provide our requests]. At that very moment rain fell and the world was replenished.

*All things, therefore, which you wish people to do to you, so do also to them. For this is the Torah and the Prophets.* (v. 12)

This teaching—the Golden Rule—is very ancient and is found in various texts. The teaching attributed to Hillel in *b. Šabb.* 31a—“What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor”—is fairly close to the version of the Rule found at the beginning of *Didache*, which reads: “Love your neighbor as yourself (Lev 19:18), and do not do to another what you would not want done to you.” But the version of the Rule attributed to Hillel ends with the advice that “this is the whole Torah, while the rest is the commentary to it; go and learn.”

In light of Hillel’s version of the Rule, it is reasonable to assume that the Matthean Jesus means here that the whole of scripture is for the sake of teaching people the Golden Rule; that is, that every law in it furthers that goal. This can only be the meaning of the phrase: “For this [rule] is the Torah and the Prophets.” The similarity between this phrase from the Matthean Jesus here and the phrase “This is the whole Torah” from the version attributed to Hillel can only mean that they are not unrelated. After stating his version of the Rule, and then claiming that it is, in essence, the whole of the Torah, Hillel concludes with the exhortation that one should “go and learn it.” As I have pointed out, the Gospel writers never show (except for Matt 9:13) Jesus exhorting anyone to study Torah (they may even have removed this exhortation, if it was known to them).<sup>8</sup>

This is the culmination of the part of the Sermon concerning righteousness. From here on Jesus assumes the role of the righteous wisdom preacher of the coming apocalypse.

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<sup>8</sup> Torah study was the supreme value in the first century. Both Philo (*Embassy to Gaius* 31) and Josephus (*Ag. Ap.* 1:60 and 2:204) note that Jewish children were immersed in this study from a very early age.

*Enter through the narrow gate, for wide is the gate and broad is the road which leads to destruction, and many are they who travel upon it. Narrow is the gate and crowded the road which leads to life, and few are they who have found it. (vv. 13–14)*

A saying with a similar rhythm and a somewhat similar meaning revealed in a similar way—through an obvious metaphor (or metaphors)—is found in *m. Abot* 2:15: “The day is short, the work is great, the workers are lazy, the reward is great, and the Master of the house presses.” There are echoes of this rabbinic text in a later saying of Jesus in Matt 9:37–38): “The (work of) harvesting is great and the workers are few. Ask the owner of the harvest to bring (more) workers for the work of the harvesting.”

Here the Matthean Jesus describes the two ways one might go, either down the wide road, which takes one towards certain “destruction,” or down the narrow road, which takes one towards “life.” To get to the wide road one must simply follow the crowd; the other, narrow, road, must be sought out and only a very few of those who seek it will find it. That is, only a select few will ever gain eternal life. Jesus’ teaching here is exclusive and elitist. It holds little encouragement for the masses. We need give pause here, for Matthew allows Jesus to disown his later stance (9:13) that he has come to open up the kingdom to sinners, tax collectors, and gluttons.

*Look out for false prophets, who come to you dressed in sheep's clothing, but inside they are violent wolves. (v. 15)*

Jesus warns against those who say that little is required for one to gain eternal life. These are the false prophets who seem as benign as sheep but are in fact as destructive as hungry wolves. It is unlikely that Jesus is speaking here of the scribes and/or Pharisees, but rather of those who say that they are the true prophets of the coming kingdom, or else, perhaps, wonder-workers of some sort.

The Rabbis also warned against false prophets and the rewards they promised to those who might break God’s laws. A tradition from *Pesiq. Rab Kah.* 24:15 reads:

A certain Ahab the son of Koliah and a certain Zedekiah the son of Maaseiah were false prophets. They used to seduce the wives of their friends—in the way that these verses relate. [“Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, concerning Ahab the son of Kolaiah, and Zedekiah the son of Maaseiah, who prophesy a lie to you in my name. Look, I will

deliver them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar King of Babylon, and he shall slay them in front of your eyes. And because of them a curse shall be current in all the (areas of the) Captivity of Judah in Babylon, saying, “The Lord make you like Zedekiah and Ahab, whom the king of Babylon burned in the fire.”] This is because they have done dishonorable things in Israel, committing adultery with their neighbors’ wives, [and speaking lies in my name, which I have not commanded them. Indeed I know, and am a witness, says the Lord.]” (Jer 29:21–23). And what did they do exactly? One of them would go to the wife and tell her, I have had a prophetic vision that when my colleague came into you, you gave birth to a prophet in Israel. One would pimp for the other.

*By their fruits you will know them. Are bunches of grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? (v. 16)*

Jesus begins an argument here which culminates with his assertion in verse 19 that those who are not good shall be cut down, which is very close to what John the Baptist says in 3:10. As mentioned earlier, “fruits” are a metaphor for deeds (see the commentary to 3:10).

*So the good tree bears good fruit, and the rotten tree bears rotten fruit. (v. 17)*

The idea that the good person does good deeds and the evil person does evil deeds is standard in the Jewish wisdom literature. For instance, Prov 11:30 tells us that: “The fruit of the righteous person is a tree of life, and he who is wise secures human lives.” And from 1 Sam. 24:13 we are told that: “As the proverb of the ancients says, ‘Out of the wicked comes forth wickedness.’”

*A good tree is not able to bear rotten fruit, nor is a rotten tree able to bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into fire. Therefore, you will know them by their fruits. (vv. 18–20)*

Trees with edible fruit could not be cut down even for reasons of national defense. “Only the trees which you know are not trees for food you shall destroy and cut down” (Deut 20:20). Again the threat is made here that for those whose deeds are found wanting perdition awaits.

*Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the heavenly kingdom, but rather the one who does the will of my heavenly father. (v. 21)*

Here Jesus warns those who have accepted him as their teacher that the power of his name alone is not enough to save them from perdition. His message here is that it is not faith that saves but works.

*Many will say to me on that day, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name cast out demons, and in your name do many powerful deeds?” Then I will publicly declare to them, ‘I never knew you. Depart from me, you who perform iniquity’” [Ps 6:8]. (vv. 22–23)*

Matthew's source here indicates a wariness of miracle-workers. Of course the Gospel tradition makes plain that Jesus himself performed many miracles. The Rabbis warned against those who healed in Jesus' name (apparently it was a common enough phenomenon for there to be such warnings). A tradition from *t. Hul. 2:22–23* recounts:

It happened that Rabbi Eleazar ben Dama was bitten by a serpent. Then Jacob of Kephar Sama came to cure him in the name of *Jesus ben Pandira* but Rabbi Yishmael did not permit him to do it. He said: “Ben Dama, you are not permitted!” He replied: “I will bring you a proof that he may heal me!” But he died before he managed to produce his proof. Rabbi Yishmael said, “Blessed are you, ben Dama, for you have departed in peace and have not violated the commandments of the sages!” For lasting punishment comes on anyone who breaks through a fence of the sages, as it is written, “A serpent shall bite him who breaks through the fence” (*Eccl 10:8*).

*Everyone who hears these words of mine and does them is compared to a thoughtful person, who built his house on the bedrock. The rain fell, the rivers came, and the winds blew and struck against that house, but it did not fall, for its foundation was upon the bedrock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them is compared to a stupid person, who built his house upon the sand. And the rain fell and the rivers and came and the winds blew and struck against that house, and it fell, and its fall was great. (vv. 24–27)*

There is, first, a promise of security for those who adhere to what Jesus has said, followed by the threat of destruction for those who do not.<sup>9</sup>

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9 See *Sipre Deut.*, *piska* 342 for the basis of sermons ending on a note of comfort as a general rule.

*So it happened, that when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were dumbfounded at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one having authority, and not as the Scribes.* (vv. 28–29)

According to the text, Jesus taught with “authority,” whereas the scribes did not (see also Mark 1:22). With regard to the meaning of “authority,” a number of popular ideas are sometimes taught in theological colleges, such as that he spoke like the prophets of old with divine authority, or that he did not cite sources, biblical or otherwise, while he taught. One Jewish reader suggested that “authority” means “allegory.” [Syriac translates here as *mashalta* which, besides the sense of authority, also can mean parable, since he spoke in parables (Chajes, cited in Klausner).]<sup>10</sup> Or perhaps it is the case that Matthew was not concerned about what it meant that Jesus taught with “authority,” only that he taught with it. Perhaps he had in mind the style of prophets, whereas the scribes did not teach in such apodictic manner but cited teachers, proof-texts and traditions. Luke too points out that Jesus taught with “authority,” but he does not say along with Matthew that this was in contrast to the scribes when they taught. He does say, however, that an effect of Jesus’ “authority” was that he could even command “unclean spirits” (4:32; 4:36). And so “authority” here might mean something like “the possession of a palpable and awesome power.” The rabbinic term that describes the extent of the power and/or authority of a court or a rabbi is *koah*.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps the best way to understand “one having authority” is to see in it the Aramaic (and Syriac) term *rishana*, “one possessing authority.” Rashbam explains “*rishtai(n)hi denashim kashpaniot* in *b. Pesah.* 10a as “mistress of sorceresses—one who commands them with authority to teach them.” She instructs the women under her command and control in the secret arts of sorcery. For Matthew, Jesus’ style as a teacher was not scholarly but rather charismatic, confident, and commanding. This is not to say that the underpinnings of his Sermon were other than exegetical, just that the overt exegetical style of preaching was not his style. The Gospel writer intends for us to understand that Jesus’ audience likely already knew much of what he said in the Sermon, but that the manner in which he said it was surprising. Jesus commanded obedience according to his own authority as if he were free to teach his opinions as binding rules; he did not cite other teachers for support. For Matthew, Jesus’ *manner* of teaching throughout the sermon, especially in this chapter, must have amazed or even confused his audience, but *what* he said did not.

<sup>10</sup> Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 265 n. 35.

<sup>11</sup> e.g., *m. Ketub.* 11:5 and *b. Qidd.* 6ob.

# Chapter 8

## Introduction

Chapter Seven ends with the listeners to Jesus' Sermon expressing astonishment at the authority with which Jesus teaches, so uncharacteristic of the scribes. Now, in chapter eight we see other manifestations of this authority, whether in his ability to heal (and in this chapter he heals many), or in his ability to control the elements. Also, from time to time in the sermon Jesus speaks reprovingly of the Gentiles, pointing out, for instance, that their prayers are too wordy, or that they only love those who love them. But now in Chapter Eight, although Jesus heals far more Jews than Gentiles, he nonetheless seems to privilege the Gentiles over the Jews. In the story of the healing of the centurion's servant, he asserts that it will be the Gentiles, rather than the Jews, who will have a place in the Kingdom.

With regard to this story it is noteworthy that whereas in Matthew the centurion comes to speak to Jesus himself (8:5), in Luke (and in the sources he used, which were likely known to Matthew) the centurion sends the well-respected "elders of the Jews" to speak for him (7:3). Moreover, in Luke the elders make it clear that the centurion has been a friend and benefactor to the Jews, whereas in Matthew the centurion seemingly has no connection with the Jews at all. Whereas in both Matthew and Luke the centurion is said by Jesus to be superior in his faith to every Jew in Israel, it is only in Matthew that Jesus goes on to say that it will be the Gentiles and not the Jews who will dine with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the Kingdom. The differences in these accounts are startling, especially since many scholars consider Luke to be a Gentile and Matthew to be a Jew.<sup>1</sup> Does it not stand to reason that Matthew's

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<sup>1</sup> Nowhere is this point better expressed than in Jules Isaac's *Jesus and Israel* (1971), 190–94. Isaac points out that in Matthew's account of this story there is the promise of the salvation of the faithful Gentiles, typified by the anonymous centurion, coupled with the promise that there shall be no salvation for the Jews. This passage echoes the condemnation of the Jews by John the Baptist in Matt 3:9. On the other hand, he notes, Luke presents the centurion as a "God-fearer" and friend of the Jews and Jesus castigates none but those Jews who are full of iniquity but accepts that many other Jews are righteous and need no rebuke. Isaac shows word by word the subtle changes in Matthew from Luke's more congenial account. See also the rabbinic portrayal of those "half-converts" called God-fearers or heaven-fearers in *Midr. Deut. Rab.* 2:24, as well as the references to Roman authors in *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism* (Stern 1974), 2:382–84.

presentation of this story shows him to be either a Gentile or at the very least a Jew-turned-Gentile?

In this chapter we also encounter the first of what are known as the hard sayings of Jesus, responses of his to others which make him appear insensitive, even cruel. To the student who says to him that he is ready to become one of his followers, if only he might first bury his father, Jesus replies, "Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead!" (Matt 8:22). Although the harshness of this saying is obvious, its meaning is not. Just who are the "dead" who, according to Jesus, should be "burying their own dead"? According to some, these "dead" are hedonists or unbelievers who, because of this, are already dead to God, since they lack an immortal soul.<sup>2</sup> Others suggest that the "dead" are those of the old, dying order.<sup>3</sup> E.P. Sanders believes that this is an authentic saying of Jesus, since it would be hard to imagine anyone in the early church inventing such a saying and attributing it to Jesus.<sup>4</sup> However it may be the case that the saying can only be properly understood if the word "dead" is held to be a mistranslation of a word from the saying in the original Aramaic.<sup>5</sup> That is, the word "dead" might very well be a mistranslation of an Aramaic word meaning "waverers," "gravediggers," or "townsfolk."<sup>6</sup>

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2 This and similar views are espoused by Clement of Alexandria (second century), Cyprian (third century), Ambrose (fourth century), and Augustine (fourth–fifth century), and also more recently by Martin Hengel in his *Nachfolge und Charisma* (1969), 8. Calvin (sixteenth century) suggests that those who keep up appearances of custom before people are themselves like dead people preoccupied in the funeral customs of burial of the dead, removed from life and the needs of the living. In *Jesus and Judaism* (1985), 252–253, E. P. Sanders suggests a meaning akin to Calvin's and stresses Jesus is serious when he says "leave your father." See also *Studying the Synoptic Gospels* (Sanders and Davies 1989), 317.

3 W.F. Albright and C.S. Mann, in their commentary to Matthew 8:22 (*Matthew*, 1971), 95–96 tell us that this saying should be read: "Follow me, and let the dying bury the dead." By "the dying" he means those who are of the old order that is passing away, and who will have no share in the coming kingdom. Because they are the dying they can bury their own dead. The living are to proclaim the kingdom for the living.

4 Again in *Jesus and Judaism*, 252–54, Sanders takes a statement to literally mean what it says: that Jesus expects the student to "follow him rather than bury his father." In other words, at least here, according to Sanders, Jesus is saying that to be a follower of his means that one must utterly disregard an especially important social and religious requirement. Sanders also refers to Hengel here, who claims that refusing to bury a parent in the Greco-Roman world was, as in the Jewish world, the gravest of ills.

5 Black, Perles, Schwarz, Lachs, and Basser all have upheld a particular view as to the way it might originally have read.

6 See also Hans G. Klemm, "Das Wort von der Selbstbestattung der Toten: Beobachtungen zur Auslegungsgeschichte von Mt. viii. 22 Par." (1969–70).

Mack and Robbins list and comment on some of the plausible meanings of the saying:

If the statement means “let the real dead do it,” it is probably a paradoxical way of saying “that business must look after itself.” If it means “let the spiritually dead do it,” it implies that those who do not follow Jesus have missed the life associated with the kingdom. If it means “let the gravediggers do it,” it implies that the obligation of following Jesus requires a person to leave tasks that would otherwise be his to fulfill. Any which way it is unsettling.<sup>7</sup>

It is worth noting that in Matt 4:19 Jesus also speaks a kind of hard saying, though here, as I have pointed out, it is in the form of a pun. That is, Jesus says to Peter and Andrew that if they follow him, he will make them “fishers of men,” but by this he means too, of course, that they must abandon their father. It may be that we have a pun in the notice that the dead are to bury their dead since “dead” can also refer to the townsfolk with a slight change of intonation in Aramaic. In this case some of the various suggestions to explain “dead” as “spiritually dead” may still find their place figuratively, while literally the ostensible meaning is that the townsfolk should be charged with supervising the burial.

In this chapter we also encounter two terms that are very important not just for Matthew but for the other Gospel writers as well—the “Son of God” and the “Son of Man” (Greek: *huios tou anthropou*). The former term refers to an earthly figure who shares in God’s powers. The meaning of the latter term—which in the synoptic gospels, as Geza Vermes points out, is only ever spoken by Jesus, and this more than four dozen times—is the subject of a massive literature.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See Burton L. Mack and Vernon K. Robbins, *Patterns and Persuasion in the Gospels* (1989), 72.

<sup>8</sup> Geza Vermes, *Jesus in His Jewish Context* (2003), 89ff. Also see Burkett, *The Son of Man Debate: A History and Evaluation* (1999). In John the term “Son of Man” is used almost a dozen times and in a way that is similar to the way the term “Son of God” is used in other Gospels. Elsewhere in the New Testament the term is found in Rev 1:13 and 14:14, and also in Acts 7:56, which reads: “[T]he Son of Man sits at the right hand of God in heaven.” Note the passage that reflects this description of the Messiah as an angelic heavenly being in *Midrash Psalms* (ed. Buber) 18:29. “Rabbi Yuden said in the name of Rabbi Ḥama: In the Future to Come, the Holy One will seat King Messiah at his right hand, ‘And God said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I may make your enemies your footstool”’ (Ps 110:1).” A verse from Psalm 20 seems pertinent as well: “Now I know that the Lord saves his anointed (Hebrew: his *messiah*); he proclaims him from his holy heaven, with the saving power (Heb. *Yesha*, nearly equivalent to *Jesus*) at his right hand” (Ps 20:6). Because the “Son of God” is a title given to an earthly figure, he who bears it has limited divine power. In contrast, the “Son of Man” is a title given to a heavenly figure, and so he who bears this title has much greater abilities.

Though no one knows for certain what the term means,<sup>9</sup> many scholars see that it likely refers to a kind of heavenly apocalyptic figure such as the one spoken of in Dan 7:13–14 (though this understanding of the term is not without problems, I too accept that the term “Son of Man” is a title for a heavenly apocalyptic figure):

I saw in the night, visions, and behold, *with the clouds of heaven there came one like a Son of Man*, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him,<sup>10</sup> and to him was given dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his

- <sup>9</sup> In some cases the term may even refer to a figure known as “Metatron.” See my discussion of this figure further in 11:19. The name of the angel who led the Israelites through the desert (Exod 23:21) is said to have been “Metatron,” and in the Hebrew apocalypse known as *3 Enoch*, or *Sefer ha-Heikhalot*, he is the angelic form of Enoch. In the Ethiopic Book of *1 Enoch* (37–71) “Son of Man,” “Righteous One,” “Messiah,” and “Chosen One” are all titles of the angelic Enoch. See James C. VanderKam, “Righteous One, Messiah, Chosen One, and Son of Man in *1 Enoch* 3–71” in *The Messiah: Developments in Earliest Judaism and Christianity* (Charlesworth 1992), 169–191. Many years ago Dr. Alan Unterman suggested to me that we should see *t-tr* in *Metatron* not as [me]*tatr*[on] but as [me]*tetr*[on] (Greek: “four”) as in *Tetragrammaton*, the four-letter name of God which is said “to be in him,” that is, the angel leading the Israelites in the wilderness (Exod 23:21). So the angel’s name literally contains God’s name—the prefixed letter *m* (= from), plus *tetra*, and the suffix “on” (an angelic name ending, as in “Sandelfon”). In *3 Enoch* it is said that he sits at the right hand of God. Saul Lieberman, in *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism* (Gruenwald 1980), 235–41, understands the name to mean “beside The Throne”, and also that God’s name is in him. The connection with the title “Son of Man” in the synoptics need not be dismissed out of hand. The descriptions are somewhat similar. Unterman’s derivation is certainly as plausible as the myriad explanations given for the name “Metatron” and for the “Son of Man” in *1 Enoch* (*Enoch* having been a person who was taken into the heavens, [Gen 5:24]). It is sometimes argued that this section of *1 Enoch* is later than the Gospels and so the author of it borrowed the term from them. Scholars note that no evidence for the section called *Similitudes* in *1 Enoch*, where Son of Man is mentioned, was found in any Semitic version (somewhat fragmented and partial) of *Enoch* recently unearthed at Qumran. In sum, no one knows where the term came from and what it means.
- <sup>10</sup> The apocalyptic colorings of Dan 7:13 are also found in Matt 24:29–31: “Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken: And then shall appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of Man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.”

dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed (Dan 7:13–14).<sup>11</sup>

The problem in determining the meaning of the term in Matthew's Gospel is that Matthew uses it to refer to a number of different beings. For instance, in 25:31–46 the "Son of Man" is said to be a kind of divine Judge in company with angels. But at 8:20 Jesus uses the term as a kind of pun. That is, although in the messianic framework Jesus is the "Son of Man"—Lord of all, even the Sabbath (12:8)—he uses the term here to refer to a figure that is even less privileged than the animals and man. The term here refers to both a "thing and its opposite"—a messiah, but a messiah who is far more burdened than any other creature. That is, the term embodies the ambiguity of the saying in which it appears. For as Jesus says at 8:20: "If you want to be a disciple of the Son of Man, you must first give up every comfort known to animal or man." The ambiguity in the meaning of the term highlights the ambiguous status of Jesus, who exists in a kind of liminal space between the realm of human authority and the realm of the divine.

As for the Rabbis, a tradition in *b. Sanh.* 98a makes plain that they also identified the "Son of Man" figure with the Messiah (though the idea that the "Son of Man" possessed divine attributes such as the ability to absolve sins was antithetical to them and to the Scribes):<sup>12</sup>

Rabbi Alexandri said: Rabbi Yehoshua [reconciled] two contrary verses: it is written, "And behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a Son of Man" (Dan 7:13) and [contrariwise] it is written, "[Behold, thy king cometh unto thee . . .] lowly, and riding upon an ass!" (Zech 9:7). [There is no contradiction.] If they are meritorious, [the Messiah comes] "with the clouds of heaven," but if they are not [then he comes] "lowly and riding upon an ass."

Moreover in *y. Ta'an* 2:1 the Rabbis warn against anyone falsely claiming to be the "Son of Man," that is, the Messiah:

<sup>11</sup> In another passage in Daniel (7:26–27) the apocalyptic aspect of the term is defused: "And the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the most high One; their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey them." This passage may undermine the force of the *Son of Man* being a title for anything more than the people of the saints.

<sup>12</sup> We shall have occasion to return to this theme in our introduction to chapter 9 and not without some puzzlement.

Said Rabbi Abbahu, “If a man should tell you, ‘I am God,’ he is lying. If he says, ‘I am the Son of Man,’ in the end he will regret it.”

### Commentary

*When he came down from the mountain, many crowds were following him. Suddenly, there was a leper approaching him, who knelt before him, and said, “Lord, if you were willing, you are able to make me pure.” (vv. 1–2)*

No sooner has Jesus finished his Sermon than he is again engaged in healing. It was on the determination of the priest that someone was pronounced a “leper” (Lev 13:3); it was also on the determination of the priest that the leper was declared clean again (Lev 13:17). The leper lived apart from others, wore “torn clothes,” and cried aloud as he walked, “Unclean, unclean” (Lev 13:45–46).

*And stretching out his hand, he touched him, saying “I am willing. Be purified.” Immediately, his leprosy was purified. (v. 3)*

“Be purified” is not so much a prayer for healing as it is a command for the leper to become pure. Healing through touch was well known among the Rabbis. A tradition in *b. Ber.* 5b says that while conversing with the ill Rabbi Yohanan, Rabbi Hanina reached out and, touching him, cured him:

“Do you attach importance to suffering?”  
 He replied, “Not them and not their reward.”  
 He told him, “Give me your hand.”  
 He gave him his hand and he raised him up.

The words “raised up” in the tradition mean “cured,” as they do in Matt 9:7: “Being raised up, [the paralytic] went into his house.” The story of the healing of the leper by Jesus, with slight variations, is found in all the synoptic gospels (Mark 1:40–44, Luke 5:13–14) and so must have appealed to the early church. The variations are interesting. Both in Matthew and in Luke nothing is said about what Jesus felt toward the leper. However in most of the texts of Mark (1:41) it is said that Jesus was “moved with pity” for the leper, while *Codex Bezae* and some Latin versions of Mark say that Jesus was actually “moved with anger.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The case for Jesus having felt “anger” (*orgistheis*) towards the leper rather than “compassion” (*splanxnistheis*) has been made by Mark Alan Proctor in “The ‘Western’ Text of Mark 1:41: A Case for the Angry Jesus,” in his PhD thesis, Baylor University, (1999).

In touching the leper Jesus would have acquired a degree of impurity which, though it was not a sin, still meant that he would have had to have purified himself before entering the Temple again or else touching priestly gifts. Perhaps Jesus is said to have felt anger for the leper in *Codex Bezea* and in a number of Latin texts of Mark because he knew that in touching the leper he would have acquired a minor degree of impurity.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, while the Gospel writers recount miracle stories to demonstrate the singular power and authority of Jesus, there remain a considerable number of passages that suggest Jesus feared being known solely as a magician and exorcist. His message was not to be related to his miracle working. However, the synoptic gospels never quite declare what unique message he intended to convey. As I noted, for Jesus' audience there was nothing really new in the Sermon, although the way it is phrased and constructed makes it an eternal masterpiece. Jesus' real message seems to lie buried within his parables. Their obscurity, however, except in a few well-known cases, prevents them from gaining wide appeal. One might speculate that gospel tradition has only hinted (since, unlike Jesus, the writers and audience were Roman citizens) that Jesus might have been seen, at an earlier stage in the telling of the Jesus story, as subversive to Roman rule, and that earlier traditions spoke of messianic pretensions more openly.

*Jesus said to him, “Say nothing to anyone, but go and show yourself to the priest, and bring the offering Moses commanded as a testimony to them.”*  
(v. 4)

The word “testimony” here means a “statute” for the Israelites. According to the provisions of the law of lepers, the offering the cleansed leper would have brought to the priest would have been a “sin” offering (Lev 14:19). Presumably the crowds have gone now, or else Jesus has moved away from them, and he does not want anyone to know that he has cured the leper, for as a matter of law only the priest’s declaration that the leper is pure, as I have pointed out, renders him pure.<sup>15</sup> Plausibly, Jesus shunned crowds because he was worried that his cures might not work, since he knew they were dependent on the strength of the faith of those being healed or, more likely, he worried about Rome’s views of his activities. It was dangerous for holy men to attract crowds in Roman Palestine because they would have been considered as rebels and rebels might rouse mobs against the Romans.

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<sup>14</sup> When Miriam, Moses’ sister, was stricken with leprosy, he prayed, “Please God, heal her now!” (Num 12:13) but he did not touch her.

<sup>15</sup> See Lev 14:2ff. for a description of the process of the purification of lepers.

*When he entered Kfar Nahum, a centurion came to him, beseeching him: "Lord, my houseboy is laid in bed at home, paralytic and terribly tormented." He said to him, "I shall come and cure him." The centurion answered him, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you enter under my roof, but only say the word, and my houseboy shall be healed. For I am a person representing authority, and I have soldiers under me, and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and he does it." (vv. 5–9)*

It is in the story of the healing of the centurion's servant that the theme of the greater faith of the Gentiles over against that of the Jews first appears in the Gospel of Matthew. Toward the end of the Gospel another centurion will remark that Jesus is truly a son of God (27:54). Centurions were commanders in the Roman army and so representatives of Roman power. Recognition by the centurion of the power of Jesus is an act of submission by one who knows that his temporal power is as nothing compared to the power of the divine.

*Jesus, hearing this, marveled, and said to those who were following him, 'Amen,' I say to you, never have I found such faith in anyone in Israel. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west and they will recline at the table with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the heavenly kingdom. (vv. 10–11)*

Here Jesus says that it will not be the Jews but rather the Gentiles who, because of their greater faith, shall gain a place in the kingdom of heaven. It is because of such statements as this concerning the exclusivity of the Gentiles over against the Jews that I find it difficult to accept that Matthew (or any of the other Gospel writers) was Jewish.

*But the children of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be wailing and the grinding of teeth.<sup>16</sup> (v. 12)*

Jesus says here what is implied above. Those who think they will inherit the kingdom, that is, the Jews, will instead be eternally damned.

*Jesus said to the centurion, "Go; let it be done as you trusted it would." And his houseboy was cured in that hour. (v. 13)*

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16 Compare with Matt 13:42, 50.

Most likely “in that hour” means “at that very moment.” The Hebrew *hahu sha’ah* means “in that very instant,” although *sha’ah* technically means “hour.”

*Jesus came to Peter’s house, and saw his mother-in-law lying in bed and feverish. He touched her hand, and the fever left her, and she arose and brought him food.* (vv. 14–15)

Again we see a cure effected by touch.

*When evening came, they brought to him many who were possessed by demons, and he threw out the spirits by speaking, and he healed all who were ill.* (v. 16)

We are told that Jesus cast out demons through speech alone. In general, nothing is attributed to God; all of the healing is accomplished under his own authority. This is the power of the holy man.

*Thus was fulfilled what had been spoken by Isaiah the prophet, “He took our weaknesses and bore our illnesses” [Isa 53:4].* (v. 17)

Here we have another fulfillment text, this one based on Isa 53:4. The text as it appears here is not from the extant LXX, which reads: “He bears our sins and suffers pain for us.” It is in fact much closer to the Masoretic Text, which reads: “Indeed, he bore our illnesses and carried our pain.”

*Jesus, seeing the crowd around him, ordered them to go across to the other side.* (v. 18)

It is tempting to think that “the other side” here means only “the other side of the Sea of Galilee.” But Jesus’ command to go to “the other side” may also be an indication of his discomfort and/or unwillingness to be followed by the masses as we have said above. That is, Jesus was acting on the awareness that holy men of this period ran the danger of being arrested for sedition if they gathered crowds about them.<sup>17</sup>

*A certain scribe approached and said to him, “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.”* (v. 19)

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<sup>17</sup> Josephus reports that the death of John the Baptist was a direct result of his popularity. My comments on 8:4 are applicable here as well.

The word “scribe” here means a follower of those who taught piety and good works based on the written Torah, and who also prescribed methods of interpretation of the oral traditions and customs either produced and/or enacted by them or earlier scribes. What Matthew’s source suggests here is that such people did not see in Jesus anyone other than the kind of teacher they normally esteemed. The response of Jesus toward the scribe, who expresses admiration for him, is startling.

*Jesus said to him, “Foxes have dens and birds nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.”* (v. 20)

What the scribe says to Jesus here resonates with what Ruth says to Naomi in Ruth 1:16: “Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go.” Jewish tradition considered this statement as tantamount to an act of conversion to Judaism on the part of Ruth, which Naomi then tried to discourage her from doing (*y. Yebam.* 47b). Here the scribe wants to become a follower of Jesus and, like Naomi with Ruth, Jesus tries to discourage him (and presumably does). For the first time in Matthew Jesus uses the term “Son of Man” and, whatever this term might mean elsewhere (see the introduction to this chapter for a longer discussion on the usage of the term), here by placing the “Son of Man” in contrast with animals and birds, Jesus is using the term as a type of pun.<sup>18</sup> Animals and birds have homes, and so are able to do certain things in them, that the “Son of Man,” because he has no home, cannot do.

*Another of the students said to him, “Lord, allow me first to go and to bury my father.” But Jesus says to him, “Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead.”*<sup>19</sup> (vv. 21–22)

Jesus’ radical insistence that his followers must renounce the cares of this world is based on his understanding that the demands of the spirit must override the demands of one’s society. This understanding is not shared by the Rabbis.

Together verses 21–22 form a concise and well-designed unit. The student says two things to Jesus and Jesus in turn, harshly and enigmatically, reverses

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<sup>18</sup> In Dan 4:10–12 there is a description of a tree under which the “beasts of the field found shade” and in whose branches lived the “birds of the air.” The point is that animals manage in nature. But Jesus lives in a liminal space between kingdoms and is not of the natural order. His supernatural characteristics are being shown more and more.

<sup>19</sup> See my comments to 6:34.

both. We analyze the structure of and the implication of certain words in this unit:

"Allow me first to *go* (to leave the crowd, but not to come to you first), and to *bury*<sup>20</sup> my father (to act according to the demands society places on me)."

"Follow me (leave the crowd, but come to *me*), and leave the dead to *bury* their own dead (ignore what society asks of you)."

The purpose of the scene as a whole (vv. 18–22) is to make clear what discipleship means for Jesus—total separation from the crowd. To the scribe Jesus says that a disciple of his must live in a kind of homeless state in which no comfort or rest can be found. And to the student he says that to live in a homeless place is literally to be homeless, which means also to be society-less, and so whatever the demands of the home or of the society, they are to be discounted. And so to be a disciple of Jesus means to be a follower not of the crowd but rather the lone, kindred spirit who would follow him without expectation of any comfort. The scene reminds one of the calling of Peter and Andrew (4:18ff.), in which Jesus says to the brothers, "Follow me," after which Jesus makes another clever play on words.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> To bury someone is to walk behind him to the grave. In *b. Ber.* 18a it is said that: "Whoever sees a dead person (funeral procession) and does not follow after it transgresses Prov 17:5: 'He who mocks the poor [dead-man] taunts his Maker.'" And in *Mekhilta of Rabbi Yishmael* to Exod 18:20: "And you shall inform them of the way in which they will go," the word *go* refers to *burying the dead* (because one follows after the dead to the gravesite).

<sup>21</sup> In 4:18ff., two pairs of brothers—Peter and Andrew, James and John—abandoned their fathers in order to become disciples of Jesus. I once thought, and still think it is possible, that in 8:22 there is a play on the Aramaic words for "city"—"mata"—and "dead"—"meta"—so that the phrase in the original Aramaic would have read: "Let the city/place bury their own dead." However it is uncertain whether, in first-century Galilean Aramaic, *mata* was still understood to mean "city/place," as it did in imperial Aramaic, and also in eastern Aramaic dialects, including Syriac. I recently discovered that, unknown to me, Strack and Billerbeck (1922) had preceded me by many decades in putting forward this claim, of which I had been previously unaware. Samuel Sandmel had argued in "Parallelomania" (1962) that in so doing they missed the intent, and the very deliberate bite, in the gospel passage. David Goldenberg raised the same objection to my similar observation in "Retroversion to Jesus' *Ipsissima Verba* and the Vocabulary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic" (1996). While I do not claim that we have Jesus' exact words anywhere, I do suggest that we can establish that Jesus is making a pun when he enjoins his disciples to "follow him" (Matt 8:22). In a similar way, in 4:19 Jesus is making a pun when

The overall content of 8:1–22 is perplexing, because it shows Jesus as both a pious Jewish holy man but also as someone who condemns the Jews (while at the same time esteeming the Gentiles).

*When he got into the boat, his students followed him. Suddenly, a great storm came upon the sea, so that the boat was covered by the waves, but he was sleeping. They approached and woke him up, saying “Lord, save us! We are perishing!” (vv. 23–25)*

Apparently it was the students who approached him rather than the other people on the boat.

*But he said to them, “Why are you afraid, you of little faith?” Then, arising, he commanded the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. (v. 26)*

Why when they turn to him for help in this situation Jesus says of his students (and this is a harsh saying too) that they are of little faith is puzzling. Was Jesus angry because they woke him, terrified, instead of trusting that all would be well since he was on the boat with them? But if this were the case, then why did he command the sea and the winds to become calm? The Gospel writers include this story to suggest that even over the elements Jesus has authority. In *b. B. Bat. 73a* a story is told of sailors using divine names to save themselves from disaster.<sup>22</sup>

*The people were amazed, saying, “What sort of person is this, that the winds and the sea obey him?” (v. 27)*

It is the people on the ship who were amazed, not the students, and again they were amazed at his authority over nature. It was for this purpose of testing and demonstration of Jesus' powers that the storm was sent.

*When he came across to the region of the Gadarenes (Gadara), two demonically possessed people met him from the tombs, so fierce that no one was strong enough to pass by that road. (v. 28)*

he says “fishers of men” after his directive to “Follow me.” Whatever the meaning of the phrase “fishers of men,” it is clearly a pun of some type.

<sup>22</sup> See my comments to this text and other similar ones in “The Rabbinic Attempt to Democratize Salvation and Revelation” (Basser 1983), 28.

It seems the region of the Gadarenes was populated by Gentiles and here again Jesus does not shy away from healing Gentiles. Matthew seems to be telling us here that demons inhabited areas in which the tombs were found and, once the two Gadarenes had become possessed, they were driven to one of these areas of the Gadarenes by the demons, since they could no longer live in civilized society. A tradition in *b. Sanh.* 65b states that it was forbidden to starve oneself and then to spend the night in a cemetery waiting for a demon to visit (apparently this practice was common enough to draw the attention of the Rabbis). It seems this practice allowed one to do supernatural feats or else gain supernatural knowledge.

*Suddenly they called out, “What do we have to do with each other, Son of God? Have you come here to torture us before the proper time?”* (v. 29)

Apparently the demons possessing the Gadarenes thought they would reign unchallenged until the End of Days. The demons knew, of course, as did Satan in the Temptation scene, that Jesus shared divine power, which meant that he had the power to exorcize them, hence their addressing him as “Son of God.” Though in the coming kingdom demons will have no power, in the temporal world they enjoy immense power, for which reason they chastise Jesus for challenging them before the kingdom has come.

*There was a herd of many swine being fed far away from them. Jews did not raise swine and the demons were aware of this. The demons urged him, “If you throw us out, send us into the herd of swine.”* (vv. 30–31)

Jesus did as they asked. As a Jew he had no sympathy for swine. It seems the demons wanted a little amusement before being forced to flee from that region. Scholars are not sure what locale the Gospels might have had in mind.

*He said to them, “Go.” They departed and went into the swine. Suddenly the entire herd rushed down the slope into the sea and died in the water.* (v. 32)

Apparently it was enough for a holy man to simply to say “Go” in order to exorcize a demon. In *b. M'eil.* 17b there is a recounting of an exorcism performed by Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai on the emperor's daughter. “He said: 'Ben Tamalion, go. Ben Tamalion, go!' And when [the demon] was called, he left.” Josephus speaks of exorcism as being an ancient art and also mentions having seen a certain Eleazar perform an exorcism (*Jos., Ant.* 8:46–48).

*The ones who were feeding the swine fled, and, coming into the city, they reported everything, especially about the men who were being possessed. Suddenly the entire city went out to meet Jesus, and when they saw him, they urged him to depart from their territory. (vv. 33–34)*

The Gadarenes cannot have been pleased that their livestock was destroyed as a result of a bargain Jesus had made with the demons. Almost certainly Jesus would not have preached to the Gadarenes anyway—they were not of the “lost sheep of the house of Israel”—and so he departed once more for Kfar Nahum (Capernaum).

# Chapter 9

## Introduction

We begin our discussion of this chapter by comparing the accounts of the healing of the paralytic in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In Mark (though silently) and Luke, the Scribes and Pharisees wonder how it is that Jesus can say he has the power to forgive sins, a claim that to them is blasphemous. Jesus understands their concerns over this and proceeds calmly to allay them; that is, in the original synoptic account of this story Jesus deals civilly with the Scribes and Pharisees, as they do with him. The fact that they wonder about the correctness of the claim Jesus makes indicates that they do not see him as a heretic but rather as a pious Jew. This also holds true for them when they ask how Jesus can dine with sinners (Mark 2:16; Luke 5:30; but also Matt 9:1), since it was commonly thought that people were judged by the company they keep (*m. Abot* 1:7). However, in his typical fashion, Matthew has reshaped the story so as to create hostility between the Scribes and Jesus. For in Matthew the Scribes are said to be “wicked in heart,” for which reason Jesus upbraids them. Finally, Matthew omits the question that in both Mark and Luke the Scribes and/or Pharisees ask of Jesus: *“Who can forgive sins but God alone?”*, an important fact to which we shall return in my comments to 11:19. Apparently Exod 23:21 intimates that a lesser divine figure could remit sins if he chose to.

Mark 2:5–12:

And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” Now some of the Scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, “Why does this man speak like that? *He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?*” And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, “Why do you question these things in your hearts? Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise, take up your bed and walk?’ But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—He said to the paralytic—“I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home.” And he rose.

Luke 5:20–26

When Jesus saw their faith, he said, “Friend, your sins are forgiven.” The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves,

*“Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?”* Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, “Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk’? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins....” He said to the paralyzed man, “I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.” Immediately he stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on and went home praising God. Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said, “We have seen remarkable things today.”

Matthew 9:2–7:

Suddenly they brought to him a paralyzed person laid upon a bed. Jesus, seeing their faith, said to the paralyzed person, “Take courage, son, your sins are forgiven you.” Suddenly, some of the Scribes said among themselves, “*He blasphemes!*” Jesus, seeing their design, said, “Why do you think wickedness in your hearts? What is easier, to say ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk’? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins upon the earth”—then he says to the paralyzed person, “Be raised up, and take your bed and go to your house.”

That Jesus was a faith-healer was well known by this time in his career, for which he drew no criticism. Indeed a tradition in *b. Ber.* 60a, which is attributed to Rabbi Yishmael, grants people the authority to heal, for it was felt that at least in this respect God was willing to share his authority.<sup>1</sup> But as I say, the concern for the Scribes was not in the healing but rather in Jesus’ claim that on his own authority he could forgive sins, for this was understood to be something that only God could do (see, for instance, Exod 34:7: “He extends mercy to thousands [of generations] forgiving iniquity, sin and wrongdoing”; Ps 32:2: “Fortunate is the man to whom God does not attribute sin”; and Ps 130:4: “For with you is forgiveness that you may be feared”). This is the reason they ask him why he claims to forgive the sins of the paralytic instead of simply healing him—to which question Jesus gives a shocking reply. He makes this claim in order to show off. Let me explain.

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<sup>1</sup> The proof-text for this tradition is Exod 21:19: “If one [who was injured by another] gets up and walks around outside on his own support, the other who inflicted the injury is not liable but shall pay for missed work and what it took to have him cured.” At the end of this verse in Hebrew the root for “cured” is written twice, for which reason the Rabbis said, “From here [the doubling] we learn that authority is given to a healer to heal” (*b. B. Qam.* 85b).

Jesus' argument for saying that he can forgive the sins of the paralytic is that in so doing he can prove that he is the Son of Man. But this is not altogether clear because the argument itself has actually been truncated in the accounts of this story. With the help of the following typically rabbinic argument from *b. B. Qam.* 34b we can see what is missing.

Why did the Torah talk about an animal which gored other animals three times in three days [Exod 21:36]? Was it to [make its punishment] harder or easier [than a first-time offender]? You must admit it is to make its case harder. Now, if in the harder case of a repeat offender one pays only for the amount of the damage and nothing extra, should this not the more so be true in the case of the [first time offender] that usually has an easier punishment?

According to the form of this argument, there are two ways of interpreting Jesus' argument (vv. 5–7). The first way is to see that Jesus begins his argument by making the weaker claim, which is that he has forgiven the sins of the paralytic, and not the harder claim, which is that he can cure the paralytic, and which is something, moreover, the Scribes are willing to believe. Of course the problem with interpreting what Jesus says here in this way (as it is with the second way) is that there is no way to confirm that the paralytic's sins have been forgiven.

"[Why did I say, 'Your sins are forgiven?'] What would be easier—to say [the mere words] 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say [the empirically verifiable], 'Get up and walk'? [Did I offer the easier case or the harder? You must admit—the easier. Now if in the harder case of curing the paralytic you will believe me, should you not believe me all the more so when I make the easier claim that I can forgive sins?] But [I said "Your sins are forgiven" for rhetorical purposes only] that you may know that the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins upon the earth." Then he says to the paralyzed person, "Be raised up, and take your bed and go to your house."

The second way of interpreting what Jesus says here is to see that he begins his argument with the harder claim, which is that he can forgive sins, and not the easier claim, which is that he can cure the paralytic.

"[Why did I say, 'Your sins are forgiven?'] What would be easier—to say [I have authority to pronounce], 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say [I have authority to pronounce], 'Get up and walk'? [Did I offer the easier case

or the harder? You must admit—the harder. Now if in the harder case of forgiving sins I actually have authority to do this, should this not the more so be true in the case of curing the paralytic?] But [I said “Your sins are forgiven” for rhetorical purposes only] that you may know that the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins upon the earth.” Then he says to the paralyzed person, “Be raised up, and take your bed and go to your house.”

Again, confirming that the sins of the paralytic have been forgiven remains a problem. In any event, although the logic of the argument fails as it is written in either case here, nonetheless the form of it is traditional. Given these problems in understanding the argument, we can appreciate why the Gospel writers cut it short, leaving the heart of it unstated thereby. It is probable that Jesus’ argument in full equated sins with spiritual sickness (see 9:12: “Those who are strong have no need of a doctor, but only those who are ill”). Yet what is clear here is that whereas before this Jesus worried about making his divine powers known, now he is prepared to show them off.

Matthew’s version of this story lacks the question, “Who can forgive sins but God alone?,” which in Mark and Luke follows the statement of the Scribes and/or Pharisees that Jesus blasphemes by claiming that he can forgive sins. Nowhere in any of the Gospels does Jesus answer the charge of blasphemy directly. In the several accounts of this story he simply sidesteps the matter by saying that as the “Son of Man” he has the authority to forgive sins on earth. Yet in Mark and Luke, as I say, this is not the concern of the Scribes and/or Pharisees. Rather it is the fact that the creature is comparing himself with the Creator. But if this is how the Scribes defined blasphemy (as being akin to idolatry, that is; see *b. Ker*: 3b–4a),<sup>2</sup> then Jesus has offered no defense of the accusation, not even a rhetorical one. At any rate, at a loss to understand Jesus’

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<sup>2</sup> The biblical law concerning “blasphemy” is referred to in Lev 24:16: “He who blasphemeth the name of the Lord shall be put to death.” It is difficult to see how Jesus has contravened this law by anything he has done here. Yet “blasphemy” seems to be a fluid term with a considerable range of meaning. In the Gospels its usage may lie in the fact that in their accounts Jesus does not openly give credit to God for the healings he performs. So, perhaps the problem lies in allowing others to think that he is some kind of god himself. This is something like the expression “the creature is comparing himself with the Creator.” On the other hand we see usages of “blaspheme,” which aim to mock God’s power and say, “My powers are greater than God’s.” This is the meaning of the term as it is used in 2 Kings 19:6: “Isaiah said to [Hezekiah’s servants], ‘Say to your master, ‘Thus says the Lord: Be not afraid of the words which thou hast heard, with which the servants of the king of Assyria have *blasphemed* me [by saying that I, God, am unable to deliver the people of Judah from his hand (2 Kings 18:32)].’” That is, the king of Assyria assumes here that he is more powerful than God, for which reason God says

argument (as were Mark and Luke too), Matthew simply left it as he found it. He also must have been at a loss to see how anything Jesus said contravened any contemporary understanding of what blasphemy was in the legal sense (i.e., reviling, cursing, or disparaging God). By removing the definition of blasphemy in his version of the story—that is, by removing the question about God alone being able to forgive sins—the truncated argument in Matthew is not as jarring as it is in Mark and Luke.

The Rabbis too inveighed against the doctrine of two authorities, which they called “*shetei reshuyot*.” A fairly late text from *b. Hag.* 15a, which explains how Elisha ben Avuyah became the heretic later known as Aher, makes this plain:

He [in his journey to the heavens] saw authority was granted to Metatron to sit and write down the merits of Israel.<sup>3</sup> . . . [Then he thought,] “Perhaps there are two authorities . . .” Permission was granted to him (Metatron) to strike out the merits of Aher.<sup>4</sup>

Whereas this text shows us that the Rabbis understood the danger inherent in the Son of Man theologies, the story of the healing of the paralytic in the Gospels shows us at what an early date this danger was known.

In this chapter we also hear the two blind men call Jesus “Son of David” (9:27). “Son of David” is the term the Rabbis preferred when referring to the messianic redeemer.<sup>5</sup>

This chapter contains reference to Jesus as the “bridegroom” and refers to the “members (or sons) of the bridal chamber” (9:15). The reference appears to refer to some mythic, mystical construct where the Son of Man and Wisdom (Sophia) are both hypostatic emanations of the Godhead. The union of Son of Man (from below) and Wisdom (from above) signifies the restoration of the “spiritual and divine” realm immediately *below* God, intimating the impending unification of all into the divine realm. On the identity of Wisdom and Jesus, the

that he has blasphemed against him. He has also mocked God’s name openly, an act which could encompass the definition of blasphemy of Lev 24:16.

<sup>3</sup> That is, Metatron is said here to be a heavenly scribe which, according to the apocalyptic literature, is the same position held by Enoch in heaven once he was taken up to it. Moreover, there is reason to see in the image of these heavenly scribes the *Son of Man* figure of Daniel (in some texts Enoch is called “Son of Man”). See further my comments to 11:19.

<sup>4</sup> I have omitted the part of the story in which Metatron is severely flogged for having misled Aher into thinking that there are two authorities in heaven.

<sup>5</sup> The term appears over one hundred times in the rabbinic literature, including *Kallah Rab.* 2:4 and 7:4; *b. Yoma* 10a; *b. Sukkah* 52a; *b. Meg.* 17b; *b. Yebam.* 62a; *b. Sanh.* 38a; 97a–98b; *y. Sukkah* 5:1; *y. Ta‘an.* 1:1, 4:5; *y. Qidd.* 4:1; *Gen. Rab.* 97:9.

arguments put forward by Ben Witherington III in *Jesus the Sage* in light of the Gospel of Matthew's references to "Wisdom" and "Son of Man" (i.e. Jesus' heavenly identity) have much merit.<sup>6</sup> The texts of gnostic Gospels, collected by J.M. Robinson are characterized by mythic imagery which extends some of the philosophic/mystic conceptualizations, identified by Witherington, within the circle of normative Jewish imaging of God through personified authorities or attributes: wisdom, power, glory. So the gnostic text, "Exegesis of the Soul,"<sup>7</sup> suggests Jesus is both brother and bridegroom of Sophia. (Wisdom)—both hypostatic children of God joined in a divine union:

From heaven the father sent to her her man, who is her brother, the first-born. Then the bridegroom came down to the bride... she cleansed herself in the bridal chamber. But then the bridegroom came down to her in the bridal chamber which was prepared... before Christ's appearance came John, preaching the baptism of repentance.

Here is a citation concerning the rational soul seeking God (authoritative teaching VI, III—33).<sup>8</sup>

She came to rest in him who is at rest. She reclined in the bride-chamber. She ate of the banquet for which she hungered.

To the *Gospel of Philip* II, chap. 3 (68–70), Robinson discusses how spiritual separations are to be repaired in the Bridal Chamber.<sup>9</sup> In sum it says that the Holy of Holies is the Bridal Chamber. Baptism and Resurrection (the holies) together with Redemption (the holy) take place in the Bridal Chamber, a spiritual realm more than a physical realm. The final paragraphs of this Gnostic Gospel are illuminating. The passage refers to image of the rending of the veil recorded by Matthew (27:51) to have occurred while Jesus was on the cross:

The holies of the holies were revealed, and the bridal chamber invited us in... If any one becomes *a son of the bridal chamber*, he will receive the light... And none shall be able to torment a person like this even while he dwells in the world.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ben Witherington III, *Jesus the Sage: the Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (1994).

<sup>7</sup> Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (1988), 168.

<sup>8</sup> Robinson, *Nag Hammadi Library*, 310.

<sup>9</sup> Robinson, *Nag Hammadi Library*, 149–51.

<sup>10</sup> Robinson, *Nag Hammadi Library*, 159–60.

I sum up the matter by abridging the words of Pirjo Lapinkivi:

Gnostics believed that their souls were brides of angels, they saw their entrance into the world beyond as a wedding-feast. When Sophia receives Christ the bridegroom, they also receive their [own] bridegrooms—the angels.... man is drunk and only the call of the redeemer can wake him up.<sup>11</sup>

Pirjo Lapinkivi traces the motif here to ideas evident in Sumerian, Hellenistic, and Jewish writings (still extant in kabbalistic sources). While the image of the “bridal chamber” seems to shift in meaning somewhat from tract to tract, there can be no question that the words refer to some kind of ante-chamber where the spiritual worlds and human souls are prepared for entry into the Kingdom of Heaven. The reference in all synoptic gospels to this “chamber” testify to its early usage in Christian doctrine.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Pirjo Lapinkivi, *The Sumerian Sacred Marriage in the Light of Comparative Evidence* (2004), 172.

<sup>12</sup> We must also note the protest of Irenaeus, who notes the abuse of the Gnostic doctrine among some Christians to seduce women in the name of spiritual union. I quote from chapter 23:6 of *Against Heresies* of Irenaeus (based on the Old Latin) *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, *The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus*, (Roberts, et al. 1885). The added notes in square brackets are by A. Cleveland Coxe:

*“For they affirm, that because of the ‘Redemption,’ [Grabe is of opinion that reference is made in this term to an imprecatory formula in use among the Marcosians, analogous to the form of thanksgiving employed night and morning by the Jews for their redemption from Egypt. Harvey refers the word to the second baptism practiced among these and other heretics, by which it was supposed they were removed from the cognizance of the Demiurge, who is styled the ‘judge’ in the close of the above sentence] it has come to pass that they can neither be apprehended, nor even seen by the judge. But even if he should happen to lay hold upon them, then they might simply repeat these words, while standing in his presence along with the ‘Redemption’: ‘O thou, who sittest beside God, [That is, Sophia, of whom Achamoth, afterwards referred to, was the emanation.] and the mystical, eternal Sige, thou through whom the angels (mighty), who continually behold the face of the Father, having thee as their guide and introducer, do derive their forms [the angels accompanying Soter were the consorts of spiritual Gnostics, to whom they were restored after death] from above, which she in the greatness of her daring inspiring with mind on account of the goodness of the Propator, produced us as their images, having her mind then intent upon the things above, as in a dream. Behold, the judge is at hand, and the crier orders me to make my defense. But do thou, as being acquainted with the affairs of both, present the cause of both of us to the judge, inasmuch as it is in reality but one cause. [The syntax in this long sentence is*

## Commentary

*Boarding a boat, he crossed and came to his own city. (v. 1)*

The city is Kfar Nahum (Capernaum, see 4:13), which had a tax office (see further 9:9).

*Suddenly they brought to him a paralyzed person laid upon a bed. Jesus, seeing their faith, said to the paralyzed person, “Take courage, son, your sins are forgiven you.” (v. 2)*

The text here is clear—Jesus is moved to heal on account of the faith of those who have brought the paralyzed man to him. I have discussed Jesus' shocking affirmation to the paralytic that “your sins are forgiven you” in the introduction to this chapter.

*Suddenly, some of the Scribes said among themselves, “He blasphemes!” (v. 3)*

In chapters 5 through 7 Jesus' authority as a teacher is made plain, and confirmed by those who have heard him teach (7:29). In chapter 8 Jesus' authority manifests itself in his ability to heal and to control the elements. Now here in chapter 9 Jesus claims to have the authority to forgive sins. For the Scribes

very confused, but the meaning is tolerably plain. The gist of it is, that these Gnostics, as being the spiritual seed, claimed a consubstantiality with Achamoth, and consequently escaped from the material Demiurge, and attained at last to the Pleroma.] *Now, as soon as the Mother hears these words, she puts the Homeric helmet of Pluto [rendering the wearer invisible] upon them, so that they may invisibly escape the judge. And then she immediately catches them up, conducts them into the bridal chamber, and hands them over to their consorts.*

*Sige* (the name might be related to that of a Sumerian goddess), according to Gnostic texts, refers to the primordial Silence who existed at the Creation. She gave birth to Sophia, the Gnostic's divine Mother, who seems to have been the 'mother' of the Divinity and his 'consort' as well. See Campbell, *Myths to Live By*, 12. We might take note the term "sits beside God" (which is equated with Sophia in the text) and think of the Jewish Metatron (sitting beside God) who is, I think, to be equated with Matthew's 'Son of Man.' In full circle, we come back to the work of Witherington, who sees in the canonical Gospels (apart from John) allusions to the lower Jesus, the heavenly Sophia, and the intermediate Son of Man as various forms of the *Logos or Memra*. A comprehensive list of works discussing Jesus and Sophia can be found in Deutsch, "Wisdom in Matthew." We will have occasion to return to these themes when we discuss Matt 11:29.

to condemn such authority as “blasphemy” presents a special problem. The biblical law concerning “blasphemy” is referred to in Lev 24:16: “He who blasphemes the name of the Lord shall be put to death.” It is difficult to see how Jesus has contravened this law by anything he has done here. It may be that what is called “blasphemy” is a more general term that suggests Jesus does not openly give God due credit for the supernatural feats he performs, allowing for others to conclude perhaps that he is some kind of god himself, even stronger than God. The usages vary, for instance, an expanded usage is found in 2 Kings 19:6: “Be not afraid of the words which thou hast heard, with which the servants of the king of Assyria have *blasphemed* me.” Apparently the blasphemy is found in 2 Kings 18:32 “[D]o not listen to Hezekiah, when he leads you astray, saying, ‘The Lord will deliver us.’” “Blasphemy” may refer to words that imply that one has independent power equal to or greater than God’s.

*Jesus, seeing their design,<sup>13</sup> said, “Why do you think wickedness in your hearts?”* (v. 4)

It is difficult to know what “design” (thought) means here. Does it mean that the Scribes think badly of Jesus? Do they accuse him of usurping divine authority in order to lead people astray? This text begins to prepare the reader, if only with a scene of dark whisperings, for the denouement of the Gospel trial narrative.

<sup>13</sup> The Greek noun *enthumeseis* means “thought,” “idea,” “imagination,” and the verb *enthumeomai* means to “think,” “ponder,” “reflect.” It is therefore roughly equivalent to the rabbinic term *hirhur* (noun) and the verb *leharher*—that can mean anything from “silent Shema meditation” (m. Ber. 3:4) to “thinking impure thoughts” (b. *Abod. Zar.* 20b), to adopting an accusatory and suspicious stance toward another’s words and actions (*Tanh. Exod. ,Pikudei* 11), to devising a plot (*Midrash Abba Gurion* [ed. Buber] to Esther, chap. 3). This last passage discusses how the Persian king plotted to preoccupy Mordecai from rebuilding the Temple by supporting Haman, his enemy, to thwart the rebuilding. The same passage discusses Haman’s plot to rise to power by wresting Esther’s privileged position (*proskope*) from her. I suggest this is the sense of Matthew’s formulation here. Jesus understands that the Scribes are harboring suspicions and conspiring against him. He perceives their design. This midrash seems to fill in the missing sentences from *Esther Rab.* 7:4 which is obviously cut short since the text mentions “many *hirhurim* (plans)” and not even one of them is fully described. The use of Greek *pro[s]kope* in the Buber text and the attribution to Rabbi Yehuda suggest the tradition is relatively early. Evidence for my supposition concerning the relationship between words denoting “conspiring” and “thinking” is found in Gen 37:18, “And they saw him afar off, and before he came near unto them, *they conspired* against him to slay him.” The Aramaic *Targum Onqelos* provides: “[T]hey reflected about him.”

*What is easier, to say “Your sins are forgiven,” or to say, “Get up and walk”? So that you may know that the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins upon the earth. Then he said to the paralyzed person, “Be raised up, and take your bed and go to your house!” Being raised up, he went to his house. (vv. 5–7)*

Here Jesus calls himself the “Son of Man” and proclaims that, though human, still he is in possession of divine authority. It is the first time in the Gospel that he has used this title to confirm his authority (in 8:20, as I say, he used the term as a kind of pun).<sup>14</sup> The logic behind Jesus’ answer to the Scribes’ accusation of blasphemy remains somewhat enigmatic. The problems have been analyzed in the introduction to this chapter.

I include here again (as I did in my comments to Matt 8:3) the tradition from *b. Ber.* 5b, in which Rabbi Hanina cures Rabbi Yoḥanan by touch: “He told him, ‘Give me your hand.’ He gave him his hand and he *raised him up*.” The Aramaic (*ve-oqmeih, af’el* of *qum*) is crucial here to appreciate that “raised up” in the Gospel text is an Aramaicism which means “cured,” as I have already pointed out that it does in *b. Ber.* 5b. In Mark’s version (5:41) of the story of the healing of Jairus’ daughter, Jesus says to her, “*talitha qum(i)*”—“Child, arise!”

*When the crowds saw this, they were afraid, and they glorified the God who gave such power to human beings. (v. 8)*

In glorifying God the crowds likely recited a blessing much like the one the Rabbis said was to be recited while witnessing the majesty of a king: “Blessed is the One who shares his glory with human beings [or to those who fear him]” (*b. Ber.* 58a). The Rabbis created blessings for every occasion based on the wording of 1 Chron 29:11: “Thine, O Lord, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty...” One rabbi—Rabbi Shila—proclaimed, “Blessed is the Merciful One who has given [power of] kingship on earth just as his [power] of kingship is in heaven” (*b. Ber.* 58a). The crowds do not think Jesus has usurped power, and even if he did not attribute his miracles to God, the crowd does.

*When Jesus was going along from there, he saw a person sitting at the tax office, by the name of Matthew. He said to him, “Follow me,” and, standing*

<sup>14</sup> D. Flusser, *Jewish Sources in Early Christianity* (1989), 56, traces the title from Daniel 7 to Enoch 37–71 to *Testament of Abraham* (son of Adam or Abel) who sees him as the final judge in the End of Days.

*up, he followed him.<sup>15</sup> When he was reclining in the house, look, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples.* (vv. 9–10)

The word “reclining” here means “dining” and is frequent in the ancient Jewish literature (Hebrew: *meisav, mesubin*). It was the general custom for people in the Hellenistic period to recline on couches while eating their meals.

The tax collectors were known as robbers and reprobates. Because their money was ill-gained it was not fit for trade or alms (*m. B. Qam.* 10:1). There may also be a hint of the gnostic motif mentioned in the introduction to this chapter that the spiritual knowledge of “drunken” souls waited for the redeemer to make them sober and call them to their true origins.

*Seeing this, the Pharisees said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” (v. 11)*

Many Pharisees were concerned about dining with those whose presence at table might cause their food to be defiled (the general rule was that people dined with their peers or their apprentices).<sup>16</sup> But more than this, apparently the Pharisees considered Jesus to be a teacher like one of their own, for which reason they are perplexed here as to why he would dine with reprobates and sinners. With respect to such people the position of the Pharisees is found in *m. Abot* 1:7: “Nittai the Arbelite said: Avoid an evil neighbor; do not associate with the wicked; and do not surrender your faith in divine justice.” There is no condemnation in their question to Jesus, just puzzlement.

Writing about the same time as Matthew, Josephus (*Ant.* 13:294–97) says of the Pharisees that they are lenient in the matter of punishments and that they pass down certain regulations which were handed down to them by their ancestors. These laws were not recorded in the Torah of Moses . . . which are

<sup>15</sup> This Matthew, who is a Jew, is not to be identified with the author of the Gospel of Matthew. There is no evidence for such identification, although it is strange that he is named and that the scene is recorded. What is significant is that Jesus has said “Follow me” to those he wishes to be his disciples (See 4:19, 8:22). That he says, “Follow me,” to Matthew suggests that he wishes that he too should become a disciple of his. In *b. Sanh.* 43a a disciple of Jesus is referred to as “Matthai” (i.e., Matthew; the Syriac name of Matthew is Matthai).

<sup>16</sup> Concerning this matter, see Stephen Westerholm (*Jesus and Scribal Authority* 1978, 62–67), and E.P. Sanders, “Jesus and the Sinners” (1983).

derived from the tradition of the fathers and the Pharisees have the masses on their side.

*When he heard this, he said, "Those who are strong have no need of a doctor; but only those who are ill." (v. 12)*

This first part of Jesus' answer is perfectly civil. He says he is in company with sinners because he wants to bring them to repentance.<sup>17</sup> He has nothing to offer those such as the Pharisees, who are already pious and kind. Matthew follows his sources here.

*Go, learn what it means, "I want mercy and not sacrifice" (Hosea 6:6). For I did not come to call righteous people, but sinners. (v. 13)*

Neither Mark's nor Luke's version of this story contains this saying of Jesus to the Pharisees in which he cites Hos 6:6. Often Matthew cannot speak of the Scribes or Pharisees without adding some kind of negative or hostile comment about them, but this is not the case here. The phrase "Go, learn" is the anglicized form of the Aramaic *zil gemor*, which is found, for instance, in *b. Šabb. 31b*—"and the rest [of Scriptures] is commentary, Go, learn"—and of the Hebrew *tzei u-lemad*, which is found in *Num. Rab. Bamidbar* 5:9: "To know why the sons of Kehath died, Go and learn from this verse . . ." That is, the phrase is used to encourage one to study the Scriptures and to apply its various lessons to the appropriate situations. And so Jesus tells the Pharisees here that if they want to know what he means by saying that he "did not come to call righteous people, but sinners," they can go and learn it from the Scriptures, in this case Hos 6:6. In their own idiom, and by way of their own method, Jesus is pointing out to the Pharisees here that he has every justification in dining with tax collectors and sinners.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> A tradition from *Lev. Rab. 34:13* shows that the Rabbis also understood the importance of visiting the poorly educated masses to teach them better ways. Purity considerations were not an issue. "*And the impoverished poor you should bring into the house*" (*Isa 58:7*). This refers to the Disciples of the Sages who frequently enter the houses of the ignorant masses (*amei ha'arets*) to nourish them from the words of the Torah . . . and teach them to do the will of their Father who is in heaven."

<sup>18</sup> In his *Mishneh Torah* ("Laws of Festivals," 6:18), Maimonides records a law—not found in the Talmuds—which states that on the festival day one is obligated to feed the stranger, the orphan, and the widow (*Deut 16:11*), among other less fortunate people; otherwise the festival sacrifice has no meaning for God. In support of this law he cites Hosea 9:4—"Their sacrifices are as bread of mourners to them, All eating it are unclean: For their bread is

Yet by saying that he is there for sinners, and by justifying his presence with them by quoting from Hosea, Jesus sidesteps the matter of his actually dining with them. In any case, the Pharisees seem to accept his answer (but see Matt 11:19: “[T]hey say, ‘Look, a person who is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners’”).

Now some disciples of John the Baptist come on the scene and they ask a more serious question than did the Pharisees, which concerns not only the practices of the Pharisees but also that of John the Baptist, the comrade-in-arms, so to speak, of Jesus.

*Then disciples of John came to him, saying, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” (v. 14)*

While Matthew writes elsewhere that John was openly hostile to the Pharisees (3:7–10), here we discover that he actually followed Pharisaic practice, at least when it came to fasting. John may have been quite sympathetic to the Pharisees, his antagonism toward them in the Gospel being an invention of Matthew’s. John’s disciples are not speaking here of the Pharisaic fasts one reads of in the *Didache*, chapter 8 (i.e., those they engaged in on the second and fifth day of the week), but rather of the mourning fasts prescribed for Jews in memory of the catastrophes that befell Judah in the last days of the Davidic Monarchy. These fasts (still observed by Jews) are listed in Zech 8:19: “Thus says the Lord of hosts: ‘The fast of the fourth month, the fast of the fifth, the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth shall be joy and gladness and cheerful feasts for the house of Judah. Therefore love truth and peace.’” Their precise dates are a matter of dispute in a *baraita* in *b. Roš Haš.* 18b.

*Jesus said to them, “How can the sons of the bride-chamber mourn so long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast.” (v. 15)*

The statement that “the sons of the bride-chamber do not mourn so long as the bridegroom is with them” seems to be drawn from a collection of first-century laws. In Jewish law those who attend the bridegroom are called *bnei huppah*; the Greek *huioi tou nymphōnos* is a literal translation of this term. A tradition in *t. Ber.* 2:10 exempts the *bnei huppah* from certain obligations

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for themselves”—and Mal 2:3—“And have scattered dung before your faces, Dung of your festival sacrifices.” It is noteworthy that Maimonides says nothing here about dining with sinners, which is a different thing than dining with the poor.

during the wedding festival, such as putting on phylacteries and the saying of the prayers. For this same seven-day period, a tradition in *b. Sukkah* 25b exempts the *bnei huppah* from the obligations of *Sukkah*, that is, of “living in booths,” since this obviously would prevent them from celebrating with the bridegroom.

The question of the bridegroom’s exemption from the fasts is a matter of some dispute. Rabbis wondered if there was a way to derive the teaching one way or another from extant post-Temple traditions. Apparently, both practices (fasting and not fasting) were current in Jewish communities. According to the eighteenth-century Rabbi Ḥayyim Yosef David Azulai (*Birkhei Yosef*, 686:6), the author of the Responsa *Beit David* (responsum 476), suggests that during the time of the bridal festivities a bridegroom did not and still should not fast on any of the four prescribed fast days, while the thirteenth-century Rabbi Yom Tov ben Ashbili, in his commentary to the Talmud (end of *b. Ta‘unit*), says that the bridegroom was always and still is obligated to fast. With regard to the fasts themselves in Jesus’ day, it seems that at times during the Second Temple period observing them was voluntary.<sup>19</sup> Jesus’ position concerning them, at least in the absence of the bridegroom, was likely more stringent than that of many Jews of his day.<sup>20</sup> It is said here that the Pharisees and the disciples of John did observe the fasts. We might note here that, according to Matthew, John’s disciples identify themselves and Jesus also with Pharisaic practice, at least insofar as observing fasts.

Jesus suggests here that the “bridegroom” will soon die. The early Gospel writers (both canonical and extracanonical) seem to have expressed positions sympathetic to being stringent about observing fasts which they mixed with a kind of gnosis of “bridal-chamber” mysticism<sup>21</sup> to defend a leniency in fasting rules in regards to Jesus’ own practices. We cannot be certain of the

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<sup>19</sup> See *b. Roš Haš.* 18b: “When there is peace they (the fast days) will be for joy and gladness; if there is persecution there will be fast days; if there is no persecution and yet no peace, then those who desire to fast may fast and those who do not need not fast.”

<sup>20</sup> Even though today the fasts are obligatory, nevertheless some authorities permit exemptions for a bridegroom during the seven days of his rejoicing in the bridal chamber (the name given to the new abode of the couple after their wedding).

<sup>21</sup> I have discussed these mystical notions at some length in the introduction to Chapter 9. Much of the gnostic Gospel of Philip (Robinson, *Nag Hammadi Library*, 153) is based on such mystical utterances that defy ready explanation. For example, consider 2.3:72: “In this world the slaves serve the free. In the Kingdom of Heaven the free will minister to the slaves; the Sons of the Bridal-Chamber shall serve the sons of marriage. The Sons of the Bridal-Chamber have [a single] name among them, the repose occurs among them mutually, they are made to have no needs. The contemplation [of the imagery is aware]ness in

full import of this mystical imagery; suffice it to say that Jesus is already in some way already married to his divine “Bride” and resident in her “Kingdom.” The wedding imagery of Song of Songs is likely at the root of the vocabulary here, although who the bride was supposed to be is never made clear.

Be that as it may, what I mean is that here Jesus alludes to mystical notions as outlined in the introduction to this chapter. He suggests his disciples are to observe the law concerning fasts as they apply to the bridegroom and his party. The terminology here reflects the mindset of “sacred bridal chamber” unions of the Gnostics. The point is that the disciples are not supposed to fast as long as the “bridegroom” is with them. By “bridegroom” the Gospels may well be utilizing hypostatic concepts of mystical traditions, both Jewish and gnostic. Jesus insists that all others should properly observe the laws regarding fasts, as also his disciples are to do when they find themselves no longer attending to him. His answer concerning the behavior of his own disciples specifies their quasi-membership in his own supernal, celestial divine circle which he embodies and their earthly membership in the House of Israel which they embody. In so framing matters he also highlights the incongruence of the two overlapping kingdoms (of Rome, God’s enemy, and of Heaven) that Jesus occupies—the kingdom of the future redemption, where there are no fasts but feasts only as God promised Zechariah (18:19: “Thus says the Lord of hosts, ‘The fast of the fourth, the fast of the fifth, the fast of the seventh and the fast of the tenth [months] will become joy, gladness, and cheerful feasts for the house of Judah; so love truth and peace’”), and the present kingdom of subjugation and mourning and fasting as God commanded Zechariah (above). This insight helps to reveal what Jesus means in the following sayings about sewing new cloth onto old and the pouring of new wine into the old wineskins. The two kingdoms are incongruous and only overlap in the liminality of the “bridal chamber” (the entrance to the new kingdom). Once the bridegroom is gone, the disciples will be part of the old kingdom and the fasts will again be obligatory for them.

In chapter 8 of *Didache* it is noted that Christians are directed to fast on Wednesday (the day of Jesus’ arrest) and Fridays (the day of his Crucifixion), unlike the “hypocrites” who fast on Mondays and Thursdays. Luke 18:12 gives us a parable about a Pharisee who boasts, “I fast twice a week.” There is a tradition (*b. Ta'an. 12a* citing the last passage in the scholian to *Megillat Ta'anit*) that

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greatness of glory. [Truly there is immortal]ity within those in the [Holy Bridal-Chamber, who receive] the glories of those who [are fulfilled].”

these optional fasts existed before the year 66 and that *Megillat Ta'anit*, likely proclaimed that year, obliquely alludes to them.<sup>22</sup>

*No one attaches a patch of unshrunken cloth on an old cloak. For its fullness takes it up from the cloak, and a worse rip is made. Neither do they pour new wine into old wineskins. If they were to do so, the skins would burst, and the wine would pour out, and the skins are ruined. But they pour new wine into unused wineskins, and both are preserved.* (vv. 16–17)

Undoubtedly Jewish, these proverbs nicely illustrate Jesus' point about the impossibility of grafting one kingdom—the present world of suffering—onto the other—the coming kingdom of salvation.<sup>23</sup> Jewish sources preserve a saying concerning the difficulty of trying to mix the old with the new: “One who studies Torah as an old man, to what is he compared? To (new) ink written on blotted paper” (*m. Abot* 4:20).

*While he was saying these things to them, suddenly one of the leaders came and knelt before him, saying, “My daughter has just now died; but if you come and lay your hand upon her, she will live.”* (v. 18)

Mark 5:22 identifies the man who approaches Jesus here as one of the “leaders” of the synagogue, Jairus by name. The exact title is *Rosh haKeneset* (*t. Ter.* 2:13 speaks of the *Rosh haKeneset* of the synagogue of Keziv). A leader of the synagogue was one of the leaders of the community. The other leaders of the community were the custodians of the city (*hazanei ha'ir*) and the administrators of the city (*parnassei ha'ir*), both of which are mentioned in *b. Ketub.* 8b.

*Jesus rose and followed him, and his disciples also. Suddenly, a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years approached from behind him and touched the hemmed-tzitzit of his cloak.* (vv. 19–20)

<sup>22</sup> See further Adiel Schremer, “The Concluding Passage of *Megillat Ta'anit* and the Nullification of Its Halakhic Significance during the Talmudic Period” (2000). Also see Hans Lichtenstein, “Die Fastenrolle: Eine Untersuchung zur jüdisch-hellenistischen Geschichte” (1931–32), 350, for textual variants.

<sup>23</sup> For Jews the coming kingdom means a worldly kingdom governed by a messianic figure in which the dead are resurrected and in which relief from all persecution is to be found. Prior to the advent of this kingdom there may be upheavals and wars and terror (three generations preceding the “Days of the Messiah”). See *Sipre Deut.*, *piska* 318. Also see Gershom Scholem’s “Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea” (1971).

On his way to the place where the young girl lies, Jesus is approached by a woman, who, though Matthew does not say so, is almost certainly Jewish. Owing to purity concerns the woman does not touch Jesus directly but merely the fringes of his cloak.

The Greek *kraspedon* (lit. hem) was the term used by the Jews to translate the Hebrew *tzitzit*—the ceremonial fringes or tassels that hung from the corners of one's outer garment (see Num 15:38)—in the biblical texts that were meant for popular consumption, such as the Aramaic *Targum Onqelos*: *krusped* and *kruspedin* (Num 15:38–39, Deut 22:12). This use of the term was current in very early times, as the LXX testifies (Num 15:38, Ezek 8:3, Deut 22:12, Zech 8:23).

*For she said to herself, "If only I touch his cloak, I will be made well. (v. 21)*

Such was the woman's faith in the holiness of Jesus that she believed it extended even to the cloak he wore. It is clear she feels that simply by touching it she can be made well. But Jesus points out that her own faith has effected her cure, rather than his touch. In the case of the sleeping/dead girl his mere touch seems to revive her and this public display of healing attracted much attention.

*Jesus, turning and seeing her, said, "Daughter, your faith has saved you." And the woman was saved at that very hour. (vv. 22)*

Again the Gospel points out that the operative factor in Jesus' healing was the degree of faith either in the one needing to be healed, as here, or else in those asking that another be healed.

*When Jesus came to the house of the leader, and saw the flutists and the crowd being stirred up (v. 23)*

It was common for flute players (*halilim*) and female mourners (*meqonenot*) to accompany funeral processions in order to draw out the emotions of the crowds. The Rabbis insisted that accompanying the funeral processions of even the poorest of Jews there should be no less than two of each (*m. Ketub.* 4:4). It is likely that in the time of the Gospels those of the middle and upper classes covered these expenses.

*He said, "Depart, for the girl has not died but she is sleeping." And they laughed at him. (v. 24)*

Certainly to others the girl appeared to be dead, but Jesus seems to indicate otherwise. Has she in fact died, or is she merely asleep?

*When the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her hand, and the girl was awokened. (v. 25)*

For the terms “sleeping” and “waking” used together, we refer to Dan 12:2: “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake.”

Resurrecting the dead was something a “Son of God”—someone who had been given certain divine powers—was able to do. First Kings 17:22–23 tells us that Elijah too, with God’s help, was able to revive the dead. “The Lord heard the prayer of Elijah; the life breath returned to the child’s body and he revived. Taking the child, Elijah brought him down into the house from the upper room and gave him to his mother. ‘See!’ Elijah said to her, ‘your son is alive.’” For Matthew, Jesus has come to possess all the divine attributes that God had shared with Moses and Elijah. This is confirmed in the story of the Transfiguration, when Moses and Elijah appear together with Jesus (Matt 17:3).

*This report went out to that whole land. (v. 26)*

Again we read that once Jesus has performed a miracle, a report of it immediately goes out far and wide.

*When Jesus passed by from there, two blind people followed, calling out and saying, “Have mercy on us, Son of David!” (v. 27)*

For the Jews the Messiah is expected to restore the national pride of the people of Israel, along with the independence of the land, as David had done, for which reason, besides lineage, he is called “Son of David.”

*And when he entered the house, the blind people came to him, and Jesus said to them, “Do you trust that I am able to do this?” They said to him, “Yes, Lord.” Then he touched their eyes, saying, “According to your trust, let it be done to you.” (vv. 28–29)*

Again the faith of those who ask to be healed is the key to Jesus’ ability to heal.

*And their eyes were opened. Jesus sternly ordered them, “See that no one comes to know this!” When they went out, they spread it around that whole world. (vv. 30–31)*

Jesus asks these blind men he has cured for secrecy but this they refuse, as did others he cured (see 8:4). The Gospel uses an Aramaicism here. When it is said in Aramaic that the blind are cured, the word “*itpatah*” is used. For instance in *Lev. Rab.* 22:4 it is said that “the one who was blind was cured (*itpatah*, literally ‘opened’).”

*When they had gone out, suddenly they brought to him a mute person possessed by a demon. When the demon was thrown out, the mute spoke. The crowds were amazed, saying, “Never has such a thing ever appeared in Israel.”* (vv. 32–33)

The amazement of the crowds in response to the miracles of Jesus is a recurring *topos* in the Gospel. Throughout the crowds act somewhat like the chorus does in Greek drama, providing a kind of commentary on the acts of Jesus.

*But the Pharisees said, “He casts out demons through the ruler of demons.”* (v. 34)

In Matthew’s day it was commonly thought that Jesus had been a magician, a sorcerer (*b. Sanh.* 43a), and that it was because he had access to the world of demons that he was able to perform miracles.<sup>24</sup> For this reason the Pharisees do not deny that Jesus cast out the demon here, but they do claim that it was only because he had access to demons that he was able to do this. This is typical of early anti-Christian polemic. The point is that the authority of the Pharisees might have been undermined by such miraculous displays of Jesus’ healings, though in fact their authority was based on their expertise in interpreting the Scriptures and the oral tradition, not on their ability to perform miracles.

It is noteworthy that when later in the Gospel the Pharisees hear that Jesus has healed another demoniac, they say again what they say here, only this time they call the “ruler of demons” by name—“Beelzebub”: “But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, ‘It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons’” (Matt 12:24–27; compare Luke 11:15). In relation to this 2 Kings 1:15–16 tells us that:

The angel of the Lord said to Elijah, “Go down with him [the third captain of the fifty]; do not be afraid of him.” So he arose and went down with him to the king [Ahaziah]. Then he said to him, “Thus says the Lord, ‘Because

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<sup>24</sup> See Morton Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (1978).

you have sent messengers to inquire of Ba'alzebub, the god of Ekron—is it because there is no God in Israel to inquire of His word?—therefore you shall not come down from the bed where you have gone up, but shall surely die.”

The name “Beelzebub” seems to have been derived from *Ba'alzebub*, the “god” of Ekron. Its use by the Pharisees in this text suggests that they see Jesus here as a false prophet who intends with his healings to lead Israel after false gods, such as are spoken of in Deut 13:iff. For the Pharisees, Elijah was the true divine healer and not Jesus, who heals in the name of a demon bearing the name of a false god.<sup>25</sup>

*Jesus went around all the cities and all the villages teaching in their assemblies and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and every weakness.* (v. 35)

The verse provides a kind of summary of Jesus’ activity as a preacher and healer in the various local synagogues of the Galilee. The verse calls to mind Isa 52:7: “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that brings good tidings, that announces peace; that brings tidings of good, that announces salvation; that says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!’”

*Seeing the crowds he had compassion for them, because they were troubled and dejected, like sheep that had no shepherd.* (v. 36)

Although Jewish tradition claims that God will never abandon Israel and that he will ever-provide firm leadership for its people, Jesus says here that that leadership was weak in his day. The content of this verse is similar to Isa 51:18: “There is none to guide her [Jerusalem] among all the sons whom she hath brought forth; neither is there any that takes her by the hand of all the sons that she has brought up.”

In Num 27:16–18, just after being told by God that he is about to die, Moses worries aloud to him about the future leadership of his people.

May the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the congregation who shall go out before them and come in before them,

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<sup>25</sup> See Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 272, also see Penney and Wise, “By the Power of Beelzebub. The name seems to be equivalent to Satan in Matthew. Also see Geller, ‘Jesus’ Theurgic Powers.’”

who shall lead them out and bring them in, that the congregation of the Lord may not be as sheep that have no shepherd. So the Lord said to Moses, “Take Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the Spirit, and lay your hand on him.”

*Sipre Num.*, *piska* 139 explains the verse “That the congregation of the Lord may not be *like sheep that have no shepherd*” (Num 27:17) with reference to Song 1:7, 8.

“Tell me, O one whom my soul loves, how you pasture your flock, how you make it lie down at noon’s heat; for why should I be like one who is *swept away*<sup>26</sup> [from beside the flocks of your companions]?” (Song 1:7)—according to its usage in the verse, “And he shall *sweep away* the land of Egypt as *a shepherd sweeps away* his cloak of vermin, and he shall go away from there in peace (Jer 43:12).” [Moses asked:] For why should I be like one who is *swept away* [from beside the flocks of your companions]—[which means] “besides the flocks of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob”? Now go and see what the Holy One replied to him: “If you do not know, O fairest amongst women . . .” [O Moses,] most eminent amongst the prophets . . . “Go follow the trackers of the sheep . . .” The trackers I will ordain to help them . . . “and pasture your lambs [by the tents of the shepherds]” (Song 1:8). From where can you say that God showed Moses all the leaders who in the future would attend Israel from the day they would leave the desert until the day the dead would live? As it said, “Go follows the trackers of the sheep” (Song 1:8).

The point of this verse seems to be that, despite having preached and healed as much as he has, still Jesus feels that he has done so little of what needs to be done for the people of Israel. The suffering of the Jews in the first century under Roman occupation, which led to the disastrous revolt against Rome in 66 CE, was severe. And of course while under it there was no opportunity for the official Jewish leadership to institute programs of national renewal. During this period of occupation many diverse groups arose, including Christianity, which by the time of Matthew professed no message of national renewal at all. There seems to be an admission by Jesus here that he did not see himself as being able to address this problem by himself.

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26 And so will die and leave the flocks of Israel unattended.

*Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. So beseech the lord of the harvest to send out workers for his harvest.”*  
(vv. 37–38)

For Jesus to say that ‘the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few’ is a metaphorical assertion that the need for teachers and healers far exceeds those who are engaged in doing these things. A similar saying, previously mentioned and to be mentioned again in comments to Matt 13:27, is attributed to Rabbi Tarfon in *m. Abot* 2:15, only the need here is for teachers of the Torah:

Rabbi Tarfon says—the day is short and work plentiful and the workers are lethargic; but the reward is great and the householder is eager.

The Lord of the harvest must be God, while in 13:27 it is the Son of Man. That the metaphors are used differently in different places suggests that the image of a master of harvest was a commonplace image, predating the Gospel and open to a variety of usages.

# Chapter 10

## Introduction

This chapter marks a turning point in Matthew's Gospel. Its eschatological aspect—the coming of a New Age that breaks completely with the political and historical realities of the past—becomes more pronounced, and its anti-Jewish rhetoric more bold. At the same time the Jewish forms of rhetoric remain apparent. Matthew wants to emphasize that despite his depiction that Jesus was a learned and faithful Jew, and despite the image Matthew presents of Jesus' expressed commitment to the Jews (it is in this chapter that Jesus says that his ministry was directed only toward those who are "lost" among them [10:6]), the Jews nonetheless spurned Jesus. Matthew takes great care to present Jesus as an authentic Jewish teacher. The degree of correspondence between a great number of texts in Matthew and texts in the written collections of rabbinic literature, which were put into writing after the Gospel but seem to have had a much longer existence in Judaism's oral cultures, continues to amaze.<sup>1</sup> The likelihood that they existed in oral forms prior to being written down in both Gospels and Talmuds cannot be overstated.

The rabbinic literature as a whole is essential in helping us bring to light what is obscure in the Gospels. Yet there is no need for a text in the Gospels to correspond exactly with a text in rabbinic literature in order for the text from the latter source to give meaning to a text from the former, though often the correspondence between the texts is almost exact. Nor is there any need to worry about the date of the relevant materials, especially the materials in the rabbinic literature. For although the context in which a certain saying or text appears may differ from one Gospel to another, or from one rabbinic narrative to another, still the saying or text remains more or less the same, and so

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<sup>1</sup> It should be pointed out, however, that although there is this remarkable degree of correspondence between texts in the Gospel and rabbinic literatures, nevertheless with respect to certain matters there are significant differences between what Jesus and the Rabbis say about them. For instance, Jesus' point of view concerning divorce as it is presented in the Gospels is not that of certain rabbis of the School of Shammai as is sometimes claimed. For whereas concerning divorce these Shammai-school rabbis show a complete adherence to the Mosaic law, Jesus makes it clear that for him the Mosaic law concerning divorce is too lenient (19:3–9; 5:31). As well, it is not the case that Jesus' statement in the Gospels that the "Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath" (Matt 12:8; Mark 2:28) means the same as the rabbinic statement that "the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." In fact these sayings have nothing in common at all.

relevant. If Jesus is said to have taught something that a later rabbi is also said to have taught—and it is a virtual certainty that the rabbi had no knowledge of Jesus having taught it—this can only mean that Jesus and the rabbi have drawn from the same intellectual tradition. After all, this is what our eyes and ears tell us is the case.

Carol Bakhos has much to say about these matters:<sup>2</sup>

In other words, are we projecting a phenomenon that developed two, if not three or four, centuries later? In what ways and to what extent can we discuss “rabbinic Judaism” before 70 C.E.? Can we go back to the “origins” of the scholarly debates? Furthermore, Instone-Brewer contends, “This collection [the Mishnah] is the best insight we have into the mindset of the Jews to whom both Jesus and Paul addressed most of their teaching.” But is it “the best insight”? By focusing on the Mishnah, he limits, in fact skews, a more nuanced picture that a careful study of early midrashic literature, especially the *midreshhei halakhah*, as well as the Tosefta, might also help furnish.... To Instone-Brewer’s credit, he endeavors to disabuse them of the notion that, since rabbinic sources are difficult to date, they are justified in steering away from them. While he must be credited for this undertaking, his conceptualization of the issues at hand and the underlying assumptions of the work at large are problematic.

I am not sure why Bakhos privileges texts considered “tannaitic” (popularly dated to before 200 CE) over the other texts in the corpus of the Talmudic Rabbis. Given the striking correspondences between the numerous texts in the Gospel and rabbinic literatures and the fact that it is almost certain that nothing in the Gospels was drawn from what is in the Midrash or the Talmud or the works of the medieval commentators, but also that nothing from the whole of the rabbinic literature was drawn from the Gospels, it is far more likely that, whatever their dates, the texts in the Gospel and rabbinic literatures that look and act like each other, or else reinterpret each other, share a common provenance. It is for this reason I believe that texts in the one literature can help bring out a fuller meaning to the corresponding texts in the other literature. To use the language of modern semiotics, I suggest that the shared symbolic universe of discourse in common contexts between Talmud and Gospel narrows the ambiguous possibilities in the senses of these texts. The reader who, like myself, perceives meaning in the link between these

<sup>2</sup> Carol Bakhos, “Review of David Instone-Brewer, *Traditions of the Rabbis from the Era of the New Testament: Volume 1: Prayer and Agriculture*” (2007).

literatures, makes each Matthean passage bolder by bringing it into sharper focus, using the lens of the Talmud, than would be the case if left to invent meanings for it on his/her own.<sup>3</sup>

A number of the most striking correspondences in all of Matthew's Gospel are found in this chapter. For example, Jesus' statement to his apostles, "You received for free, so give for free" (Matt 10:8), is almost identical to a *baraita* in *b. Bek.* 29a. Also his suggestion to his apostles that they "be cunning as serpents and pure as doves" (v. 16) is likewise found almost verbatim in *Song Rab.* 2:30. His declaration that it "is sufficient for a student to be like his teacher, and [it is sufficient for] the slave to be like his master" (v. 25a) is found word for word in many places in the rabbinic literature, for example in *b. Ber.* 58b. Also of interest, but in this case because of its form (this also applies to the saying above), is the Jesus saying, "If they slandered (literally "named") the master of the house [calling him] 'Beelzebub,' how much more will [they so slander] the members of his household" (v. 25b), for the form of this saying adheres exactly to a complex legal argument that appears in *b. B. Bat.* 111a.<sup>4</sup> I include the rabbinic parallels in the appropriate sections of the commentary to chapter 10.

Also of interest in this chapter is Matthew's advice to the Christian missionaries of his own day, which he put into the mouth of Jesus at the time of the commissioning of his apostles, for it tells us of the court activities that were carried out in the "synagogues" (which may or may not refer to the places of prayer of the same name) of his day: "Be on guard against people, for they will hand you over to councils, and they will whip you in their assemblies" (v. 17). Not only does this saying reflect what is said about public flogging in *m. Mak.* 3:12, but also Jesus' mention here of "assemblies" (in Aramaic, *bei kenishta*: sometimes used for "synagogue", and other times for the hall of judicial processes) and what happens in them suggests that these "assemblies," or "synagogues," were institutions that housed courts that oversaw community affairs, including the pronouncing and administering of punishments. Josephus confirms this when he says of the synagogue at Sardis that it was a "place" in which the Jews could "decide their affairs and controversies with one another" (*Ant.* 14:235).<sup>5</sup>

3 See Humberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (1990), 21.

4 In the commentary proper to this chapter, I shall point out many more remarkable correspondences between Gospel texts and texts that come from the later—in some cases much later—rabbinic literature.

5 1 Macc. 14:28 may also be suggesting that the synagogue assembly can refer to a court rather than a prayer hall: "At Saramel, in the great congregation of the priests, and people, and rulers of the nation, and Elders of the country, were these things notified unto us." Also see

The final point that needs to be addressed before we begin our commentary to chapter 10 is the implication from Matthew's citation of Jesus' words in verse 10:25 that people disparagingly referred to him as "Beelzebub." With regard to this we must first recall what Matthew claims the Pharisees said of Jesus once he healed the dumb man possessed of a demon: "He casts out demons through the ruler of demons" (9:34). Next we must also consider Matt 12:24, in which the name of this ruler of the demons is said to be Beelzebub. "But the Pharisees, having heard [it], said, 'This one does not cast out demons, but by Beelzebub [some manuscripts render it "Beelzeboul"], ruler of demons.' " That is, at least for the words claimed of the Pharisees, Jesus is said to have cast out demons by the power of Beelzebub, the prince of demons. But what understanding could lie behind these sayings of the Gospel Pharisees? According to Abaye in *b. Ker.* 3a and *b. Sanh.* 65a, the term for summoning a *shed* (an evil spirit) is *mekater le-shed*. Now some think that this means to give an offering, perhaps of incense (from *qtr; heqter*: "to place on a smoking altar"), to the demon in order to summon him to one's aid thereby.<sup>6</sup> Alternatively, *mekater le-shed* may refer to a process of mystical "binding" (*qshr*)<sup>7</sup> by the recitation of a magical name. That is, angels or demons might be conjured and bound to do one's bidding by the use of a magical name.

The conjuring (*melaḥashim* and *ḥover ḥavarim* using Ps 58:6—"the spell of conjurings, the enchantment of the most skilled of magicians") about which Abaye speaks in *b. Ker.* 3a and *b. Sanh.* 65a is done by the one hoping to bind the *shed* to his will, so that he might then do the conjurer's bidding. Now if Jesus was really claimed to have been conjuring the power of Beelzebub, then it stands to reason (at least for Matthean tradition) that over time he may have been called by that name himself. Whom would demons listen to if not to Beelzebub, their king? And so perhaps Jesus came to be seen as Beelzebub, that is, not merely a conjurer but in fact the demon himself.

R.A. Horsley, "Synagogues in the Galilee and the Gospels," in *Evolution of the Synagogue in the Diaspora* (Kee and Cohick 1999), 96ff.

<sup>6</sup> See the commentary of Rashi to *b. Ker.* 3a and *b. Sanh.* 65a.

<sup>7</sup> See J.N. Epstein, "Glosses Babylo-araméennes" (1921) 33; also Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkabah Mysticism* (1980) 6 n. 135. In *b. Ker.* 3a and *b. Sanh.* 65a Abaye says: "in order to enchant him (the demon)." I suggest *qatar* means to recite an incantation of an angelic (or demonic) name, equivalent to *amar shem*, in order to accomplish a supernatural feat. My proof derives from a comparison of the text of paragraph 20 in "Ma'aseh Merkabah" (in Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition*, 11)—"QATAR [= enchanted] a crown for his master that it might rise"—and the text in *b. Hag.* 13b: "AMAR SHEM [= uttered a divine name] for the crown that it might go and rest."

In ways such as this—that is, having the Pharisees associate Jesus with Beelzebub—Matthew sets the stage for his attack on the Jews, that is, on those who witnessed the miracles of Jesus and shut their eyes to his claims. That attack is the substance of chapter 11.

### Commentary

*Calling his twelve disciples, he gave them authority over impure spirits, to be able to cast them out<sup>8</sup> and to heal every disease and every weakness. (v. 1)*

Jewish sources indicate that the Rabbis knew that faith healing was being done in Jesus' name (after his demise). Indeed, the apparent popularity of the Jewish-Christian missionaries troubled the Rabbis (perhaps more for social considerations than "letter of the law" reasons) for which cause they forbade their followers to avail themselves of those who healed in his name. The Rabbis did not want Jews lending credibility to the "Christian" movement. The aforementioned tradition from *t. Hul. 2.22–23* (also *y. 'Abod. Zar. 2:2*)<sup>9</sup> in which we read that Rabbi Yishmael prevented Jacob of Sama from curing Eleazar ben Dama in the name of Jesus, was likely told to make Jews aware of the dangers involved in seeking healing from those who healed in Jesus' name. For at the end of the story it is said that because Eleazar died without the name of Jesus being pronounced on him, no evil would befall him in the World to Come.

The number twelve, in enumerating the apostles, here is taken by many commentators, without much evidence, as an obvious reference to the twelve tribes of Israel, descended from the twelve sons of Jacob, and representing the entirety of the people. The following verse seems to suggest Gospel writers want us to avoid such speculation. The number, for these writers, is not symbolic but "historical."

<sup>8</sup> The Greek says "ekballow," "force out," "drive out."

<sup>9</sup> "It once happened that Rabbi Elazar ben Dama was bitten by a snake, and Jacob of Kefar Sama came to heal him in the name of Jesus son of Pantera, but Rabbi Ishmael did not allow him. He said to him: 'You are not permitted, Ben Dama!' He said to him: 'I shall bring you proof that he may heal me,' but he did not have time to bring the proof before he dropped dead. Said Rabbi Yishmael: 'Happy are you, Ben Dama, for you have expired in peace, and you did not break down the hedge erected by Sages. For whoever breaks down the hedge erected by Sages eventually suffers punishment, as it is said: 'He who breaks down a hedge is bitten by a snake'" (Eccl 10:8)." Translation from Adiel Schremer, "Seclusion and Exclusion: The Rhetoric of Separation in Qumran and Tannaitic Literature" in *Rabbinical Perspectives: Rabbinic Literature and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Fraade, Shemesh and Clements 2006), 141.

*The names of the twelve disciples are these: first, Simon, called Peter, and Andrew his brother, and Jacob the son of Zebedee and John his brother; Philip and Bartholomew, Thomas and Matthew the tax-collector, Jacob the son of Alphaeus, and (Lebbaeus, whose surname was) Thaddeus.* (vv. 2–3)

The inclusion of “Lebbaeus, whose surname was” before the name “Thaddeus,” which is found in some manuscripts, appears to be the more original reading. Since “Thaddeus” alone is what is written in Mark 3:18, it is likely that in their copying of Matthew some scribes simply skipped over the words “Lebbaeus, whose surname was” and wrote only the single name “Thaddeus,” as Mark has it. “Todos” is a known Jewish name from this period, for example, “Todos of Rome” (*t. Beṣah* 2:15). And the name “Todah” appears in the Talmud as the name of one of the disciples of Jesus (*b. Sanh.* 43a).

*Simon the Cananaean and Judas the Iscariot, who betrayed him moreover.* (v. 4)

It may be that *Cananaean* here refers to someone who was a “Qanai.” “Qanai” appears as a rabbinic term for “zealot” (*'Abot of Rabbi Nathan*, end chap. 6),<sup>10</sup> that is, for someone who was a member of that group, which was aligned with the Pharisees but whose members differed from them in their willingness to use violence as a way of resisting the Roman occupation of Judah and especially of the Galilee. It is more likely, however, that the designation *Cananaean* in relation to Simon means that Simon came from the town of Cana in the Galilee. In the same way, the designation “Iscariot” means that Judas may have come from the town of Kariot (Josh 15:25). If so, the name “Iscariot,” then, would be a Greek rendition of the Hebrew “ish Kariot,” that is, “a person of Kariot” (much as Todos of Rome, whom we mentioned above, was called in the rabbinic sources Todos “ish Romi”). The epithet, “who betrayed him,” to describe Judas seems to be an anachronistic addition to the names in the “disciple list” as the context here relates to their trustworthiness as a whole in representing Jesus.

*Jesus sent out these twelve, commanding them, “Do not go out into the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter into a Samaritan city.”* (v. 5)

When Jesus “sent out” (*apesteilen* in Greek = *shalah* in Hebrew/Aramaic) his disciples, he sent them out to act on his behalf. That is, no longer were they

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<sup>10</sup> For the Zealots, see Josephus' *Ant.* 18:23ff.

to be simply his disciples. Now they were to be his “apostles” or “*sheliḥim*.” “*Sheliḥim*” is a Jewish legal term that refers to those agents or “apostles” who have the authority to carry out the wishes of the one who sent them, as though it were the sender himself who was carrying them out. Later in this chapter (v. 40) we are told not only that the twelve were apostles of Jesus, but that Jesus was the apostle of God.

The status of the Samaritans (Heb. *kutim*) as converts to Judaism was a matter of some confusion for Jewish authorities during this period, and it remains so to this day, although the Samaritan community is now negligible in size and is in fact on the verge of dying out altogether.

*Go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.* (v. 6)

By having Jesus instruct his disciples to go only to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” Matthew is in effect setting up the Jews so that he can then knock them down. That he does so is made especially clear at the end of the Gospel where he shows the Jews willingly accepting responsibility for Jesus’ death, and not just at that time, but for all time (Matt 27:25–26; some may argue with this interpretation). For Matthew the Jews were presumed to be the chosen people, but Jesus, though he directed his ministry toward them, was ultimately rejected by them. Instead it was the Gentiles who, though Jesus did not seek them out, showed such faith in him that in the end he called them to be his disciples (Matt 28:19) rather than the Jews (Matt 21:43).

It is likely that this chapter dates from a period after the Christians and the Jews had gone their separate ways and while the Christian mission to the Jews was being met with stiff resistance, for the divide between Christians and Jews is clearly indicated throughout it. For example, Matthew says here that Jesus commands his disciples to stay away from the Gentiles as they go about healing Jews and raising their dead, but he also warns them that the Jews will scourge them, and even hand them over to gentile kings to be killed (10:17ff.). For in fact the “lost sheep of the house of Israel” are wolves (see v. 16), whereas it is the apostles Jesus sends out who are the “sheep” (though as yet no one in the Gospel has raised a finger against either Jesus or his disciples). It would seem that for Matthew the Jews hated the mere name of Jesus and, since his apostles will speak and act in his name, they too will be hated. It is because of statements such as the one Jesus makes here (vv. 16ff.) that I am inclined to believe that Matthew was not Jewish. I suspect he was not a self-hating Jew (although it is arguably possible he was a Jew-turned-Gentile) and would posit he was likely a Gentile.

As I say, here in this chapter a sharp turn is made. Indications of this turn have appeared before (see 8:11–12), but from now on Matthew will begin more clearly to indicate the divide between the Jews and Jesus and the tension that exists between them because of it.

*As you go, proclaim, “The kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (v. 7)*

“The kingdom of heaven is at hand” were the first words Jesus said as he began his ministry (4:17). This was also the message of John the Baptist (Matt 3:2). What is different here is that when Jesus tells his disciples to go about proclaiming that “the kingdom of heaven is at hand,” he does not tell them to preface this message with the word “Repent!” as both he and John reportedly did when they proclaimed it. While Matthew is careful to show that repentance and the confessing of sins were central to the ministry of John, he does not make either of these the central pillars of the ministry of Jesus, despite Jesus’ initial proclamation that all repent and some later references to that call. Very likely in Matthew’s day the Christian evangelists were having little success in Palestine, although their threat was felt in the Jewish communities. Repentance was preached by the Jews, so there was no need for this to be reinforced either by Gentile-Christians, or by the suspect Jewish-Christians whose communities were being overshadowed by those of the Gentile-Christians who by Matthew’s day likely populated the majority of the churches. Under pagan influence, the understanding of what the “kingdom of heaven” was changed, so that for the Christians at least it came to refer to a kind of inner mystical domain rather than an external reality.

*Heal the weak, raise the dead, purify lepers, cast out demons. You received for free, so give for free. (v. 8)*

All the miracles that up to this point in the Gospel that Matthew has shown Jesus doing are now to be done by his disciples as well.

The ability to raise the dead was considered rare and special during both the period of the prophets and the period of the Second Temple. However by the time Matthew was writing his Gospel, sometime after 70 CE apparently, this ability was said to belong not only to certain holy people but also to their disciples, at least according to a tradition in *Lev. Rab.* 10:4. For here it is said that even the least of the disciples of Rabbi Yehudah the Prince was able to raise the dead. Moreover the tradition relates that one of Rabbi Yehudah’s disciples was sent to heal a certain slave of Antoninus, a Roman ruler, who was on the verge of death. When the student approached the slave and asked him why he was

lying down instead of working, the slave immediately quickened and began to work again.

Jesus tells his disciples that as they go about teaching and healing they are not to take any fees. A *baraita* (a teaching of the *Tannaim* not included in the Mishnah) in *b. Bek.* 29a states:

“See, I have taught you statutes and laws as the Lord my God commanded me to do so” (Deut 4:5). Just as I [taught you] for free so you also [teach] for free.”

The Jewish sources indicate that this was standard practice.

*Do not acquire gold or silver or copper coins in your belts; nor a bag for the road, nor two shirts, nor sandals, nor a staff. For the worker is worthy of his food.* (vv. 9–10)

Jesus' point here is that since God provides the wages for those doing his work, there is no need for his disciples to take anything with them as they go about doing it. In relation to this, the Rabbis taught: “For all who labor in the Torah his food is provided by the Torah and he gains wealth and success in his quests” (*Tanh. Exod., Ki Tissa*, 29).

*Whatever city or village you enter, search for whoever in it is worthy, and stay with them until you leave.* (v. 11)

Offering hospitality to travelers and strangers was a paramount duty for Jews, as was asking after their welfare and offering them blessings of peace. According to *b. Šabb.* 127a, “offering hospitality to strangers is greater than communication with God.” In *Tanh. Num., Pinhas*, 1, it is said that “[w]hen someone arrives from the road—they ask after his peace—and likewise in the morning they inquire after his peace and at evening they inquire after his peace.”

*When you enter into the house,<sup>11</sup> greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it, but if it is not worthy, let your peace turn back to you.* (vv. 12–13)

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<sup>11</sup> That is, the house of your hosts.

Jesus tells the apostles that they are to offer blessings of peace upon those in whose homes they are invited to stay. [The Hebrew idiom is that blessings “come upon” people and things, e.g.: “The giver of kindness—blessing will *come upon* him” (minor tractate *'Abot of Rabbi Nathan A*, chap. 41).] He then says that if those living in these homes are “worthy,” the blessings the apostles offer them will indeed fall upon them, but if they are not worthy, then the blessings that they offer them will instead fall back upon the apostles. That is, at no time will the blessings offered by the apostles ever be free of recipients, for which reason they need have no fear in offering them. The tone of Jesus’ instructions to his apostles here is somewhat harsh and it will get harsher. Jewish sources state that even if the recipient of another’s hospitality does not return this hospitality with a blessing, still the giving of hospitality itself causes blessing to come upon the one who gives it.

*Whoever will not receive you, nor listen to what you say, shake the dust from your feet when you leave that house or that city. (v. 14)*

Isaiah 52:2 also speaks of the shaking off of dust, only here it is God who commands Jerusalem to do this:

Shake yourself from the dust; be quick and sit down, O Jerusalem. Free yourself from the shackles of your neck, O captive daughter of Zion.

In shaking itself free of the dust, Jerusalem is at last freeing itself from its period of captivity in Babylon so that it can return in freedom to its rightful home. So too are the apostles to free themselves from the oppressive atmosphere of hostile cities.

*'Amen,' I say to you, it shall be more bearable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that city. (v. 15)*

In having Jesus declare that the punishment awaiting those who reject his apostles, as many Jews had refused concourse with Christian missionaries, is to be far worse than the sulphur and fire that God rained down on Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:24), The statement here is an anachronistic reference to those Jews who turned their backs on those preaching the Gospel. Matthew makes plain his antipathy for the Jews who rejected Jesus and his movement. The reference is very fitting. According to the Rabbis, the chief sin of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah was their inhospitality to strangers (*b. Sanh. 109a* [see also *Gen. Rab. 49:6*]).

*Look, I am sending you out like sheep in the midst of wolves, so be cunning as serpents and pure as doves. (v. 16)*

Matthew's language reporting Jesus' instructions to his disciples here to be both "cunning as serpents" and "pure as doves" is likely of Jewish origin. A tradition recounted in *Song Rab.* 2:30 tells us that in commenting on *Song 2:14*, Rabbi Yehudah remarked, in the name of Rabbi Simon: "God said to Israel: In respect to me, 'be' [text emended from 'they are']<sup>12</sup> pure as doves but with the nations of the world ['be'] cunning as serpents."

*Be on guard against people, for they will hand you over to councils, and they will whip you in their assemblies. (v. 17)*

The councils (*synhedria*) are the Jewish courts. It would seem that Matthew presumes here that the Jews would forbid anyone to preach Christian doctrines in public. As I say, it is probable that by the time Matthew was writing his Gospel the split between the Christian and Jewish communities had occurred. Moreover by this time the Christians understood the Torah to be antiquated and had replaced its teachings with their own.

It may be that "assemblies" here refers to actual synagogues, and perhaps it was the case that when floggings were carried out—and this by the designated official known as the *hazan hakeneset* (*m. Mak.* 3:12)—they were carried out adjacent to the synagogues. Those flogged in public were those who had transgressed laws that concerned the well-being of the community, whether from an internal (transgression of law concerning Jewish matters only) or external (transgression of laws meant to safeguard coexistence with Rome) point of view. The courts decided if one was guilty of a breach, they would also decide the punishment to be administered. If the punishment was public flogging, then the courts would also decide the number of lashes to be administered (in any case, never more than thirty-nine). It is unlikely that in the time of Jesus any legislation existed pertaining to those in his movement for which flogging was the punishment, since Christian doctrine had yet to be formulated, though there may well have been legislation that, broadly speaking, forbade anyone to incite crowds against Rome (especially by predicting that a Davidic king had come to overthrow the empire). It is more reasonable to assume that Jesus' warning to his disciples here represents an anachronism, in that it speaks of

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<sup>12</sup> The simple emendation allows us to understand the preface of the statement—God is commanding Israel. I conjecture *Heh-vav-yodh* (be) was confused for *heh-mem* (they) by a careless scribe.

the dangers that Christian missionaries faced in Matthew's day rather than in Jesus' day.

*You will be led before rulers and kings for my sake, as a witness to them and to the Gentiles. (v. 18)*

During Matthew's time, we might suspect that Rome treated Christian missionaries somewhat harshly. This is so in general at a slightly later period judging from the Pliny-Trajan correspondence; this is dated c. 110–111, a little later than Matthew. Tacitus mentions Nero's persecution in Rome in 64 that was sporadic and local.<sup>13</sup> It may well be that some of those who were accused by Rome of being Christian at that time willingly died for their faith.

Behind a number of verses in this chapter lie texts from Isaiah 51–52. We have seen that behind verse 14 lies Isa 52:2. Behind both this and the previous verse lies Isa 51:7: “Listen to me, you who know righteousness, the people in whose heart is My law; have no fear of the scorn of people, nor should you fear their abuse.”

*But when they hand you over, do not worry about how you should speak or what you should speak about; for what you should say will be given to you in that hour. (v. 19)*

Likely behind this verse lies Isa 52:15: “So shall He sprinkle many nations; the kings shall shut their mouths at Him. For that which had not been told them shall they see, and that which they had not heard shall they consider.”

*For it is not you who are speaking, but the spirit of your Father who is speaking in you. (v. 20)*

<sup>13</sup> Tacitus, *Ann.* 15:44 (composed c. 116) relates: “Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their center and become popular. Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths.”

That the spirit of God speaks through another is often commented on in the rabbinic literature. A text from the *Mekhilta of Rabbi Yishmael* to Exod 19:19 (*Bahodesh, Yitro* 4) states that Rabbi Akiva said to Rabbi Eliezer:

*Vadai* (in the realm of the mysterious *absolute*),<sup>14</sup> the matter is such that the Torah reports that “Moses would speak [and it would be God answering in the voice (Exod 19:19)].” The point is taught that God placed his strength and power in Moses and God would support him with His/his voice. And with the very melody that Moses would hear in Him/him, he would inform Israel.

Another relevant text, this one from *Midrash Aggadah* [ed. Buber], Num 24:2, says of the evil Balaam: “‘And the spirit of God was upon him (Num 24:2)’—this refers to the *Holy Spirit* that fell into his mouth and said all the words that Balaam spoke.”

*A brother will hand over brother to death and a father his child, and children will rebel against parents and kill them.* (v. 21)

In Matt 10:35–36, Jesus says that these betrayals will in fact be his doing. This text flies in the face of the report that John the Baptist was to fulfill the role of Elijah, who before “the great and terrible day of the Lord” was to come so that he could unite fathers with their sons and sons with their fathers (Mal 4:5). Rather, it seems to indicate the utter depravity of that generation, which will be the last before the Messiah comes.

A text from *m. Sotah* 9:15 confirms that among the Rabbis too it was believed that the period before the coming of the Messiah was to be marked by depravity and corruption.

In the footsteps of the Messiah, arrogance will increase . . . the border people will wander from city to city and none will show them compassion; the wisdom of authors will stink; sin-fearing people will be detested; truth will be missing; young men will humiliate the elderly; the elderly

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<sup>14</sup> The word *vadai* literally means “assuredly” and it may signal that the meaning of the statement that follows it refers to a supernatural event. This usage is found in the Zohar, but it appears to operate in this sense in the Tannaitic literature as well. For its use in Zohar, see Daniel Matt, “The Old-New Words: The Aura of Secrecy in the Zohar” in Gershom Scholem’s *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism, 50 Years After* (Schäfer and Dan 1993), 203–204.

will stand while the young sit; sons will revile their fathers; daughters will strike their mothers, brides will strike their mothers-in-law; and a man's enemies will take over his house. The face of the generation is like the face of a dog! Sons have no shame in front of their fathers. And so, on whom do we depend?—Only upon our Father in heaven.

*You will be hated by all on account of my name, but he who endures to the end, this one will be saved. (v. 22)*

That certain motifs from Isaiah 51–52 lie behind this section of the chapter does not mean for Matthew that the Second Isaiah's prophecies are now being fulfilled. Matthew does not offer a list of events here, each of which must come to pass before the end-time can begin. Rather the art of storytelling requires him to describe the degenerate nature of the time just before the end, with the motifs from Isaiah functioning somewhat like background music does in a film, enhancing the mood of the scene. Lying behind this and also, perhaps, the next verse is Isa 52:5: “Now therefore, what have I here,” says the Lord, ‘that My people are taken away for nothing? They that rule over them make them to howl, says the Lord,’ and My name continually every day is blasphemed.’”

*When they persecute you in this city, flee to the other. ‘Amen,’ I say to you, you will not have completed all the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes. (v. 23)*

The implication here is that no matter what city or town they enter, Jesus' disciples will almost certainly be rejected. Be that as it may, before they can be rejected for a final time Jesus in his capacity as the Son of Man will arrive to usher in the new kingdom, and save his apostles thereby.

The prophet Malachi foresaw that on the day of the coming of the Lord, God would judge, among others, those who had refused to offer aid to travelers: “And I have drawn near to you for judgment, And I have been a witness, Making haste against . . . those turning aside a sojourner, And who fear Me not” (3:6).

*A student is not above his teacher, nor a slave above his master. It is sufficient for a student to be like his teacher, and the slave like his master. If they call the master of the house “Beelzebub,” how much more will [they so slander] the members of his household! (vv. 24–25)*

The members of the household (Heb., *bnei bayit*; see Gen 15:3) are the servants, the slaves, and the attendants. “It is sufficient for a slave to be like his master” was a popular saying that appears over a dozen times in the rabbinic literature—e.g., *Sipra, parashat 3, Behar* 4; *b. Ber.* 58b; *Gen. Rab.* 49:2 (ed. Theodor Albeck)—as well as the near parallels in *Exod. Rab.* 42:5 and *Tanh. Gen., Lekh lekha* 23.<sup>15</sup> Here Jesus uses this saying, but in the form of a well-known legal argument (“sufficient” meaning “ample” for legal argument). Technically the argument is called, literally, “an argument of sufficiency to discover an unknown premise that will be clarified from a known premise” (in Heb., *dayo lavo min hadin lihiot kenadun*). A tradition from *Sipra Baraita de Rabbi Yishmael* 1:3 (and *b. B. Bat.* 111a) shows us how the argument was used by the Rabbis:

How should we apply the principle of *qal veḥomer*?<sup>16</sup> [We need to consider] *And God said to Moses: If her father had spat in her face* [an exaggerated way of saying if a woman’s father was totally annoyed with her behavior] *would she not carry her shame for 7 days?* (Num 12:14a). All the more if the *Shekhina* was totally annoyed with her should she not be locked away for 14 days? [But God indicated to Moses] that conclusions based on comparing punishments of greater and lesser cases are sufficiently cogent to warrant punishments no more severe than those applied to the original cases [and so he told him] *Let [Miriam] be shut out of the camp seven days and afterwards she may be brought back* (Num 12:14b).<sup>17</sup>

The logic of what Jesus says in Matt 10:24–25 is as follows: because it is beyond any reasonable expectation that a student should ever be shown more respect than his teacher, then if it should happen that a teacher is besmirched, it can only follow that his student is besmirched the more. The limit of least respect shown to a teacher marks the limit of greatest respect that could ever be shown to his student. That is, the sufficient limit of least respect shown the teacher is also the limit of greatest respect shown the student. And so what Jesus means to say here is: “They are referring to me, your superior, [at their maximum level of insult] as ‘Beelzebub’ [see also 12:25], therefore how much more will they call you that (at the minimum level of insult).”

<sup>15</sup> See Kister, “Words and Formulae,” 125–7.

<sup>16</sup> *Qal veḥomer* (literally “light and heavy”) arguments draw conclusions based on the effects of items which are quantitatively different. A leniency permitted in a “heavy” (e.g., capital) case can often be argued to be at least equally permitted in a “light” (civil) case.

<sup>17</sup> *B. B. Bat.* 111a and its commentators analyze the problems associated with this statement.

*So do not fear them, for nothing is hidden which will not be uncovered, nor secret which will not be known. (v. 26)*

In the end all will be revealed, according to Matthew's report of Jesus' words. Again, a text from Isaiah 51–52 lies behind this verse, in this case 52:10: "The Lord has made bare His holy arm in the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God."

*What I say to you in the darkness, speak in the light, and what you hear whispered in your ear, proclaim upon the rooftops (v. 27)*

According to a tradition in *y. Beṣah* 1:1 (see also *Gen. Rab.* 3:4), some Rabbis actually did quite the opposite. We are told that Rabbi Yudan said: "Just as I received (the teaching) in a whisper (assuming it to be esoteric) so I transmit it in a whisper." But this certainly was not always the case. A tradition preserved in *b. Ber.* 22a informs us that Nahum of Gamzo whispered a teaching to Rabbi Akiva, who whispered it to Shimon ben Azzai, who then went and taught it aloud in the market place.

*Do not fear those who kill the body, but they are not able to kill the soul. Fear rather the one who is able to destroy both the soul and the body in Gehenna. (v. 28)*

The one who is able to destroy both the soul and the body in *Gehenna* is, of course, "the evil one"—Satan.

*Are not two sparrows sold for a mere assarion? But not one of them falls to the earth apart from your Father. (v. 29)*

Though sparrows are of little worth, still God watches over them, Jesus says. The same point is made in a tradition preserved in *y. Šeb.* 9:1, in which we are told of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai's flight from the Romans. According to this tradition, Rabbi Shimon while in flight found a cave in which to hide. Finally deeming that it was safe to come out

[he] saw a hunter of birds spread a trap [to catch them]. [When he spread it for the first time] he heard a heavenly voice saying *demos*, "reprieved!" and the bird escaped. [When he spread the net for a second time he heard a heavenly voice say *spekula*, "sentenced," and the bird was caught.]

The conclusion of this story is found at verse 31, where Jesus too concludes what he has to say about sparrows and their worth relative to human beings.

*And even all the hairs of your head are numbered. (v. 30)*

Jesus makes clear that God is attentive to even the smallest creatures and to the most minute details concerning their formation. A tradition found in *b. B. Bat.* 16a states that God provides each hair with its own follicle for a specific reason.

*So do not fear. You are more valuable than many sparrows. (vv. 31–33)*

The tradition concerning Rabbi Shimon from *y. Šeb.* continues with his reflection that if a mere bird cannot be trapped unless Heaven wills it, how much more so is it the case that a person, who is far more valuable, cannot be entrapped.

*Everyone who acknowledges me before people, that one will I acknowledge before my heavenly Father. But whoever denies me before people, that one will I deny before my heavenly Father. Do not think that I came to cause peace upon the earth. I did not come to cause peace but a sword. (vv. 32–34)*

The Rabbis also spoke of great wars that were to occur just before the coming of the Messiah (*b. Sanh.* 97a). What Jesus says in verse 34, and then in verses 35–39, is difficult to reconcile with what he says elsewhere about love and forgiveness. If the sayings of Jesus in these verses are not original to him, we can only wonder who would have put them in his mouth. We cannot forget that Peter will deny Jesus three times before the Gospel concludes. The tension between Peter's denials and Jesus' harsh words, warning against such, creates a disturbed atmosphere of disappointments and frustrations. The normal familial social expectations seem to be unraveling and the world is headed somewhere unnerving.

*For I have come to turn a son against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be the members of his own family [Micah 7:6]. (vv. 35–36)*

Jewish Scripture speaks of the breakdown of society, with the younger generation sassing the older, as a horrible evil. "For the son dishonors his father, the daughter rises up against her mother, the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, and a person's enemies are those of his household" (Micah 7:6). Rabbinic literature expanded the theme of the same social breakdown in portraying the last generation before the arrival of the Messiah. For example, the widely cited

*baraita* mentioned in *b. Sanh.* 97a (“the generation when Son of David comes”) and the text found in *m. Soṭah* 9:15 show extreme reversals and cite Micah 7:6. But these passages show us a society so broken that only the Messiah can fix it. Perhaps Rabbis are describing their own generation and holding out some hope. The Gospel, on the other hand, shows us it is Jesus himself who will undermine society and its constitutive social relationships. It is instructive to consider these societal reversals as signaling the dismantling of old structures and strictures, and the creation of the new society in the coming Kingdom—a purposefully vague notion that can only be understood once it arrives.

Liminal periods, perceived as transitions between one mode of being and another, are often marked by social breakdown such as the reversal of status in the social hierarchy. Victor Turner points out that during a liminal period, society is perceived as an “unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders.”<sup>18</sup>

*Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and the one who loves his son or his daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me, he is not worthy of me.* (vv. 37–38)

*Gen. Rab.* 56 to *Gen 22:6* informs us that the phrase “taking one’s cross” was a known idiom and so independent of any association with the crucifixion; therefore it could, perhaps, have been used by Jesus without reference to his own death.

*The one who finds his life will destroy it, and the one who destroys his life on my account will find it.* (v. 39)

Paradox was very much a style of the early teachers. For instance, a tradition in *b. Tamid* 32a tells us that they asked: “What shall a man do that he may live?—Kill himself. And what shall a man do that he may die?—Give himself life.” And a tradition from *m. Abot* 1:13 says that the “one who extends his name destroys his name.”

*The one who welcomes you welcomes me, and the one who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.* (v. 40)

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18 Victor W. Turner, “Liminality and Communitas,” in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Turner 1969), 96.

In a dozen places or more the Talmuds make the claim that the messenger is the equivalent of the one who sent him. In the *Mekhilta of Rabbi Yishmael* to Exod 12:6, in a discussion of the commandment that the whole assembly of Israel slaughter a lamb chosen for the Passover sacrifice, the Rabbis wonder how this can be done. Is literally everyone in the community supposed to participate in the slaughter? What the Rabbis conclude is that the purpose of the commandment in the verse is to make known to the community that one's messenger is equivalent to the one—or in this case to the many—who sent him. And so, when the slaughterer keeps in mind that he is performing the sacrifice of the lamb in the name of the many who sent him, the many also receive the reward for having fulfilled the command that “they shall slaughter it” (Exod 12:6).

*He that receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward; and he that receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man, shall receive a righteous man's reward.* (v. 41)

Whoever serves the prophet or the righteous man becomes like the one he serves and receives the same reward. For without receiving help, both the prophet and the righteous man would have to concern themselves with earning their own livelihoods instead of serving God. It is for this reason that those who help them deserve to receive the rewards of either the prophet or the righteous man, as the case may be. A tradition from *Gen. Rab.* 72:5 is of interest here:

From whom did Issachar manage to gain glory in Torah learning? From Zebulun. The latter worked in business and supported Issachar who was a great scholar. . . . Hence when Moses came to bless the tribes [with their deserved rewards] he gave precedence to Zebulun (the generous donor) over Issachar (for enabling the scholar).

Whoever supports a scholar or enables a student learn better will be rewarded with a share of the learner's merit. So too, says Jesus, even giving cold water to enable a student to learn better is worthy of reward.

*And whosoever shall give to drink to one of these little ones a cup of cold [water] only in the name of a disciple, verily I say unto you, he shall in no wise lose his reward.* (v. 42)

Whoever even gives a drink to a student with the intent of helping the student learn better will share the student's reward.

# Chapter 11

## Introduction

Up until now, Matthew's narrative had been structured so as to allow for and support the argument that Jesus has been teaching and performing miracles for the Jews, but receiving little appreciation or esteem from them. From prison John the Baptist now sends word to Jesus asking him whether he is really the promised redeemer. Obviously, both Jesus' own failures to gain wide acceptance and John's disappointing career, ending in imprisonment and imminent execution, are cause for concern. By way of the words of a children's chant in a certain kind of parable that he tells, Jesus shows the Jews that they really do not know what a redeemer figure looks like. The Jews find every reason to ignore the possibility that either Jesus or John might be the figure who appearance the prophets and all Jewish teachers had been foretelling for hundreds of years.

In contrast to pagans, Matthew now argues that, on the one hand, all Jews are irredeemable. On the other hand, amidst what are perhaps veiled references to the haughtiness of the Pharisees further along in the chapter, he also says that even they are excused from their failure to recognize Jesus as God's servant, since God has in fact withheld from them his true identity. In the end, however, Matthew will come down on the side of the pagans, declaring that they will become the true believers, once they learn about Jesus. "Go, therefore, make disciples of all the nations" (Matt 28:19).<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter, references are made to Wisdom or Logos theology, a Middle Platonist/Stoic mystical view of the world based on the figure of a demiurge or agent creator. In this theology Wisdom/Logos (*Wisdom of Solomon* already presupposes the link) has two associates or Powers (to use Philo's terms).<sup>2</sup> Depending upon the text of Matthew, either the acts of Wisdom are vindicated (i.e., Jesus as Wisdom), or the Children/Powers of Wisdom are justified (i.e., John and Jesus). The Powers, at least for Philo, seem to be related to the various names of God in Scripture (Y-H-W-H and E-L-O-H-I-M). The Rabbis saw these powers or "*midot*" as either benevolent or strict and also related to Y-H-W-H and E-L-O-H-I-M.<sup>3</sup> Thus chapter 11 tells us that Jesus appeared to the people as

<sup>1</sup> See the introduction to Chapter 2, n. 1, and also see chap. 12, vv. 15–17.

<sup>2</sup> See Dahl and Segal, "Philo and the Rabbis on the Names of God" (1978).

<sup>3</sup> See L. Finkelstein note in *Sipre Devarim*, p. 41, to line 6.

a friend of sinners (as indeed mercy is), while John appeared to the people as just the opposite (as sternness is).

Breaking with my usual pattern, I refrain in this introduction from discussing the complex exegetical problems (including speculations on the redaction of certain passages) involved in the understanding of this chapter. Rather, I will discuss these matters at length in the commentary proper to avoid unnecessary repetitions.

### Commentary

*When Jesus finished commanding his twelve disciples, he left from there to teach and to proclaim in their cities. (v. 1)*

Chapter 11 deals with Jesus' failure to appeal to the Jewish people, despite his almost unceasing activity as a preacher and healer among them. In this chapter we also see Jesus chastise the crowds for failing to recognize John's eschatological role and so, by implication, his own.

*John, hearing in prison about the deeds of the Christ, sent word through his disciples. (v. 2)*

Josephus writes that John was arrested by Herod Antipas for gathering crowds about him and preaching to them of the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God. Having heard of "the deeds of Christ" while in prison, John sends a number of his disciples to Jesus to inquire of him concerning what role he is to play in the coming final act of history. The reason John sends more than one disciple to Jesus is twofold: first, it was not the custom in those days for people to travel alone; second, so that there would be more than one witness to report back to John what Jesus says in response to his query (Matt 11:4).

According to the overwhelming testimony of manuscript evidence, there is no doubt that for Matthew Jesus was the messianic redeemer. It is made plain here in his reference to Jesus as "the Christ," that is, "the Messiah." In some early manuscripts, at least according to the commentaries of Matthew by both Origen and Chrysostom, "the deeds of Jesus" is read here, and not "the deeds of Christ."

*And said to him, "Are you the one who is coming, or shall we expect another?" (v. 3)*

John wonders if the reports he has heard about Jesus indicate that he is the Messiah. He refers here to the expected Messiah as “the one who is coming,” echoing what is said of the divine messenger in Malachi 3:1.

*Jesus answered them, “Go, tell John what you hear and see. The blind receive sight, and the lame walk, the plagued with leprosy are cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised, and the poor have good news proclaimed to them.” (vv. 4–5)*

Without saying, “Yes, I am the one” to John’s disciples in response to John’s question concerning whether or not he is the Messiah, Jesus offers testimony with which John will only be able to conclude that he is indeed the one. Though Jesus is reluctant here to reveal his divine/messianic identity (yet he has already revealed it over and again by offering signs and proofs), he overcomes this reluctance in verse 27.

Up to this point in the Gospel, Jesus has performed all the miracles about which he speaks here, except for the restoration of hearing to the deaf, which is recounted in Mark 7:31–37. (It is clear that the source that both Matthew and Luke drew upon contained traditions known to Mark.) Jesus has cleansed a leper (8:2–3), cured a paralytic (9:6), resurrected the dead (9:25), and given sight to the blind (9:27). This list of miracles, which is almost word for word the same in Luke 7:22, also corresponds, at least in part, to lists of miracles that also appear in a number of Jewish sources—the Hebrew Bible, documents from Qumran, and rabbinic prayers. In these Jewish sources, the miracles are said not only to be manifestations of the divine attribute of mercy, they are also associated with the period of the final redemption. The similarity of the miracle lists suggests that Matthew is drawing on a pan-Israelite tradition here.

What follows are excerpts from these other Jewish sources, each of which, in speaking of the good news of the redemption, includes at least some of the miracles Jesus speaks of. Only the document from Qumran includes the statement concerning the proclaiming of the “good news to the meek [i.e., the poor].”

Say to those who have an anxious heart... “He will come and save you.” Then the *eyes of the blind shall be opened*, and the *ears of the deaf unstopped*; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy... but the redeemed shall walk there. And the *ransomed* of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away (Isa 35:4–6, 9–10).

[The Lord . . .] executes justice for the oppressed, *gives food to the hungry*. The Lord *sets prisoners free*; the Lord gives *sight to the blind*. The Lord *raises up those who are bowed down*, the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord *protects the stranger*, sustains the orphan and the widow, but thwarts the way of the wicked. The Lord shall reign forever your God, Zion, through all generations! (Ps 146:7–10).

[F]reeing prisoners, *giving sight to the blind, straightening out the twisted*. Ever shall I cling to those who hope. In His mercy he will jud[ge,] and from no-one shall the fruit [of] good [deeds] be delayed, and the Lord will perform marvelous acts such as have not existed, just as he sa[id], for *he will heal the badly wounded* and *will make the dead live*,<sup>4</sup> he will proclaim good news to the meek, give lavishly [to the need]y, lead the exiled and *enrich the hungry* [4Q521 2 11 8–13 (DSST 394)].

Note the parallels with the opening lines of the central rabbinic prayer of Eighteen Blessings:

[The Great God . . .] remembering the pious deeds of the forefathers, who, in love, will bring a redeemer to their children's children for his Name's sake. . . . You, O Lord, are mighty, *the reviver of the dead*, You perform great deeds to save the world, sustaining the living with much loving-kindness, *supporting the fallen*, and *healing the sick, freeing the prisoners*, and keeping your promise to them that sleep in the dust. Who is like You, master of mighty deeds, and who resembles You who is the king, who brings death but resurrects the dead, and causes salvation to spring forth?

*And blessed is the one who finds no offense in me.* (v. 6)

While some might think that the miracles Jesus has performed are not his work but rather the work of demons and/or dark powers, he refutes this by saying that providence is on the side of those who resist such thinking. He is not a charlatan, nor is he allied with demons. It is understandable, however, that many would take offense at Jesus who, while performing miracles as a holy man, also kept company with those of ill repute.

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<sup>4</sup> Compare *Sipre Deut. piska* 329 to Deut 32:39, “I put to death and I bring to life, I have wounded and I will heal,” which is taken to mean the one upon whom God has brought death he will later revive and the one he has wounded he will later heal. *Sipre Deut.* explains that the logic of the verse suggests a reversing of the order of it so that its meaning becomes clearer: “God wounds and heals (the same person who was wounded) and puts to death and bring to life (the same person who died).”

*As they were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: “What did you go out to the desert to look for? A reed shaken by the wind? So what did you come to see? A person dressed in soft things? Look, the ones who wear the soft things are in the houses of kings. So what did you come to see? A prophet? I say to you, Yes, and more than a prophet.” (vv. 7–9)*

Jesus asks the crowd three times what they have come out to see. After asking the first time, he dismisses the charge that John is in any way aligned with such haughty figures as the Pharisees. Of interest here is a tradition in minor tractate *Derekh Eretz* 7:1 (other texts 8.1), in which it is said that the one who is humble in spirit is like the soft reed which bends with the blowing wind. He is not like the hard reed which, because it lacks pliability, does not bend in the wind but is shaken by it, and so does not endure as it encounters what is greater than itself.

When he has asked the second time, Jesus dismisses the charge that John is in any way aligned with royalty. How could this be, for he is humble, and a man of ascetic garb? Finally, after asking the third time, Jesus asserts that John is the messenger preceding the Messiah, that messenger of whom Malachi speaks. Indeed, John is Elijah the prophet (though again he does not yet clearly state this), whose purpose is to be the forerunner of the Messiah. In fact, in his new incarnation as the Baptist, Elijah is now greater than any prophet; he is the harbinger of the messianic kingdom.<sup>5</sup>

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5 Morris M. Fainerstein, in “Why Do the Scribes Say That Elijah Must Come First?” (1981), 75–78, argues that this was not a current popular belief at the time. However, Jesus’ disciples challenged Jesus and asked in Matt 17:10 “Why Do the Scribes say that Elijah must come first” (and Jesus explains that he has already come). They wondered if Jesus could be the Messiah since Elijah has not yet appeared and they politely intimated this is all wrong.” Teachers are challenged in Jewish culture by the question, “Did not you teach us . . . ?” pointing out a well-known general teaching. The answer points out that the question is misplaced to one who knows the facts of the current situation (e.g., *m. Ber.* 1:1 or 2:7). Even more to the point, Malachi 3 must be taken to mean that Elijah will come back on the Great Day, but when—before the Messiah or after the Messiah? The Scribes taught “before.” The disciples, who apparently followed their teachings, queried how Jesus could be the Messiah since he had to follow after Elijah. Jesus explains John and Elijah are the same. Since the New Testament knows the Scribes taught he would come before the Messiah and the Talmudic rabbis of a much later era taught the same thing (*b. Erub.* 43b) we should see a line of tradition from the pre-Christian Jewish scribes passing to the Talmud, even if the available evidence is sparse in between them. Louis Ginzberg, *An Unknown Jewish Sect*, (1976), 251, does well to interpret the available evidence in this light since there is no reason to doubt the accuracy of the Gospel’s assertions that the Scribes taught Elijah would come first. We also note that in Chapter 3:1, “I immerse you in water for repentance, but the one coming after me is stronger than I, whose

Properly speaking, this passage continues at verse 14. The intervening verses (10–13) provide the proof texts that Elijah was indeed to be the forerunner of the Messiah, a claim we have dealt with at length in Chapter 2. Verse 10 also offers a further explanation of John's role in relation to Jesus, alluding first to Exod 23:20, in which God promised Moses that a messenger would accompany the Israelites into the promised land a full forty years before it happened.

*This is the one concerning whom it has been written, “Look, I am sending my messenger before your face [Exod 23:20], who will prepare your way before you [Mal 3:1].”* (v. 10)

The introductory formula here is rare, though it also occurs in the Lucan parallel (7:27). It appears to be a rendering of two formulae, one in Hebrew, *zehu [mah] shekatuv*, and the other in Aramaic, *al da kativ*. This would explain its unusual form: “This is the one (Heb., *zehu*) concerning whom (Aram. *al da*) it has been written.” The purpose of the formula is to summarize a list of claims by appealing to the authority of Scripture (Exodus 23 and Malachi 3). Jesus' healing of the blind and curing the sick (vv. 5–6a) testify to his being the Son of Man (see the commentary on v. 19 below). John is to prepare the way for Jesus. It is likely that Jesus is intended to be understood as the speaker here, rather than the narrator; according to verse 7, he is speaking about John.

The quotation itself is predicated upon parts of two biblical verses—Exod 23:20, as noted, and Mal 3:1. “This is what is written, ‘*Look, I am sending my messenger before your face*’ [Exod 23:20]” (which is identical to the reading in the LXX except that the LXX begins with “And”). This is followed by a proof of the claim that John is greater than the prophets. “Concerning this it is written, ‘*He will prepare the way before me*’ [Mal 3:1].” That is, John will prepare the way for Jesus. In the process of editing, the two texts were conflated into a single text (which looks very much like the whole of Mal 3:1). The texts that have been conflated here anticipate the identification of Wisdom's children in verse 19. To see that in this text two introductory formulae have been conflated into one, as have also two proof-texts, provides a much more elegant solution to the problems inherent in this verse than those proposed by J.B. De Young.<sup>6</sup>

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shoes I am not worthy to carry. He will immerse you in Holy Spirit and in fire.” There is an idea that John is Elijah and Jesus the Messiah.

6 J.B. DeYoung, “The Function of Malachi 3:1 in Matthew 11:10” (Evans and Stegner 1994), 66–91.

*Amen, I say to you: No one has arisen from those born of women greater than John the Baptist. But the least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than he.* (v. 11)

In a tradition in *b. Šabb.* 88b, it is said that once Moses arrived in heaven to receive the Torah, the angels complained to God that no one born of a woman (in relation to them a sign of inferiority) should ever be found among them. Almost always when the Rabbis use the phrase “born of a woman,” they use it to contrast angels with someone of the stature of either Moses or Jacob.

I assume “Kingdom of Heaven” here refers to the actual experience of redemption and the ensuing witnessing of God’s glory. Of interest here is the rabbinic claim that even the lowliest maidservant who witnessed the splitting of the Red Sea saw God (i.e., the Glory) in a way that the greatest of the prophets did not (*Mekhilta of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai* 15:2 and parallels).

*From the days of John the Baptist until now the Kingdom of Heaven has suffered violence, and violent people besiege it.* (v. 12)

This text cannot logically be part of the narrative of Jesus’ life, for John is still alive at this point in the Gospel story. It can, however, be seen as a kind of footnote concerning the Kingdom of Heaven. The liminal gap between the time of John’s ministry, which inaugurated the expectations of the coming of the kingdom, and the time of the writing of the Gospel, by which time the kingdom had yet to arrive, troubled or confused many who were impatient for its arrival. The text likely refers to the events of 66–70 CE, during which time numerous prophets and zealots in Israel were expecting God to actively intervene on behalf of Israel against Rome for the sake of its redemption. A tradition in *Song Rab.* 2 to *Song 2:7* expands on a popular motif of those who failed to force the redemption through violent means (*dahku al haqetz*) by naming them or their time periods. Both Matthew and the Rabbis saw such activity as being counterproductive and against the divine plan.

*For all the prophets and the law till John did prophesy.* (v. 13)

The precise time of the arrival of the kingdom, and also the way in which it will be manifested once it has arrived, are unknown in this post-Johannine age. For according to Jesus, no prophet has ever foretold what one should expect at this time. A tradition in *b. Ber.* 34b points out that the prophets prophesied only up until the turbulent period of the Messiah (*yemot hamashiah*), which is to precede the future kingdom (*olam haba*). After that, no one except God

knows what will happen. The digression begun at verse 10 ends here and now we return to Jesus' discourse on the living John.

*And if you are willing to accept [it], he is Elijah who was to come. (v. 14)*

While not everyone in the very early church accepted that John was an incarnation of Elijah (see John 1:21), Matthew certainly did.

*Whoever has ears should listen. (v. 15)*

This phrase introduces a wisdom teaching Matthew uses in connection with his parables (13:9, 13:43). It shares the outlook of Prov 22:17: "Direct your ears and listen to the sayings of the wise; apply your heart to what I teach."

Jesus then offers the teaching that lies at the heart of this chapter (vv. 15–20). Why is it that he and John have not succeeded in bringing about a change in the people of Israel as a whole, so that they repent for their sins? Using a rhetorical device known as a *mashal*, Jesus tries to explain why he and John have failed in this regard. A *mashal* is a type of allegory or parable used to compare actions of people involved in an often unusual or even extraordinary situation with the actions of the characters involved in a similar but much more mundane situation in the *mashal* itself. The purpose in telling the *mashal* is that, once the reasons for the behavior of the characters in the *mashal* are understood, the behavior of the people in the actual situation, and the reasons for it, also become clear. The *mashal* ends with an explanation concerning the relationship between the people involved in the actual situation and the characters spoken of in the *mashal*. This is known as the *nimshal*. Before we comment on the *mashal* in our Gospel text, let us first consider a *mashal* found in *b. Ber.* 11a, the purpose of which is to highlight the seemingly spiteful behavior of Rabbi Yishmael that so frustrates Rabbi Eleazar, who is relating it.<sup>7</sup>

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7 Maurice Simon's translation (Soncino edition, 1952, ed. I. Epstein) of *b. Ber.* 11a is as follows:  
 "Our Rabbis taught: Beth Hillel say that one may recite the *Shema* standing, one may recite it sitting, one may recite it reclining, one may recite it walking on the road, one may recite it at one's work. Once Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Eleazar b. Azariah were dining at the same place, and Rabbi Ishmael was reclining while Rabbi Eleazar was standing upright. When the time came for reciting the *Shema*, Rabbi Eleazar reclined and Rabbi Ishmael stood upright. Said Rabbi Eleazar b. Azariah to Rabbi Yishmael: Brother Ishmael, I will tell you a parable. To what is this [our conduct] like? It is like that of a man to whom people say, You have a fine beard, and he replies, Let this go to meet the destroyers. So now, with you: as long as I was upright you were reclining, and now that I recline you stand upright! He replied: I have acted according to the rule of Beth Hillel and you have acted according to the rule of Beth Shammai."

I shall give you a *mashal*: to what can this issue be compared? It is like someone who was told, “You have a beautifully grown beard,” and this other replied, “Let it befall the razors.” [Now the *nimshal*:] So too are you [Rabbi Yishmael], who, whenever I stood erect, you bent forward and whenever I bent forward you stood erect.”<sup>8</sup>

Finally, before we comment on Jesus’ *mashal* here one more thing needs to be said. Matthew 11:15–20, in which the *mashal* is found, forms a complete unit. It may well be a commentary on Deut 32:4–5, which also speaks of a perverse generation. “He is the Rock, his *work* is perfect: for all his ways are judgment: a God of truth and without iniquity, just and right is he. It has acted corruptly with Him; their blemish is not *His sons*; A generation perverse and crooked! They are a perverse and crooked *generation*.”

*To what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces who call out to each other. They say, “We played the flute for you, but [you say this is abnormal, so] you did not dance; we sang a dirge, but [you say that is abnormal too, so] you did not mourn.”* (vv. 16–17)

8 See further Basser, “Some Examples of the Use of the New Testament.” Beit Hillel permits one to recline or stand to recite the evening Shema and Beit Shammai rejects standing. In order to make the point that the law is not like Beit Shammai, Rabbi Yishmael stood when he saw Rabbi Eleazar recline. The contrary behaviors are illustrated by a *mashal*. Our sources present two versions of this story with two versions of the *mashal*. We have already seen the *Bavli* version. The other version of the *mashal* is found in several Palestinian texts, *Sipre Deut*, *piska* 34; *t. Ber.* 1:4; and *y Ber.* 1:3. the speaker offers a *mashal* to explain the other’s behavior. The texts (e.g., *t. Ber.* 1:4) report:

“What kind of insolent behavior is this, Eleazar?”

He (Eleazar) said to him, “Yishmael, my colleague, I will compare this to a certain person whom they asked (in disgust), ‘Why is your beard long?’ And this person answered: ‘In protest against those who use razors!’ I who was originally erect—reclined (to recite the evening *Shema*, to follow the view of Beit Shammai) but you who were already reclining needlessly stood erect.

The other (Yishmael) explained, “Your moving into reclining posture was to fulfill the posture stipulated by Beit Shammai (and I reject this view), while my standing up posture was to fulfil (demonstratively) that of Beit Hillel.

The *mashal* in this passage has attracted some attention and I simply point out its existence without entering into its problems of logic and rhetoric. The Gospels combine the strategies of our *Bavli* and *Yerushalmi* sources in their presentation. There are additional factors in the unpacked *mashal* than were actually presented in the *mashal* itself. This is true of both rabbinic *mashal* and Gospel *mashal*. In many ways the Gospel passage opens a window to see the sophistication of these Jewish versions of protest-parables.

The *mashal* Jesus uses here to explain the failure of himself and John with respect to their own “perverse” generation is confined to the behaviors illustrated in the sing-song words that children call out to each other in the market-places: “We played the flute for you....” The characters, actions, and setting of the *mashal*—the children’s chant casts blame upon the merchants for ignoring the cues they have set up—are used by Jesus to compare the failures of himself and John in their ministries to a situation that, though similar, is much more mundane. The following verses illustrate this; in them is given the *nimshal*, the key to the meaning, of the children’s words.

*So John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say [you (pl.) say (Luke, 7:31)], “He has a demon.” (v. 18)*

John, as Matthew has already told us (3:4), was an ascetic living on locusts and wild honey. John behaves one way (dirgeful) and is belittled.

*The Son of Man came eating and drinking [Deut 21:20], and they say, “Look, a person who is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners”... (v. 19a)*

Jesus acts the opposite way and is belittled. John came to stir up lament among the people but got no response from them, save the accusation that he was mad. Jesus came to play the flute, thereby announcing the good news that the world was on the edge of redemption, but, like John, he got no response from the people, save the accusation that he was a reprobate who kept bad company.

The *mashal* ends with Jesus’ comment about Wisdom that makes plain that with it he means to critique his, and John’s, generation. The *mashal* renders intelligible the behavior of those who do not respond to the message of Jesus. However that may be, in the end, because of this failure to respond, the people will be punished. The self-identification of Jesus as Son of Man reinforces his supernal status in the spiritual world. How ironic that he should be called a “glutton” and a reprobate by those he has come to serve.

*... But Wisdom is declared righteous by her children [teknon, majority reading] /by her works [ergon, reading in Nestle-Aland edition]. (v. 19 b)*

If we look at Deut 32:4–5 cited above, both “work(s)” and “children” are mentioned in it. In *nuce*: “his work is perfect”; and: “their blemish is not *His sons*.” It seems, then, that we have a true variant. Both “works” and “children” are equally plausible here and there is no way to decide on the better reading.

Wisdom, the *Logos* or active element of the Godhead, is spoken of here as a designation of God's creative powers.<sup>9</sup> God created the world through the medium of "Wisdom," which is akin to the Platonic "demiurge." The divine activity both in the beginning-time and now in the end-time is referred to as "Wisdom." Wisdom is also considered the maker of heaven and earth in some traditions in rabbinic thought. For example, in *Tanh. Gen.* [ed. Buber], 16, the Rabbis state:

"These are the generations of the heavens and earth when they were created on the day the Lord God fashioned the earth and the heavens (Gen 2:4)"—which is explained by Prov 3:19. "The Lord through Wisdom founded the earth and established the heavens with Understanding." So you find that through *Wisdom* the Holy One created the heavens and the earth.

The "children of the generation" of Jesus and John are doomed, for aside from the two of them, it is made up largely of those who are not God's children. Only Jesus and John recognize that God is righteous and just and that his work is perfect. They also understand that, in spite of the contrariness of those of this generation, still redemption will come. Wisdom's "children" will be vindicated. Creation will find its completion. The respective missions of John and Jesus will end with the coming together of heaven and earth.

We again make note of the title "Son of Man" which, for the Rabbis, as I have previously said, refers to the angelic figure later known as "Metatron." This figure is mentioned in *b. Hag.* 15a, though the Talmud here absolutely rejects any thought of him as being a second god, which can perhaps mean that at some point he was thought of in this way. In his book *Kabbalah*, Scholem says of the Karaite scholar Jacob Qirqisani (flourished c. 930) that he was able to read in his version of the Talmud that Metatron was "the lesser Y-H-V-H."<sup>10</sup> *B. Sanh.* 38b understands that a reference is also made to Metatron in Exod 23:21. According to the Rabbis, he is the "him" in whom God says in the verse that his name resides: "Be on your guard before him and obey his voice; do not be rebellious toward him, for he will not pardon your transgression, since *My name is in him*." Note here that the Rabbis in their non-polemical studies must also have seen that Metatron had the power to forgive sins, a power that Jesus also claimed

<sup>9</sup> Compare *Sipre Deut., piska* 307, which, in discussing Deut 32:4–5, speaks of the "Rock (*Tzur*)" as both designer and creator (*tzayar, yatzar*), and says that the Creator's ways of reward and punishment are perfect.

<sup>10</sup> Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (1974), 377–78.

for himself. In the same tradition from *b. Sanh.* 38b, Rabbi Idith explains that in Exod 24:1 it is written that God said to Moses, “Come up to *the Lord*, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu and seventy of the elders of Israel, and you shall worship at a distance,” and not “Come up to *Me*,” because it is actually Metatron who said this and not God. The pseudepigraphic *Apocalypse of Abraham* says of the angelic figure Jahoel, whose attributes, according to Scholem, were later attributed to Metatron,<sup>11</sup> that he also “has the tetragrammaton in him.” *B. Hag.* 15a, as we have seen, would have none of this. In this latter text, Metatron is said to be only a heavenly scribe with no real power of his own. It seems that “Sophia/Wisdom” typologies stood behind the image of Metatron (perhaps *meta-thronios*, the one who sits next to the Throne of Glory).<sup>12</sup>

*Then he began to reprimand the cities in which most of his miracles had occurred, because they did not repent.* (v. 20)

This verse ends the unit in which Jesus’ failure to effect change among his hearers so that they might repent in preparation for the end is emphasized. Repentance is the dominant theme in John’s ministry, and it carries over into this very pro-John section of the Gospel. In speaking of his miracles here, Jesus speaks of that about him which above all demonstrates his divine election.

*Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! Because if in Tyre and Sidon had been done the mighty works that were done in you, long ago in sack-cloth and ashes they would have repented; but I say to you, to Tyre and Sidon it shall be more tolerable in a day of judgment than for you.* (vv. 21–22)

Here Jesus makes final condemnation against Israel while at the same time offering praise of the Gentiles. As he says, were even the most wicked in the pagans cities of Tyre and Sidon (Joel 3:4–7) to have witnessed the miracles of Jesus that the Jews of Chorazin and Bethsaida have witnessed, then, unlike the Jews in these cities, they would certainly have repented. It is for this reason that in the end the Gentiles will be saved but the Jews will not. According to the Rabbis, only Jonah prophesied among the people of the city of Nineveh; they then donned sackcloth and repented (Jonah 3:3–8). But many prophets came to the Jews and they would not repent so then they were sent into exile (*Midrash Eicha Rabbati*, Proem 31) According to Matthew, Jesus, like the

<sup>11</sup> Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 378.

<sup>12</sup> See further Moshe Idel, *Ben: Sonship and Jewish Mysticism* (2008). Most pertinent for our purposes are Idel’s discussions in his Introduction, chapter 1, and the Appendix.

midrash, had no reservations about condemning the Jews for by their works they condemned the Jews. For Matthew, Jesus' mission has proved to be a failure not only among the Jewish priestly and political elite, but among all Jews. In the end, as far as Matthew is concerned, Jesus will find his followers from among the Nations.

*And you, Capernaum, will you be raised up? Unto Hades shall you be brought down, because if in Sodom had been done the mighty works that were done in you, it would still be standing to this day. (v. 23)*

Even the sinful people of Sodom would have been moved to repent had they witnessed the miracles Jesus performed in Capernaum, but the Jews of that city, because they have failed to take notice of them, are, according to Jesus, even more reprehensible than the sinners of Sodom, for which reason their punishment will be eternal. That is, even the notorious people of Sodom will be judged more favorably in the end than the people of Capernaum.

*But I say to you, to the land of Sodom it shall be more tolerable in a day of judgment than to you. (v. 24)*

The source, which both Matthew and Luke shared and which contained these several verses (11:20–24 in Matthew; 10:13–15 in Luke), gives us the words of a gentile polemicist at his most vitriolic, who also knows that in Tyre and Sidon there are many who have become followers of Jesus. In fact, Jesus and John did not fail in their mission to the Jews; it was rather that their mission to them was impossible. It is not they who should be blamed for their lack of success: it is the Jews who are to blame. The polemic in these several verses is unmistakable. To my mind it remains very doubtful that any Jew (save perhaps a Jew-turned-Gentile) could have written these words.

*At that time Jesus, answering, said, "I do confess [thank] to You, O Father, Lord of the heavens and of the earth, that you concealed these things from wise and understanding ones, and did reveal them to babes". (v. 25)*

It is likely that this section is dependent on a Semitic original, and so a few comments on the semiticisms here, and when elsewhere they appear, are in order. "Answering" (Heb., "anah") really means "to praise" ("anta" means "praise," "song"—see *Tanh. Exod.* [ed. Buber], Vayera 22). Also, rather than "I do confess," this phrase in the original probably read something more like *Modim anaḥnu lakh*, as in the following text from *y. Ber.* 1:1: "We thank you, O Master

of All Creatures, Lord of All Praises . . . *that You . . .*,” or *Modeh ani lefanekha*, as in the following text from *t. Ber.* 6:16: “[When he entered (the town) peacefully he said,] ‘*I thank you*, O Lord My God, *that [= because]* You brought me in with peace so may it be well pleasing before thee, O Lord My God, that You bring me out in peace . . .” That is, although according to Matthew Jesus says “I confess to you,” what he means to say is “I thank you . . . that (on account of) . . .”

Jesus says here that the meaning of the events of the present time and of his miracles remains hidden from the Wise (*hakhamim*), that is, the scholars or understanding ones (*bunim*), but has been revealed to those who are thought to be unwise. The rabbinic tradition that equates *bunim* (scholars) with *banim* (children) comes to mind here. At the conclusion of *b.* Talmud tractates *Berakhot*, *Nazir*, *Yevamot*, and *Keritot*, the initial letters of each of which, when put together, form an anagram spelling BNYK (*banayikh*), or “your children.” Here is the early tradition that was appended to these tractates:

Rabbi Eleazar said in the name of Rabbi Hanina, “Torah scholars (*hakhamim*) increase peace throughout the world, for it says, ‘All your children shall be taught by the Lord, and great shall be the peace of your children [*banayikh*]’ (Isa 54:13).”

The tradition tells us that we are to read “children” (*banim*) here to mean “understanding ones” (*bunim*).<sup>13</sup> In light of Jesus’ words (allegedly reported by Matthew above) we might see a reversal (in the Talmudic passage) of Jesus’ implied interpretation of Isa 54:13 children (*banim*) were taught by God of the coming kingdom, but the Sages (*bunim*) were not. Hence, for the Gospel’s Jesus, the “Era of Peace” is for the children alone.

In contrast with the harsh rhetoric above in which Jesus condemns the Jews by comparing them unfavorably with the men of Sodom, his tone here is comparatively mild. Here Jesus simply points out that the Sages are not to blame for their refusal to expound his message to their followers, for God has deliberately hidden this message from them for his own purposes but has revealed it to the children (i.e., the uneducated peasants). In relation to this, nothing more can be said, other than that such was God’s will. Klausner remarks on the change in temperament in Jesus from his harsh condemnation of the Jews of Capernaum and Chorazin above to his much milder reproof of the wise here and would have us believe that both are original to the historical Jesus.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Following the translation of Robert Gordis, “Increasing Peace in the World” (1976), 44–46.

<sup>14</sup> Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 410.

*Yes, Father, because it was well-pleasing before you. (v. 26)*

The Semitic construction that lies behind the phrase “well-pleasing before you” (*ratzon milefanekha*) is used here for the sake of protecting God’s honor. That is, distance is created between God and his feelings by way of the prepositional phrase “before you.”

*All things were delivered to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, nor does any know the Father except the Son, and he to whom the Son may wish to reveal him. (v. 27)*

The mystical tone of the passage indicates that Jesus has some kind of divine status.

*Come to me, all you belabored and burdened ones, and I will give you rest; take up my yoke upon you, and learn from me, because I am meek and humble in heart, and you shall find rest for your souls. (vv. 28–29)*

We seem to have an implied contrast between the haughty Pharisees (Matt 16:11) and their doctrines, and the much more humble Jesus and his teachings. “Rest for your souls” seems to mirror “*nahat ruah*” (e.g., *b. Hag.* 16b), which often carries a sense of religious fulfillment and spiritual accomplishment. The term is used to express the emotion felt by someone underprivileged by the prevailing rules when a rabbinic authority grants them what had been (or could have been) denied them.

To “take up the yoke upon oneself” (Heb., *mekabel ol*) means to commit oneself to a unique way of life that marks one’s identity. Usually the acceptance of such a “yoke” requires dedication and discipline. In relation to this, in *Sipra Behar* 5 (to Lev 25: 35–38), the Rabbis state: “Whoever takes upon himself the yoke of usury laws takes upon himself the yoke of heaven.”

*For my yoke [is] easy, and my burden is light. (v. 30)*

It is not clear whether Jesus means to say that his yoke and burden are lighter than other leaders whose burdens are heavy, or that his yoke and his burdens are his doctrinal teachings of the end-time that are both inspiring and full of hope for redemption, making the burdens of life under Rome more bearable.

# Chapter 12

## Introduction

In this chapter Matthew makes plain the deep revulsion he feels toward the Pharisaic system and the Pharisees themselves. However that may be, the primary Gospel traditions are not absolute in their condemnations of the Jewish sages and their legal systems. Indeed, the various layers of Gospel traditions show us a Jesus who adheres to, and is adept at applying, that legal system.

It is by way of Matthew's additions to the narrative that we are able to discover the overall plan of his Gospel. In it, Jesus inaugurates the *eschaton* by first defeating the Pharisaic power structure—and this by disregarding Pharisaic law—so that he can justify the apparent violations of his disciples (it would seem, perhaps, that even sacrifices are to be suspended, if they hamper the exercise of mercy and justice).<sup>1</sup> Matthew portrays the sort of ongoing debate between Jesus and the Pharisees in his Gospel as a debate between the scribal legal system and God's era of mercy and peace. Ultimately Matthew's Gospel is the story of Jesus versus the Pharisees. For him, Jesus represents kindness and mercy, the Pharisees and their legal system a burdensome yoke. And so chapter 12 is a continuation of chapter 11, in that chapter 12 is a kind of extended interpretation of Jesus' claim in 11:30 that he is the "light yoke" and the promise of spiritual satisfaction at the close of this chapter.

Matthean additions to the Gospel story found by comparing Matthew to Mark and Luke show us that the Matthean Jesus sees the final movement of human history as the complete salvation of the gentile nations and the defeat of the prevailing Jewish hierarchies. All of this comes to the fore in this chapter. With great skill, Matthew has interpolated his own views into the basic themes of the received Gospel tradition. He has one purpose here: to stress how Jesus struggled to show the Jews how much more significant are the matters of mercy

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<sup>1</sup> The Gospel will frame the issue as one of mercy and kindness in order to portray the Pharisees as heartless and unaccommodating where they should be the opposite. However, the point is rhetorical as no legal system can simply overlook its inner dynamic to accommodate all who are at some point disadvantaged by it. It would be difficult to argue that all the prophets wanted to uproot the practice of sacrifice which brought atonement when people failed to behave properly.

and justice;<sup>2</sup> in so doing he shows Jesus downplaying the values of the prevailing structures of the oral legal system of the Jewish Sages.

Jesus' major speeches and actions as reported by the early church were understood by Matthew to be prophetic fulfillment of the final act of world history. The next act would belong to the kingdom. Matthew's understanding of the enigmatic stories he heard from the Gospel tradition were informed by Isaiah's vision (chap. 42) of the *eschaton*, the opening verse of which (Isa 42:1) he quotes at Jesus' Baptism (3:17) and again at the Transfiguration (17:5), and also in this chapter 12 (v. 18). This vision of Isaiah is presented by Matthew, with some license, as the key to understanding the Pharisaic obstruction of brotherly love, the vindication and victorious judgment of the Gentiles (of whom Matthew must have seen himself as the chief scribe).<sup>3</sup> The meek and humble Jesus has already contrasted himself with these haughty teachers who will be judged to the flames, opening the door to the final kingdom, the arrival of which is imminent.

Richard Beaton has rightly seen the redacting hands of Matthew manipulating his story at every turn so as to give this lesson, which was not lost on the Church Fathers and Christians up until modern times.<sup>4</sup> Medieval rabbis (not unlike Christian clerics) also accepted the view that Jesus was a renegade who disparaged rabbinic law and teaching while claiming to be divine; they also

<sup>2</sup> See Matt 23:23: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others." About which weighing Rabbi Judah the Prince remarks (*m. Abot* 2:1) that one should be as careful with a light precept as with a weightier one.

<sup>3</sup> Whereas in the Christian understanding of the *eschaton* it is the Nations who are victorious while Israel is condemned, in the Jewish understanding Israel emerges victorious from the final judgment and the Nations are condemned. *Tanh. Lev., Emor* 18 (cf. *Lev. Rab.* 30), explains the carrying of palm branches on the festival of Sukkot as emblematic of the outcome of the final trial of history where Israel and the Nations are judged.

Compare it to two who went before a judge. For a time, we cannot know the outcome ... whoever emerges carrying date fronds in his hands then signals he is the victor. So it is with Israel and the Nations as they pass before the Lord for judgment on the Day of Atonement: For a time, we do not know who is victorious. God told them to take palm fronds in their hands so all can know they were victorious in judgment. Thus did David say: Then shall the trees of the wood sing for joy, before the Lord—*when did this happen?*—when He came to judge the earth *on* the Day of Atonement. (We note the interpolations into 1 Chron 16:33.) So Israel waits another five days so all can know that Israel was victorious. For this reason is it written, "And you shall take for yourselves on the first day" (Lev 23:40).

<sup>4</sup> Beaton, "Messiah and Justice: A Key to Matthew's Use of Isaiah 42:1–4?" (1999), 5–23.

accepted the idea that Jesus was killed because he blasphemed God and disparaged Jewish authorities. Beaton shows how Matthew repeatedly portrays Jesus as one who shows a deep concern for the outcasts who are his followers, while the Pharisees treat with haughty contempt any of their followers who neglect even the minutest of their rules. His work should be read as an introduction to this commentary.

The underlying story of Jesus in the synoptic gospels presents him as someone whose arguments are closely aligned to and in sympathy with Pharisaic teaching as we know them today. It is to a great extent Matthew's skill as a writer that has widened the gulf separating Jew from Christian and further opened the door for enmity and strife between the two.

Jesus finished his preaching at the end of chapter 11, and now, at the opening of chapter 12, he and his disciples are wandering through fields of grain on the Sabbath. The episode leads to controversy. The dialogue in the argument that follows between Jesus and the Pharisees is contrived but the style and content of it are well within the parameters of typical Jewish debate forms. We will keep our eyes open for Matthean additions and interpretations of the controversy as Matthew presents his version of the events that ensue.

We now need to take stock of the setting of the story. According to both Mark and Matthew, Jesus confined his preaching to the Galilee (Mark 1:38, Matt 4:23), while Luke indicates that he preached in Judea as well (Luke 4:43). In chapter 11 Matthew suggests that Jesus preached to the Jews alone and allegedly only about the coming of the kingdom. "Preaching" in Jesus' day (as it still does) meant giving sermons based on biblical texts and oral traditions, the telling of stories and parables, and the reciting of proverbs. Now Jesus, if he really did preach, delivered his sermons in the authorized synagogue style and not like a student-scribe of the Sages of his day (Matt 7:29). And while some in Jesus' day might have been surprised at the Gospels' reported control of the material in his name, we should not be. For had it been otherwise, why would anyone have paid attention to him? Undoubtedly he spoke the same language and used the same methods current with the official synagogue preachers of his day. So while we lack direct evidence for the bulk of his sermons in the synagogue and so can only assume he gave them in the accepted manner of first-century Jewish Sages, we can demonstrate that what we have of his reported legal teachings, generally not concerning the news of the Kingdom, was said in the manner now preserved in the literature of the Rabbis. Those legal teachings are what we shall examine here in their Matthean form.

The Gospels provide us with a number of accounts of debates Jesus purportedly entered into with groups of Pharisees in his day, who complain about his

disregard of the oral laws instituted by Sages throughout the Second Temple period. These laws, while not divinely given, were held to be sacred on account of their antiquity. The Gospels show us a Jesus who, although he respects and honors these laws, is not above educating his critics as to the legal possibility of overriding them when he feels this is warranted.

The structured debates in the rabbinical literature—frequently with “heretics”—followed a specific three part format:

- A. A statement of complaint
- B. A statement of practice (from the opponent’s point of view), analogous to that complained about seeking the opponent’s approval. This justifying practice is phrased as a question: *Do not you also . . .?*
- C. A conclusion, usually argued in an “All the more so in our case” construction: *So we can now both agree that your complaint is groundless.*

This format is apparent in confrontations with “heretics,” as well as between Pharisees and Sadducees. *M. Yad.* 4:6 provides the following example:

- A. The Sadducees said: We object to you, Pharisees, when you say, “The Sacred Scrolls defile the hands but the [profane] Scrolls of *Homoros* do not defile the hands.”
- B. Rabbi Yoḥanan Ben Zakkai said: And why should this be the only complaint against the Pharisees, after all, they [Pharisees] say: the bones of a donkey [Hebrew: *hamor* resonates with *homoros* and both are pure for Pharisees] are inherently pure, but the bones of the High Priest Yoḥanan [beloved of the Sadducees] defile? They [Sadducees] replied to him: According to their preciousness is their defilement determined for otherwise [and God wanted to safeguard against this eventuality] a person may make the bones of his father and mother into spoons.
- C. He [Rabbi Yoḥanan Ben Zakkai] said to them: It is the very same in the case of the Sacred Scrolls. According to their preciousness is their defilement determined [and Pharisees wanted to safeguard against their misuse]. But the Scrolls of *Homoros* are not precious, so they do not defile the hands [and so no one cares how they are treated].

One would not expect reasonable people to state that sacred Scriptures would “defile” the hands that touch them (and so enact legislation that would prevent this). Yet the Pharisees did state this and were challenged by the Sadducees for doing so, as the tradition indicates. Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Zakkai, the chief Pharisee, answered according to the Sadducean method of reasoning, in order

to demonstrate to them their misunderstanding. He pointed out to them that the example of the sacred texts is not the only example in which an esteemed thing causes “defilement.” The analogous example he gives is that of bones. Finally Rabbi Yohanan then uses the Sadducees’ reply to respond to their first claim and says that defilement is also used as a safeguard in the proper handling of books. The Sacred Scrolls deserve special handling; therefore they cause defilement of the hands.

Now let us turn to Matt 12:1–8 (with variants in Mark 2:23–28; Luke 6:1–5):

At that time Jesus went through the grain-fields on the Sabbath; his disciples were hungry and they began to pluck the ears of grain and to eat [rubbing them in their hands (Luke’s version)]. But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, “Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath.” He said to them, “Have you not read what David did, when he was hungry, and those who were with him: how he entered the House of God and ate the Shew Bread, which it was not lawful for him to eat nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? [*Or have you not read in the Law how on the Sabbath the priests in the Temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless? I tell you something greater than the Temple is here, and if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice’*” (Hosea 6:6),<sup>5</sup> *you would not have condemned the guiltless* (Matthew’s version)]. And he said to them, [“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath (Mark’s version alone—2:28)]. For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.”

At this point I declare that everything I have ever said about this passage in previous works about Matthew I now repudiate. In the past, when I have discussed this passage I failed to take into account the rhetoric that guides its structure. I deal here with Matthew’s text since his Gospel is what I comment on in this work, though I suggest here that the other Gospels have omitted what Matthew includes here because they did not understand their sources, just as Matthew did not completely understand them either and even edited them (unless a copyist did it). What strikes one in this passage is the story of the *hungry* disciples allegedly profaning the *Sabbath*. Jesus’ defense of his disciples’ behavior lies in the cumulative effect of two biblical texts. A *hungry* David and his men eating the sacred bread, without condemnation, that was

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<sup>5</sup> In Matthew, Jesus always criticizes the Pharisees for lack of compassion. In mentioning sacrifice, Matthew adds that the Pharisees neglect compassion, but that is not central to the argument here. It is an aside.

not lawful for anyone to eat save priests alone, and priests in the *Temple* desecrating the *Sabbath*, without condemnation. What Jesus suggests here is that hunger can excuse unlawful behavior and that the presence of the Temple can excuse Sabbath desecration. Since Jesus is greater than the Temple, his presence excuses Sabbath desecration that, were he not present, could still not be condemned if hunger is involved.

Commentators have been perplexed by the story in 1 Sam 23:1–5. How could David have eaten the Shew bread? According to an ancient tradition found in *b. Menah.* 96a and *Yalkut Shim'oni* (1 Samuel section 130), David was stricken by a disease brought about by near-starvation and so had no choice but to eat it; that is, had he not eaten the Shew bread he may well have died. There was no other food available for him at this time. It is a principle of Jewish law that to save one's life overrides all laws, including the law which forbids one from eating the bread consecrated for priests alone.

While this answer was sufficient for the Rabbis' understanding of David's action here, how did the Gospel writers understand this story of David eating the bread and how did they relate it to the case of the disciples of Jesus? And where is the “all the more so” argument that gives shape to these kinds of texts? Note what Matthew has Jesus say in 12:12: “How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” The problems inherent in this story of David eating the Shew bread have produced an enormous amount of scholarly speculation. As well, we do not know where the law tells us that priests who profane the Sabbath are to be held blameless. Matthew likely assumed it referred both to the daily sacrifice, and also the special sacrifice performed on the Sabbath, prescribed in Num 29:9–10: “On the Sabbath day you shall offer two unblemished yearling lambs, with their cereal offering, two tenths of an *ephah* of fine flour mixed with oil, and with their libations. Each Sabbath there shall be the Sabbath holocaust in addition to the established holocaust and its libation.” Thus Matthew can cite Hos 6:6 to say that sacrifice is of less importance than mercy, so if sacrifice pushes aside Sabbath guilt, then kindness to the hungry will also.

In fact, only the arguments concerning Sabbath desecration (for sacrifices) in the Temple being blameless or Jesus being greater than sacrifices and the Temple seem to lead somewhere. The story about David being hungry and presumably eating forbidden food may be included here (though this seems a stretch to say), simply to add to the preponderance of evidence to excuse the hungry disciples and was taken on its own to have served as a sufficient argument (as in Mark and Luke). However, being “lord of the Sabbath” does not fit the story of David where there is no mention of the Sabbath in the Gospel account at all; being lord of the Sabbath plausibly fits the story of the Temple

precincts permitting Sabbath desecration. When we hear that Jesus is greater than the Temple, and the Temple exempts priests for Sabbath violations, then it follows that Jesus also is above any laws pertaining to the Sabbath. This fits Matthew's assertion about the Temple priests but nothing in the other Gospel accounts. So I assume Matthew's text is the more complete. I also assume the inclusion of Hos 6:6, in which it is said that mercy trumps sacrifices, is meant as a direct challenge to the Pharisees whom Matthew sees as being obsessed with ritual concerns (the trivia of the Law). However all this may be, I still cannot follow the logic of the arguments. If the story of David's exemption from ritual concerns on account of hunger was the point here, then the Gospels should have said: "Just as David and his men were permitted to eat forbidden food to assuage hunger, so should my disciples." But the argument is never concluded in this way. Of the following account in Matthew we are left to consider this question: "If the priests were enjoined to offer sacrifices on the Sabbath and so prepared and offered burnt offerings, how does this exempt the disciples from plucking grain on the Sabbath who were obviously not commanded to pluck grain on that day?" Furthermore, where does the Law say that the priests who profane the Sabbath in the Temple are blameless? Offering a sacrifice that has been commanded for the Sabbath cannot qualify as profaning the Sabbath. I suspect it is the lack of an answer to this question that accounted for the statement being dropped in the source followed by both Mark and Luke. The whole passage in Matthew remains an enigma that requires some technical elucidation.

Let us briefly examine the synoptic use of Jesus' saying "have you not read" introduction for polemic purposes to refute accusations of wrongdoing. He says it three times in Matthew, three times in Mark, and once in Luke. It always comes to produce a counterexample, as if introducing some kind of sermon based on scriptures to establish the divine law. It occurs twice in Matthew 12 (vv. 3 and 5); once at 19:4, to forbid divorce; and at 22:31, to establish the doctrine of resurrection. It also occurs in Mark 12:10 to establish his authority, Mark 2:25 to speak of David's eating Shew bread, Mark 12:26 to establish the doctrine of resurrection, and in Luke 6:3 to speak of David's eating Shew bread. However, only in our passage is it used to excuse a one-time infraction of a commandment. Further, in Matt 12:11 the analogous question begins, "Which person among you . . . will not lay hold of it and lift it out?"<sup>6</sup> In other words, in this case we get a clear argument based on a practical analogy and not an exegesis or sermon. Furthermore, in Matthew 12 no biblical

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6 These expressions translate the Hebrew *NTL*—"seize and raise (lift)"—which is the scribal transgression of handling certain items like animals on the Sabbath.

text is cited verbatim which breaks the set form of the other usages. I draw no conclusions from these observations except to say that we either have a highly contrived unit or else a badly garbled rendition of something that once made sense.

We might have to be satisfied that the argument is purely sarcastic rhetoric using the argument from analogous case which is the standard form to argue these complaint debates. "Leave me alone and better complain about David and Temple priests!" On the other hand, the double argument (from the actions of both David and the priests in the Temple) suggests that there were two different traditions concerning what Jesus answered here. If so, the final saying of Jesus here is truly enigmatic: "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath." What does this mean here?

I suspect we have a complicated development in the tradition. Since it is unlikely that we are to think of the disciples as thieves, I assume the Gospel story originally envisioned them eating what has been "left for the poor" as Lev 19:9–10 prescribes:

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not be so thorough that you reap the field to its very edge, nor shall you glean the stray ears of grain. Likewise, you shall not pick your vineyard bare, nor gather up the grapes that have fallen. These things you shall leave for the poor and the alien. I, the Lord, am your God.

Some Pharisees wonder how they could dare profane the Sabbath by plucking the grain left for the poor. Jesus reminds them about David's hunger. A more sophisticated argument ensues and this time it is in proper form and to the point. The argument concerns Sabbath rules that did not apply in the Temple. Neither argument really addresses hunger on the Sabbath, though together on the surface they seem to. The second argument is very sophisticated and seems to be original since all Gospels contain a line that is relevant to it alone.

Let us try to imagine what the objection in the Gospel might be. It might be that the disciples have contravened the Law of God and Jesus seeks to exonerate them. I have no doubt that this is how the Gospel writers understood their sources. But there is another possibility, which is that it is the Pharisaic law that has been contravened and not God's Law. In my opinion, every case in Matthew where the Pharisees accuse Jesus and his disciples of Sabbath infringement concerns Pharisaic or scribal laws but not biblical rules as such. If this is so, then we must understand the tradition behind Matthew 12 to have read: "Do you *not know* [rather than "not read"] how the priests in the Temple

profane the Sabbath<sup>7</sup> and are blameless..." In joining the Temple pericope to the tradition concerning David the editor repeated the words "have you not read" from the David introduction to introduce the Temple tradition and against all logic stretched them into the next argument. If this was the case, then Matt 12:5–8, concerning Pharisaic law and not biblical law, is entirely consistent with Matt 12:10–12: a question of soliciting agreement on a contemporary practice that seems to break the scribal prohibitions (do not you rescue animals on the Sabbath?/ i.e. may not one rescue animals on the Sabbath?) and then using an "all the more so" argument (are not people more valuable than animals?) that addresses the issue at hand.

So far so good. Now for the particulars. Nowhere does the Law state that priests who profane the Sabbath in the Temple are blameless. The argument, when phrased as in the way that it is—"Do you not know how on the Sabbath the priests in the Temple profane the Sabbath<sup>8</sup> and are guiltless?"—corresponds to a known rule. Priests may profane scribal laws (*shevut*) in the Temple on the Sabbath, since they will keep watch on one another and fear the sanctity of the Sabbath. They will be therefore mindful in this holy setting not to infringe biblical rules—and if they mindlessly do slip the priests there will stop them. So the disciples may all the more profane scribal law as it pertains to the Sabbath when need be since they are in the presence of the Son of Man, the fear of whose watchfulness is even greater than what priests experienced in the Temple. No other Gospel argues from this premise, and it seems likely that Matthew's version is a parallel to the widespread Gospel tradition: "Have you not read [in Scripture] what David did . . . ?" and attempts to explain the meaning of the passage concerning David, albeit weakly.

When people pluck grain on the Sabbath, then push out the kernel of wheat, which is an unusual way of harvesting (normally wheat is harvested in large amounts with a sickle), they do not violate any biblical laws that pertain to the Sabbath.<sup>9</sup> However the Scribes, in order to protect the spirit of Mosaic

<sup>7</sup> That is, "*mehallelim et hašabat*," desecrating the Sabbath according either to biblical law or Pharisaic law. "Blameless" here means from the usual recriminations administered for transgressing the Sabbath rules of the Sages.

<sup>8</sup> Priests did not have to keep all the customary Sabbath rules of *shevut* in the Temple to safeguard against infractions of biblical Sabbath law. The fear and reverence of Temple priests within the confines of the Temple precincts guarded them from taking laxities there.

<sup>9</sup> See *b. Šabb.* 128a. In Mark we must assume that the text reads "plucking" and "rubbing" of the kernels to show the kernels were hard and taken from the field in an *ad hoc* way. See *t. Šabb.* 14:12 which permits *kotem* and *molel*, plucking and rubbing. The idea here is more the idea

laws, banned “abnormal” Sabbath acts which were biblically permissible. Ears of grain were not normally plucked from the fields one by one, as opposed to the more common harvesting and threshing methods in use at the time. *B. Šabb.* 103a<sup>10</sup> records a very early tradition that specifies the types of plants that are forbidden by biblical law to be plucked (by hand) and ears of grain are not mentioned (since they are normally harvested with a sickle).

Deuteronomy 23:26 specifically mentions an unusual method of plucking off the tops of the wheat to get to the kernels by hand when eating in another’s field, without reaping and threshing. The activity in this New Testament passage depicts this unusual method, which was not forbidden by biblical law. Another source, *b. Beṣah* 13b, contains examples of the rabbinic rules of *shinui* (change from regular manner) to show specifically that rubbing kernels of ripened grain to eat was unusual (as we find in Luke’s version). It was not considered to be a biblical prohibition in regards to the Sabbath. It follows that what is described in the Gospels would be forbidden by a scribal prohibition but not by a biblical one. Therefore room for leniency might be found, as the Scribes often left loopholes in their rulings, allowing for various circumstances under which their rulings would not necessarily apply. If there were reason to know that particular circumstances would have prevented the disciples from actually profaning the Sabbath while they were engaged in separating the sheaves or kernels, then they acted blamelessly.<sup>11</sup>

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of plucking out the kernel from the ear and then rubbing it, which might be the idea in Luke (rather than uprooting the whole ear of grain as might be suggested in the other versions).

- 10 Compare *t. Šabb.* 9:14–16.
- 11 To fully appreciate the point one needs to know that the law of the Sages is divided into two areas—infractions that in themselves can lead to physical or moral harm and infractions that protect people from getting involved in harmful physical or moral activities. While driving across a street against a red light might be dangerous, police officers may ticket drivers proceeding through yellow lights although they are in no real danger in doing so. Likewise safety margins on job sites and building codes must be observed even if these in and of themselves would not matter if ignored. At certain times these safeguard measures might be suspended if the need were pressing. Pharisaic law introduced safety legislation into Sabbath laws that were intended simply as safety measures but in and of themselves when transgressed are not subject to the penalties of real Sabbath violations. The rabbinic category for these safety infractions was “*patur aval assur*” (exempt from Sabbath law punishment but nevertheless forbidden by rabbinic decree). When some people saw Jesus and his disciples relaxing the safety measures they queried Jesus for his reasons and he supplied them.

Let us review the details of the above argument. Matthew's invoking of Hos 6:6 as antithetical to Temple sacrifice shows us how he has manipulated his source. He purposely confuses the Sabbath sacrifices prescribed by the Torah with his source's reference to certain scribal rules called "*shevut*," which indeed were suspended in the Temple.<sup>12</sup> In this way he again introduces the notion that the Pharisees neglect mercy and are obsessed with rituals that God abhors. The real force of his source is to show the point that the Scribes assumed the Temple authorities would be careful that no biblical rules would be infringed.<sup>13</sup> So this example shows that scribal laws can indeed be infringed where there is watchfulness (the awe of the Temple itself provides such). In Matthew's original source, it seems most likely, Jesus argues that the Son of Man is greater than the Temple, which must mean his own presence provides more watchfulness than the presence of Temple authorities in the Temple would. Thus, the *scribal infringement* would not apply in this case had it happened in the Temple. Plucking by hand and rolling out the kernel was a "*shevut*" (since it was so unproductive and unusual a way to prepare the grain for consumption) purely of a scribal nature. Just as the Temple safeguarded the Sabbath, so the Son of Man did so and he might be called "the lord of Sabbath" who ensured that every law pertaining to it was observed to the last detail.

This saying of Jesus here in Matthew makes sense in terms of the idea that Temple priests were not bound by scribal rules while in the Temple. Why David's consumption of the sacred bread argues in favor of the disciples plucking grain requires some analysis. To end that passage by saying the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath makes no sense if it is to be the conclusion of an argument based on David transgressing a biblical Levitical law by eating sacred loaves at the sanctuary in Nob. In and of itself that cannot be the argument. The Gospel's use of David's eating of bread in Nob is truly baffling. Making matters even more confusing, all the synoptic traditions invoke this argument, so it cannot be easily dismissed as extraneous or irrelevant. Let us examine the details and speculate upon them.

According to an ancient tradition, found in *b. Menah.* 96a and *Yalkut Sim'oni* (1 Samuel section 130), David was stricken by a disease brought about by starvation. He ate the consecrated bread because he would have died had he not eaten it. There was no other food available to him at that time. The Jewish tradition cites the story of David to justify the general principle that only the possibility of saving a life can override the Sabbath laws. This applied to David

<sup>12</sup> David Hill has noted that Matthew has edited this passage. See his "On the Use and Meaning of Hosea 6:6 in Matthew's Gospel" (1978), 107–119.

<sup>13</sup> See *b. Beṣah* 11b and *Šabb.* 20a.

under these specific circumstances, but the Gospels never claim that the disciples were on the verge of starving to death when they transgressed. So what has this story in 1 Samuel to do with the question of permitting scribal Sabbath laws to be broken which is what the lord of the Sabbath would allow: proper supervision safeguarding divine law can over-ride scribal Sabbath enactments? I am inclined to leave this Gospel answer as one of rhetoric quite divorced from any Sabbath considerations—even biblical law can be pushed aside if need be so why quibble about human enactments? The pericope is not rooted in any legal setting with regard to the Sabbath since it strains all legal argumentation. It simply tells us God's laws are based on mercy which override even cultic regulations when warranted.

Still, it is not clear in Matthew whether the Pharisees who engaged with Jesus are satisfied with the argument Jesus gives them that no real Sabbath desecrations would occur.<sup>14</sup> They have been assured by the type of argument that the infringement is of a scribal nature and that there was supervision to see that no biblical laws were violated. Again, there would be little warrant here for any condemnation save that the Pharisees would not have accepted Jesus' claim that his presence would guarantee no laws would be broken. Similarly, *b. Šabb.* 29b refers to the upper chamber of the house of Nithza in Lod (noted in many places, e.g., *b. Sanh.* 74a) as the place where the Supreme Court of elders decided many problematic issues. Here the elders did not protest Rabbi Yehudah's trespass of a rabbinic enactment as the Sabbath approached. The circumstances somehow obviated the law. In his commentary to *m. Šabb.* chapter 2, Maimonides explains that the Sages of the Court who met here were alert, watchful, and vigilant so as to guarantee no biblical laws would be broken in those Sabbath sessions (probably lectures), which were held under their auspices in this particular place.<sup>15</sup> Therefore the reason for the enactment (i.e.,

<sup>14</sup> The Gospel is useful here in providing the scribal thinking behind “eyn shevut bamikdash” and “kohanim zrizim hem,” which are principles applied by later authorities to early laws. The Gospel evidence shows the aptness of these applications.

<sup>15</sup> It is unlikely that the idea of permitting laxity in that place was the invention of the Talmud's editors. The whole idea of such laxity runs counter to the thrust of Talmudic civilization and proves embarrassing in its permissive attitudes. The very next line in the Talmud criticizes the elders in the upper chamber for remaining silent in the face of one taking liberties with scribal laws. Rabbi Moses Feinstein, in his *Dibrot Moshe* commentary to *b. Šabb.* 29b, cannot accept the words as given in the Talmud without his positing very unlikely circumstances to account for the permissive attitude. The oddity attests to its originality. No one would invent it. It likely reflects actual ancient scribal notions concerning relaxing nonbiblical legislation. It seems obvious that the scribes, open to the accusation that they were hypocrites by enacting rules and then exempting themselves,

suspected negligence) did not apply and the Sages said nothing about the laxity they witnessed.<sup>16</sup> In short, there is nothing at all to learn from these Jesus/Pharisee debates, if seen out of their later literary contexts. Originally they might have been preserved to show Jesus' mastery of Jewish law and humane application of it. About which cases of healing the majority of Sages in the first century CE would have ruled leniently and which ones they would have ruled stringently is a matter of speculation, since the rabbinic evidence shows a variety of approaches where there is no danger to life or limb and not too much pain.

Whether or not the laying on of hands was considered medicinal or not also seems to have been an issue, but this constituted no more than a *shevut* category of infringement. At any rate, the cases the synoptics report that Jesus used as the point of departure for his arguments are confirmed as consonant with scribal law, and it may well be that his arguments would have been acceptable for him, but probably not endorsed, given the wide latitude that was available for dealing with scribal enactments. No divine laws, written or oral, were threatened by the kinds of faith healings that Jesus was said to have performed. There could be little cause for unhappiness with these approaches.<sup>17</sup> The Gospels present a Jesus whose vocabulary and reasoning in these passages and whose knowledge of technical laws devised by Rabbis to enhance the observance of the Sabbath match the systematic workings peculiar to rabbinic Sabbath law in minute detail. So it appears that we have traces of traditions that intended to highlight his fulfilling the minute details of laws that his interlocutors had overlooked. But in the end these traces dissolve in the overwhelming hostility of the Gospels' anti-Jewish stance so evident in chapter 11.

We can now look at the next passages in chapter 12, which illustrate the same Jewish A-B-C debate form we noted above.

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would have later abolished this questionable practice. But the vestiges of such exemptions (in places of vigilant authority) are preserved in the Talmudic version of the Tosefta and in the Gospels.

<sup>16</sup> This passage is similar to *t. Šabb.* chap. 2, which, however, lacks mention of the vigilance of the court. The Tosefta may be an edited version since the old idea that rabbinic rulings might in some cases be suspended is nowhere else to be found except here. The language of the Palestinian teaching in the Talmud is also suspect as it utilizes Babylonian Aramaic. The reading in the commentary of Rabbi Hannanel is superior and it is likely that there was some such teaching in early times which fell out of the Tosefta. Similarly we find cases where certain rabbinic laws are suspended both for priests since they are diligent, and also among the groups at Passover sacrificial meals where people are watchful. We note certain rabbinic laws may be suspended in these cases but never biblical laws.

<sup>17</sup> Especially since he administered no medicines or herbs.

Matthew 12:10–12 (Luke 14:3–5):

- A. *Looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, they asked him: “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?”* (v. 10)
- B. *He said to them, “If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out?”* (v. 11)
- C. *How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.* (v. 12)

The earliest extant specific teachings concerning an animal stuck in a pit on the Sabbath<sup>18</sup> are found in the Damascus Document<sup>19</sup> and may well relate to the problem humanely addressed by scribal decrees that are found in the Tosefta. The Tosefta says that if an animal falls into a pit from which it cannot get out on its own but in which there is water, one should feed it food while it is in there but not extricate it (*t. Šabb. 14:3*). The Babylonian *Amora'im* (masters of Mishnah in the rabbinic academies) thought that this meant if the animal could stay comfortably in the pit, then one should feed it there, but if it would cause the animal pain to be left there, then it could be removed even though this would entail infringing upon a minor scribal decree.<sup>20</sup> The Babylonians apparently followed the reasoning that any animal in pain had to be relieved of it by Torah decree, and this Torah injunction could override some scribal prohibitions of the Sabbath.<sup>21</sup> Although we have no tannaitic statements like this, the force of Babylonian Amoraic tradition is borne out by the New Testament. The practice of alleviating the pain for animals trapped in pits dates to Second Temple times, although written Jewish sources attest to it relatively late.

With regard to scribal tradition, the Mishnah and Tosefta record many Sabbath rulings that were prohibited by Scribes but not considered prohibited by Torah law. The Tosefta discusses the origins of scribal *muktzeḥ* prohibitions.<sup>22</sup> Since these types of decrees discuss Temple practices, the firm Palestinian and Babylonian traditions claiming these decrees date to Second Temple times are

<sup>18</sup> Aside from New Testament sources.

<sup>19</sup> CD 11:13. The point seems to be that it is forbidden to extricate the animal on the Sabbath but we do not know the parameters governing this law.

<sup>20</sup> See *b. Šabb.* 128b.

<sup>21</sup> See *b. B. Meši'a* 32b. Exod 23:5 states concerning an animal in distress, “You shall surely help.”

<sup>22</sup> That is, utensils scribally forbidden to be handled on the Sabbath. *T. Šabb.* 14:1 is discussed in *b. Šabb.* 123b, which mentions that both the Palestinian and Babylonian authorities dated the laws of *muktzeḥ* back to Second Temple times.

warranted. These laws are manmade, and each of them had a rationale and a hierarchy of importance in the total scheme of things, for example, to protect people from mistakenly transgressing biblical laws. Certain urgent priorities can override scribal rules in certain circumstances. These rules were circulated and practiced but not frequently discussed.<sup>23</sup> New Testament writings, such as the expression found in Matt 12:11—“seizing and lifting”—would seem to confirm the impression of the antiquity of these laws.<sup>24</sup>

Scribal law was accorded deep respect and not easily disregarded. Thus even when certain rules were overridden, they were overridden in ways commensurate with scribal priorities. Relax this minor law rather than another. The principal reasons adduced by the majority of authorities to suspend scribal laws forbidding either the lifting and/or moving of animals or non-prepared utensils were for the sake of enabling important good deeds such as Sabbath Torah study, Sabbath hospitality, easing pain to animals, calming people about loss of belongings.

Animals are categorized as “non-Sabbath items” and thus are not to be moved on that day.<sup>25</sup> Since the New Testament uses the expression “lay hold of and lift,” we see the problem is one of scribal *muktze*—“animals are not set aside for Sabbath use”—and so must not be taken and lifted. The Scribes prescribed that *muktze* items are not to be taken and lifted. In the need to justify a teaching, the Babylonian Talmud reveals there could be a rule of *hefsed meruba* (substantial loss).<sup>26</sup> The Talmud posited that if something was of small value it could not be rescued by overriding scribal law.<sup>27</sup> This is said to be the idea behind *m. Šabb.* 24:1. We now infer that where something was of great value it could be rescued and, if necessary, even at the expense of scribal law.<sup>28</sup> But that is not the issue at hand in Matthew. The passages dealing with alleviating the pain of an animal can be found in *b. Šabb.* 128b and this is the sole issue. That scribal prohibitions are overridden in cases of doing important good deeds is discussed in *m. Šabb.* 18:1 and the commentaries of the Talmuds on it. Jesus is not saying anything very radical here.

<sup>23</sup> This “public silence” as to when rabbinic law might be mitigated was justified on the basis that divine honor was at stake. See *b. Šabb.* 153a.

<sup>24</sup> The prohibition of *muktze* is that of seizing and lifting (“*tiltul*”) objects which are in categories that preclude normal handling on the Sabbath.

<sup>25</sup> See *b. Šabb.* 128b and *t. Šabb.* 15:1.

<sup>26</sup> Permission to override scribal Sabbath laws with regard to an object is of great value to its owner.

<sup>27</sup> See *b. Šabb.* 154b.

<sup>28</sup> See *b. Šabb.* 153a.

We must point out that the alleviating of pain for animals is a most complicated issue.<sup>29</sup> There were two schools of thought on the matter and the first two *Amoraim* (teachers of Mishnah, ca. 215 CE) offered different opinions. Shmuel held the more lenient view and Rav the stricter view. Both agreed that severe pain had to be alleviated, but even in doing so measures to protect rabbinic laws had to be reasonably enforced. The two rabbis differed sharply on how to apply these principles. It is correct to state that scribal laws are worked out for animals in fine detail in the fifth chapter of *m. Šabb.* If need be, there would be no reason not to extend these very leniencies to humans. However, the Rabbis had traditions more direct than arguing from rules concerning animals to permit various categories of healing on the Sabbath. It might well be that the questioners of Jesus (as reported in the Gospels) were not aware of the full range of possibilities within the scribal legal framework. At any rate, it should not be thought that arguments stated in the Talmuds were unknown before the Talmudic period. The Gospels, like those under present discussion, show us that at least some arguments found in the Talmuds do predate the Talmuds, since they evidence the same differences of opinion. In general, we find that the rules that the Gospels report Jesus puts forth as the basis of his arguments are known from rabbinic literature. Quite often, the specific arguments in the Gospels (based on well-known data) seem unique to Jesus. The arguments are sufficient but usually unnecessary to establish the leniency. The Rabbis in many cases had used more specific arguments to make the same points.

Jesus' argument with the Pharisees in the synoptic healing passages may best be seen as assuming the tenets of scribal law. For Matthew, if Jesus does not accept scribal law, he will not convince his opponents and also the rhetorical features of these passages will make no sense. So Jesus argues from scribal premises. The question put to Jesus is: In cases where there is no immediate threat to health and no immediate unbearable pain, how can you permit healing? The accusation against Jesus' healing on the Sabbath must be in the light of scribal law. The Scribes forbade elective healing, lest one think one could pound herbs and drugs to cure a person *whose life or limb or organ is in no danger* and came eventually to permit "grinding herbs" in such cases (which were considered biblical prohibitions).<sup>30</sup> To cure a sick person *whose life or limb or organ may be in danger* is not only permissible on the Sabbath but mandatory.

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<sup>29</sup> See *b. Šabb.* 53a.

<sup>30</sup> See *b. Šabb.* 53b and 108b. This is spelled out clearly in Luke 13:14 where a woman was crippled for eighteen years here and the healer is told to come back on a weekday and

In every case, Jesus permits the overriding of Sabbath laws by using the *a fortiori* hermeneutic operation of “*qal veḥomer*.” In Matthew and Luke this generally means, “You permit forbidden things in cases of animals, so all the more so you are to permit forbidden things in cases of humans.”

For Matthew, these exchanges with the Pharisees lead further into the story of conflict between Jesus and the Jewish teachers of his day. Below, in verse 19, we find another of Matthew’s fulfillment scriptures and again from the Book of Isaiah. But it is not he who will fulfill the text but those who will keep his secret of who he is. Jesus simply warns them to be quiet. The Isaiah text begins by suggesting the Gentiles will be judged and at the end notes that they will emerge victorious. The Gentiles gain salvation through the name of the servant.

The narrative proceeds, hinged on the wrath of the Pharisees and the mercy of Jesus toward his followers. This hinge heightens our grasp of the biased understanding of the legal issues that Matthew brings to interpret the debate scenes.

- 14. But the Pharisees plotted against him, how they might destroy him.
- 15. Jesus, knowing this, departed from there, and many crowds followed him, and he healed all of them,
- 16. And he warned them not to expose him,
- 17. So that what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled:
- 18. *“Look, my servant whom I chose; my beloved in whom my soul is pleased. I shall place my spirit upon him, and he will proclaim a judgment for the nations.”*<sup>31</sup>
- 19. *“He will not quarrel nor will he cry out, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets.”*<sup>32</sup>
- 20. *“A crushed reed he will not break, nor extinguish a smoking wick, until he brings the judgment to victory.”*<sup>33</sup>
- 21. *“And in his name, the nations will hope.”*<sup>34</sup>

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do the cure. The condition was not worsening and presumably the pain was by this time quite habitual and not severely felt.

<sup>31</sup> LXX Isa 42:1 “Jacob, my child, I shall help him; Israel, my chosen. My soul has received him; I have laid my spirit upon him, he will carry out a judgment for the nations.”

<sup>32</sup> LXX Isa 42:2: “His voice will not cry out, nor lift up, nor be heard outside.”

<sup>33</sup> LXX Isa 42:3: “A broken reed he will not crush, and a burning wick he will not extinguish, but he will carry the judgment to the truth.”

<sup>34</sup> LXX Isa 42:4: “He will shine brightly, and not be oppressed, until he puts a judgment upon the earth, and upon his name the nations will have hope.”

As the rest of the chapter and the Gospel follow suit, I would dub this chapter “A study in dualism,” for in it the world is divided in two: Jesus and his followers and the Gentiles who do good things, Satan and everyone else who do evil. Two articles need be mentioned here. The first is “The Gentile Bias in Matthew” by Kenneth Clark. Clark argues that Matthew at all times consults a Greek Bible which is like our LXX. It differs from it in some instances where it has been corrected against a Hebrew text which better approximates our Masoretic Text. Clark argues that Matthew was rather ignorant of Hebrew and his facility with biblical texts was no greater than many gentile Christian biblical scholars of his day who used Greek texts. The evidence for this assertion is moderately persuasive but until we find such Greek texts I remain skeptical that Matthew knew no Hebrew, although I do think he was Gentile. Clark, as have many others, finds many Cynic motifs in Matthew, although I am inclined to account a portion of these to Christian Gnostic motifs. As for Matthew’s dismissal of Jews as being doomed and having their promise of final salvation transferred to the Gentiles, he cites 8:12, 12:21, 21:34, 21:43, 22:1–14, 25:31–46. Furthermore, Matthew’s real “Christ-of-faith messiah” is not the just the humanoid “son of David (son of Abraham) messiah,” as shown from birth to death, but in the end is revealed as the divinoid “Son of Man” figure.<sup>35</sup> As for the gentile membership of Matthew’s church, he shows us 23:37–39 and 24:45. He mistakenly points out how Matthew mocks Jewish *tefillin* mentioned in 23:5 using the Greek *phylakterion* (pagan good-luck charms) and in general mentions hardly any Hebrew or Aramaic terms even where Mark or Luke do. The article mirrors many of my own thoughts concerning the gentile identity of Matthew. Nevertheless, as I said, he is wrong about Matthew’s usage of *phylakterion*. Jews could also refer to them by the term *qameia* (amulet). Rabbis (*y. Ber.* 2:3 and its variants elsewhere) noted some hypocrites donned their fringed cloak and phylacteries to pretend to be pious and defraud the gullible. The Rabbis complained, “Why do they [the masses] treat them [*tefillin*] laxly? Because of the hypocrites.”<sup>36</sup>

The second article that should be mentioned is Maarten J.J. Menken’s “The Quotation from Isaiah 42:1–4 In Matthew 12:18–21: Its Textual Form.” In this

<sup>35</sup> See Matt 22:41–46: While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, saying, “What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?” They said to him, “The son of David.” He said to them, “How then does David by the Spirit call him ‘Lord,’ saying, ‘The Lord said unto my Lord, “Sit on my right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool”?’ If David then calls him ‘Lord,’ how is he his son?” And no man was able to answer him a word, neither dared any man from that day on to ask him any more questions.

<sup>36</sup> See Jeffrey H. Tigay, “On the Term ‘Phylacteries’ (Matt 23:5)” (1979), 45–53.

article Menken also argues for Matthew using a revised LXX and himself introducing very minute changes to his text for the sake of smoothing out or sharpening a point. All Matthew's quotations seem to come from the same type of pre-Matthean Greek Bible. The citation from Isaiah in this chapter addresses the Pharisees' plot to destroy Jesus, his silence, his healings, and his command that his miracles be kept secret. Right now Jesus' identity must be kept secret. His death and resurrection stand at the center of the meaning of this Gospel to the Gentiles who will experience his justice, as the Pharisees will get their just end. The citation from Isaiah is cited with an omission that is incompatible with the passion and death and what is to be realized then. The main point of interest to us in this article will be discussed in the comments to 12:21. The LXX followed by Matthew gives us "the Gentiles who will hope in his name." Clearly LXX is referring to God's name while Matthew likely understands the reference to be to Jesus' name. Yet all Hebrew texts have "hope for his Torah." The issue will be taken up in the commentary proper.

### Commentary

*At that time, Jesus went on the Sabbath through the fields of grain. His students were hungry and began to pick the ears of grain and eat. (v. 1)*

Presumably Jesus has finished teaching his Sabbath lesson but no one has provided him or his students with food for the day. It is difficult to see how this could have happened since Jesus should have had the foresight to prepare food for himself and his students for the Sabbath, or at least to have arranged for himself and them to be guests at a Sabbath meal, as was the rule (*m. Pe'ah* 8:7). How it happens that Jesus is out of the city and walking in the fields is also somewhat puzzling. Since it is doubtful the disciples were stealing the grain, one must assume they were taking part of the grain harvest the Torah commanded be left in the field for the poor (Lev 19:9–10). On the other hand, it is possible the Gospels tradition considered these fields to be ownerless.

*The Pharisees who saw it said to him, "Look, your students are doing what is not permitted to do on the Sabbath." (v. 2)*

The Pharisees are not being confrontational here but simply drawing Jesus' attention to the actions of his disciples. The Pharisees are presuming that Jesus would be concerned enough about what his disciples are doing to tell them to

stop doing it. If the Pharisees had been interested in creating trouble for Jesus they could have done so; as witnesses to the Sabbath violation his disciples were committing, they could have issued a sterner warning. Penalties for flagrant Sabbath violation were fairly severe, as the violation was understood to be a denial of God.

*He said to them, Have you not read what David did when he and those with him were hungry? How he entered the house of God and they ate the bread of the offering, which was not permitted for him to eat, nor those with him, but only for the Priests? (vv. 3–4)*

On the surface the argument here is preposterous, for with it one could justify every violation of the Law. The Pharisees would not have been impressed with such an argument; the Gospel authors, and Jesus himself, if he actually said it, would have been mocked for it, as I have discussed in the introduction to this chapter.

*Or have you not read in the Law that on Sabbath, the Priests in the Temple profane the Sabbath and are blameless? (v. 5)*

The words “have you not read in the Law” may have been original to Matthew’s source, or he may have inserted them here to serve as a literary parallel to the “Have you not read what David did?” preceding it. Given what Jesus says next, it would seem that he is not talking here about prohibitions spoken of in the Law, but rather safeguards instituted by the Scribes that prohibited certain activities that might lead to actual Sabbath violations. In light of the centrality of the Temple and its rituals, it is certain that the priests would have taken extra care in their handling of the prescribed sacrifices on the Sabbath (Num 28:9–10), for which reason the scribal laws pertaining to these matters would have been set aside for them. Thus what Jesus says next makes perfect sense.

*I say to you, something greater than the Temple is here. (v. 6)*

Because the Son of Man is even greater than the Temple, scribal laws that can be set aside in the Temple can also, of course, be set aside in his presence.

*If you had known what it means to say, ‘I want mercy and not sacrifice’ [Hos 6:6], you would not have condemned the blameless. (v. 7)*

Matthew seems to have misunderstood the argument in his source. He assumed that the priests (v. 5) were said to be blameless on the Sabbath because they were performing the Sabbath sacrifices, which God had commanded them to do. So he compares sacrifice to Sabbath and mercy to eating. Hence Jesus' disciples, as he understood it, who took food to eat in a way that is in violation of the Sabbath, should likewise be considered blameless.

Matthew has separated verse 6 from verse 8, which together comprise a complete thought, with an interpolation that acts as a kind of footnote to the argument in his sources. Interpolations such as these function as footnotes in rabbinic literature as well.

*For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath. (v. 8)*

Likely “Lord of the Sabbath” means something like “guardian of the Sabbath” (in Heb., *ba'al/adon ha-shabbat*). By his presence, Jesus guards the Sabbath as though it were an extension of himself. That Jesus is “guardian of the Sabbath” does not mean that he is free to place himself above the Sabbath, but rather that as a divine figure he is the one in charge of Sabbath observance.

*Having departed from there, he went into their assembly. (v. 9)*

Jesus returns to the synagogue, within the Jewish community of the Pharisees.

*And look, there was a man with a withered hand. They asked him, “Is it permitted to heal on Sabbath?” so that they might have some grounds to accuse him. (v. 10)*

By giving us the motive for the question the Pharisees ask Jesus, Matthew makes clear the Pharisees are enemies of Jesus. In a close parallel in Luke (14:3–6) it is Jesus who asks the Pharisees a question.

*He said to them, “Which person from among you who has a [single] sheep, would not grasp it and lift it out, should it fall into a pit on the Sabbath? (v. 11)*

The point here is not that the act of rescuing a sheep in distress on the Sabbath is forbidden, as non-Pharisee texts found at Qumran and the Cairo Geniza suggest (CD 11:13), but that one would rescue it anyway. It may originally have been that, as abiders and arbiters of the Law, the Pharisees would follow the

more prevalent teaching that permits the rescue of an animal on the Sabbath if, and only if, it is in distress (*b. Šabb.* 128b; *t. Šabb.* 15:1). “Grasp and lift” (in Heb., *tiltul*) is the twofold act referred to in the scribal prohibition. Biblical law has nothing to say about rescuing or not rescuing a sheep on the Sabbath. According to the Talmud, when an animal is in distress on the Sabbath one may rescue it, but must do so in a prescribed way; even though the ruling of the Sages is recalled through this way, their restriction is set aside. Apart from the rhetoric of the Gospel, the words of Jesus and Talmudic teaching are compatible.

*Now, how greatly does a human being surpass a sheep! So it is permitted to do good on the Sabbath. (v. 12)*

I have already dealt with the pertinent issues found here in the introduction to this chapter. The “all the more so” argument is standard in these debate forms.

*Then he said to the man, “Extend your hand.” He extended it, and it was restored, healthy as the other one. (v. 13)*

Satisfied with the argument and presumably his critics are as well, Jesus is now said to have wholly cured the man’s hand.

*But the Pharisees going out, plotted against him, how they might destroy him. (v. 14)*

Here again we have reference to a plot to destroy Jesus. The plot to destroy Jesus stands at the center of Matthew’s focus on issues of conflict, or of duality, in this unit: Jesus against the Pharisees, Gentiles against the Jews, Jesus against the Satan, Jesus’ followers against his non-followers, trees bearing good fruit against trees bearing bad fruit.

*Jesus, knowing this, departed from there, and many crowds followed him, and he healed all of them, and he warned them not to expose him, so that what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled. (vv. 15–17)*

Matthew makes use of a fulfillment text from Isaiah (42:2) unique to his Gospel. Jesus warns the crowds he has healed that they must remain silent and keep his secret; this warning fulfills the text. They may say nothing, about the deeds

they have seen him do. This text from Isaiah is enigmatic. Matthew must have understood the text as a precondition for Isa 42:4, which concerns the hope of salvation for the Gentiles.

Generally fulfillment of these texts in Matthew, as I have argued earlier, depends upon an almost hyper-literal reading of them. Here we see that for this text from Isaiah (42:2) to be fulfilled by others, Jesus must ensure his voice and actions are not the subjects of public declarations. Jesus will perform his deeds as softly as the sound a reed makes when it breaks, or a wick makes when it smolders. That is, what Jesus is saying here is that he can only perform miracles so long as his true identity remains concealed.

*Look, my servant/son<sup>37</sup> whom I have chosen; my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my spirit upon him, and he will proclaim judgment/justice to the Gentiles.* (Isa 42:1). (v. 18)

The choice here of “Gentiles” to translate the word *ethnesin* in the text, instead of the alternative “nations” (the two terms were essentially synonymous in the first century), has been guided by my sense of the anti-Jewish tone of the chapter. The RSV also has “Gentiles” here.

Twice elsewhere in his Gospels Matthew cites Isa 42:1, although in neither of these other cases does he use it as a fulfillment proof-text. Rather in these other cases Matthew says of it that it is a direct word from God, to mark either Jesus’ initiation into “sonship” at the Baptism (Matt 3:17), or to mark his graduation into “divine partnership” at the Transfiguration (Matt 17:5).<sup>38</sup> Matthew uses Isa 42:1–2 here as a fulfillment text of a kind (Jesus is to fulfill Isa 42:1; as for Isa 42:2, see v. 19, he acts in such a way that others will fulfill it too), but he also continues to quote from Isaiah 42 as far as verse 4. This is for polemical reasons rather than for the sake of including the full fulfillment proof-text itself, which requires him to quote only as far as Isa 42:3.

*He will not wrangle or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets* (Isa 42:2). (v. 19)

Jesus wants the reports of his miracles to be silenced. “He” and “his voice” in this text, as I say, are somewhat strained to refer to his own actions as well as

<sup>37</sup> “Son” is undoubtedly the meaning Matthew is thinking of if he is using a Greek text here. But a slave was also a “son” to his master.

<sup>38</sup> For more on this, see Beaton, *Isaiah’s Christ in Matthew’s Gospels* (2002). This work is devoted to the citations of Isa 42:1–4 in Matthew.

his audience's compliance. Perhaps it is best to see the fulfillment of the verse in Jesus warning the crowds not to broadcast reports of his miracles in public. Elsewhere in the text the pronouns and pronominal adjectives are all understood to refer to Jesus himself. That is, if Matthew really intends to break up this text here and refer the fulfillment solely to his audience, would he not have done it in a clearer way? In Isaiah itself the third-person-singular pronoun in this text always refers to the servant. Moreover, later in the chapter the fact that the generation to whom Jesus has preached has failed to listen to him, and has spoken beyond his wishes, becomes an issue, which perhaps fits with what the text is saying here. See also what Menken says in n. 43 below.

*A crushed reed he will not break, or quench a smoldering wick, until he brings judgment/justice to victory.<sup>39</sup> And upon his name, the Nations/Gentiles will have hope (Isa 42:3–4). (vv. 20–21)*

Concerning this text from Isaiah more should be said. First, however, I quote Isa 42:1–4 from the text from the Masoretic text followed by the same text from the Septuagint.

Masoretic Hebrew text:

Look, my servant, whom I support; my chosen, [in whom] my soul is pleased; I have put my spirit upon him: he shall bring out judgment/justice to the Gentiles. He shall not cry out, nor lift up, nor cause his voice to be heard in the street. A bruised reed he will not break, and the smoking flax he will not quench: he will bring forth judgment unto truth. He will not grow faint nor be discouraged, until he has set judgment/justice in the earth: and [even the furthest] shores will hope for his Law [*torato*].

LXX:

Jacob, my child, I shall help him; Israel, my chosen. My soul has received him; I have laid my spirit upon him, he will carry out a judgment for the nations. His voice will not cry out, nor lift up, nor be heard outside. A broken reed he will not crush, and a burning wick he will not extinguish, but he will carry the judgment to the truth. He will shine brightly, and not be

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39 A part of the text from Isaiah,—“He will shine brightly, and not be discouraged, until he puts a judgment upon the earth,”—has been omitted, suggesting that what Matthew includes after the omission is intentional and operates as a direct message for what the narrative is meant to imply, which is spelled out in Menken’s article on Isaiah 42.

discouraged, until he puts a judgment upon the earth, *and upon his name [onomati] the Nations/Gentiles will have hope.*

Matthew's version of Isa 42:1–3 is closer to what is found in the received Hebrew texts, but his version of Isa 42:4 is closer to what is found in the received texts of the LXX. Matthew regards Jesus as the servant/son and not Israel. But he also stresses that the *Nations/Gentiles* will learn justice from Jesus and so will derive hope from the power of his name, which has been given to him by God.

It is of interest that in the MT this text ends with the phrase “and [even the furthest] shores will hope for his Law,” whereas in both Matthew and LXX the text concludes with the phrase “and upon his name the Nations/Gentiles will have hope.”<sup>40</sup> The stability of the Hebrew reading of “his Law” is confirmed by the Isaiah Scroll from Qumran, column 35:13. However, in this text it is said that the furthest shores “will inherit [NHL] his Torah” (or at any rate this is the common translation, but “bequeath” is grammatically better), and not that the furthest shores “will hope for [YHL] his Torah.” This must be an error, since the phrase “will hope for his Torah” makes much better sense than “will bequeath to his Torah.” It would seem then that our text from LXX—“and upon his name [onomati] the Gentiles will have hope”—cannot have been the original reading in LXX. Most likely YHL, “will hope for his Torah,” was the parent reading.

In any event, all manuscripts of LXX Isa 42:4 read *onoma* and the word must somehow refer to Torah in this text, as it does elsewhere in LXX (although it is true that in the Gottingen edition of LXX Isa 42:4 reads “hope for his law, *nomos*,” the editors emended the text so that this reading would make sense).<sup>41</sup> Menken points out that there are places in the LXX that translate “Torah” by *onoma*, and places that translate “name” as *nomos*.<sup>42</sup> To be more precise, as

<sup>40</sup> It is possible that LXX readings of this text have been influenced by Matthew's citation.

<sup>41</sup> See Pietersma and Wright, eds., *A New English Translation of the Septuagint* (2007).

Moisés Silva translated Isaiah (Esaias) in this work and on the first page of his introduction to it he notes that he has diverged from J. Ziegler (Ziegler, ed., *Isaias*, 2nd ed., *Septuaginta: Vetus Testamentum Graecum* 14 [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1967]) in sixteen places and Isa 42:4 is listed among them. Silva (p. 856) has followed the LXX manuscript readings and gives us here “name,” as does Matthew. In balance, it does not seem likely, although it remains possible, that the manuscripts were corrupted by the Matthean reading. The stronger argument here is that Matthew followed LXX here because it was convenient for him and it is likely this was the reason for his choosing to find a fulfillment text in ways that did not typically call for one, since Jesus is not fulfilling any prophecy here.

<sup>42</sup> Menken, “The Quotations from Isaiah 42, 1–4 in Matthew 12, 18–21” (1999), 45, and notes.

Dale Allison once informed me, there are fragments and fuller texts that show how frequently these terms interchange with each other. (Allison pointed me to versions of Exod 16:4; 2 Chron 1:9, 6:16; Ps 58 (59):12, and elsewhere). It is not likely that we have copyist mistakes in all these places. Therefore we must conclude that these two words could, at times, be interchanged, but for reasons that were theological rather than linguistic, as Menken says. It must also be admitted, however, that the verb “will hope for”—*elpiousin*—seems to imply the expectation of the arrival of a potent force rather than the arrival of a document or oral instruction.<sup>43</sup>

In light of all this, I can only conclude that Matthew does follow the Septuagint for 42:4 (although, as I say, his reading of Isa 42:1–3 is closer to what is found in the Masoretic text, but this may be due to his particular version of LXX). Moreover, we should also understand that the word *onoma* in this verse in LXX means “Torah.” According to the context of the narrative at this point, the addition of Isa 42:4 in Matthew is not at all warranted. Matthew included Isa 42:4 here because he found in it a prophecy that the Gentiles would find hope “in his [Jesus’] name” (in the literal sense of the Greek). In Matthew’s vocabulary, I suspect, *nomos* and *onoma* are never interchanged, so he happily uses this text

43 Menken points out that Isa 26:8 in our Hebrew texts has “name” and “mention” as parallels, whereas in the same verse in Qumran iQIsa “name” and “Torah” are given as parallels (*ibid.*). The interchange is likely theological, as Menken suggests. Although he does not tell us this, we should note that for the Rabbis, God created the world through Torah, and in *b. Sukkah* 53b it is told how David created the space of the Temple by tossing a shard with “God’s name” into the *Tehom*, which suggests Gen 1:2—“the spirit of God hovered over *Tehom*.” The thirteenth-century kabbalists say outright that Torah and the Divine Name are one and the same and again what is thought of in the thirteenth century indicates what might have been thought in the first. LXX seems to be evidence of this. From his book *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism* 40–42, here is Gershom Scholem’s description of the phenomenon:

“To say that the Torah was in essence nothing but the great Name of God was assuredly a daring statement that called for an explanation.... To say that the Torah is a name does not mean that it is a name which might be pronounced as such.... The meaning is rather that in the Torah God has expressed his transcendent being, or at least that part or aspect of his being which can be revealed to Creation and through Creation. [Scholem then goes on to discuss *m. Abot* 3:14; *Sipre Deut.*, *piska* 48; *Gen. Rab.* 1:1 (all of which share much with Plato and Philo [e.g., *Life of Moses* 2.51]), esoteric and apocalyptic works of the Rabbis showing that heaven and earth were created by the Name of God and that Torah does not refer to a physical document but to a pre-existent being [Pseudo Rabad to *Sefer Yetzira* 1:2: “The primordial Torah is the name of God.”] There were kabbalists for whom the conception of the Torah as the Name of God meant simply that it was identical with God’s Wisdom....”

from LXX to suit his needs. If he was aware of the Hebrew text, he either ignored it as being irrelevant or else as having been corrupted by Jews. Given the fact that, strictly speaking, Matthew quotes from Isaiah 42 more than he needs, the polemical nature of the text as he uses it stands out all the more.

Matthew's use of LXX for this verse alone shows us that it had special meaning for him. His use of it is also an indication to me that Matthew and his audience were Gentiles. It is the Gentiles who will be the ones to trust and have faith in Jesus' name. Matthew is looking forward to the end of the Gospel here when Jesus, who while alive preached only to the "lost sheep of Israel," after his death and resurrection calls on his disciples to turn toward the Gentiles so that they might be the ones to carry forth his teachings (Matt 28:19). This is clearly the message of Matthew 12:42–45. Isaiah 42:4 is not seriously meant to be a proof-text for Jesus' insistence that no one may broadcast the news of his miracles. The citation, as Matthew understands it, serves to introduce the idea that the Gentiles are worthy of salvation while the Jews are not.

*Then there was carried to him a blind and mute person possessed by a demon and he healed him, so that the mute person could speak and see.*  
(v. 22)

Incredibly, here Matthew ignores the preceding narrative in which Jesus makes known that he wants no report of his miracles to spread. The healing is followed by another debate between Jesus and the Pharisees that is similar to those we have seen before, in which the Pharisees challenge Jesus over the propriety of his healings. See my comments to 11:5 above, which cite Isa 35:5: "Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped."

*And all the crowds were beside themselves, and said, "Is not this one the Son of David?"* (v. 23)

"Son of David" is another term for Messiah in rabbinic literature. The Messiah is envisioned as the descendant of King David, who saved Israel from the hands of its enemies.

*The Pharisees, having heard, said, "This one only casts out demons by the name of Beelzeboul, the Prince of Demons!"* (v. 24)

The Pharisees want to defuse the messianic aura surrounding Jesus the healer, for which reason, according to Matthew, they offer another explanation for

his ability to heal, by which means they also are able to castigate him. For the Rabbis as well, Jesus was thought to be a sorcerer, at least according to a tradition in *b. Sanh.* 43a (uncensored editions): “Jesus practiced sorcery and corrupted and misled Israel.”

Both the Syriac and the Vulgate offer “Beelzeboub” for Beelzeboul” here in Matthew. In *T. Sol.* 6:1–4, “Beelzeboul” is said to be the name of the “prince of the demons.” About himself in this text Beelzeboul says: “I bring destruction by means of tyrants; I cause the demons to be worshiped alongside men; and I arouse desire in holy men and select priests. I bring about jealousies and murders in a country, and I instigate wars.”

*He knew what they were thinking, and said to them, “Every kingdom divided against itself is made barren, and every city or every house divided against itself will never be established.”* (v. 25)

Again we have the motif of Jesus’ being aware of the nefarious intentions of the Pharisees toward him. I have discussed this motif in note 13 to chapter 9. Matthew introduces Jesus’ diatribe by putting into his mouth a saying similar to the saying the later Rabbis used to introduce traditions concerning Hosea 10. Minor tractate *Derekh Eretz* 37:7 provides an example:

“Their heart is divided, now they will be found sinful” (Hosea 10:2): The upshot is that being at peace is deemed precious, while division is deprecated. What are the examples? *A city in which there is division—it is destined to be made desolate. For the Rabbis have stated division in a house is [destined to bring wretched] vileness . . . division in a court is [destined to bring] the desolation of the world.*

*If the Satan casts out the Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom be established?* (v. 26)

Jesus’ argument is this: If he were Satan, the king of demons, and he were casting out demons, then it would follow from what he has said above that by doing this he would be dividing his own kingdom, thereby preventing it from being established. So if his purpose were to establish the kingdom of Satan, why would he divide his “own” kingdom by casting out demons? Hence he cannot be working for the demon Beelzeboul, Lord of the Heights.

*And if I cast out demons by the name of Beelzeboul, by whom do your people cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges.* (v. 27)

Jesus knows that certain of the Pharisees also cast out demons and so now he asks them why they think that by casting out demons he is in league with the prince of demons, but the Pharisees who do the same are not? Should it not follow that they are in league with Beelzeboul too? Let them—that is, those of their own people—declare if demons are cast out by Satan or by God.

*But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then God's kingdom has already come upon you. (v. 28)*

But in fact, Jesus says here, he casts out demons by the agency of the divine Spirit. Moreover, since he has this power to cast out demons, then where he is, God's kingdom is, too. It should be noted that Jesus does not say this explicitly, but by using an “if-then” construction, he leaves the matter for the listener to decide rather than to make the case outright for his rulership in God's kingdom.

*How can anyone enter a strong person's house and seize his things, unless he first binds the strong person? Then he robs his house. (v. 29)*

Here the discussion concerning Jesus' being in league with Beelzeboul (or even being him) draws to a close. Yet what Jesus says here is perplexing. Just how a weaker person can bind the stronger is not made clear. Nor is it made clear who the weaker one is here and who the stronger. It is doubtful that Jesus is suggesting that he is the weaker one in relation to Satan who is the stronger, and whom he yet must somehow bind. It is more likely that he is saying that the God-given will in the body is the stronger one, and Satan the weaker. In the Book of Job (4:18–19), the human body is said to be a house: “He charges His angels with error; how much more those who dwell in houses of clay, whose foundation is in the dust.” The use of the word “bind” here suggests the casting of a spell. In casting a spell, the Satan casts a spell on a person's will to do good and then takes control of the body (or house). The point is that Satan then takes possession of that person, or anyway a demon does in his name, by ridding him of his will. It is Jesus who can free the person from possession of the demon by casting the demon out.

The use of “bind” to mean “possess” is found in Jewish mystical contexts. There are glimpses of this use of the word “bind” in normative rabbinic texts as well. Consider this tradition from *b. Šabb. 81b*:

How does magic work? It is similar to the story of Rabbi Hisda and Rabba who were traveling on a boat. A Roman lady said to them, “Let me sit between you.” They did not let her. She uttered an incantation (*mlta*) and

bound (*asra*—literally “tied” or “bound”) the boat [with a spell, which presumably froze the boat’s travel]. They said *M-L-T* and released the spell.<sup>44</sup>

This confrontation then is between the Satan, who robs the body (“house”; see also v. 44 below) by tying up the moral “will” and Jesus, who frees the strong man (will). In some ways, the imagery is very close to Gnostic typologies. However, a distinction must be made: in Gnosticism the body is *ab initio* evil, not so here, where the body is possessed by Satan but is not inherently evil. No longer can this figure of Satan in Matthew be seen as the accusing and testing angel of the Lord, but rather as the king of that evil realm that opposes God’s rule. We have here complete and utter dualism—the war between the divine and Satan.

*The one who is not with me is against me, and the one who does not gather with me scatters.* (v. 30)

The extreme dualism is now articulated. Either one is with him, Jesus says, or one is against him. There is no middle ground. One is reminded of the words Elijah spoke at the contest on Mt. Carmel between God and Baal: “If the Lord is God, follow him; if Baal, follow him” (1 Kings 18:21).

The acts of gathering and scattering stand in opposition to each other. Jesus says that one who does not gather with him scatters. In relation to this, an early teaching of the Rabbis, found in *y. Ma’as. 3:1* (also *t. Ma’as. Rišon* 2:17), states:

One found grain in a field. What had been gathered into piles (intentionally) is forbidden [to be taken] since it would become stolen property. What remained scattered is permitted since it would not be stolen property.

The point here is that the gathered grain, the result of productive labor, belongs to the owner, for which reason to take it is to steal from him; whereas what has remained scattered belongs to all, so that, so far as the owner of the field is concerned, there is no theft in the taking of it, nor does it matter to him who takes

44 Apparently there are two texts. Our printed editions have *MLTA* “a [counter] spell.” Rashi assumes her spell was that she uttered the name of a demon and their spell was that they uttered a divine name. But the reading *MLT* (without the A) is also said in hasidic oral lore to be an original reading where the Talmud abbreviated the verse *M[ekhashefah] L[o] T[eheyeh]*—“You shall not allow a witch to live” (Exod 22:17), as a word play on her *mlta*, which they counteracted by summoning this verse concerning witches.

it. But according to what Jesus says here, however, indifference is tantamount to scattering (i.e., removing from God's domain and control) the fruit of Jesus' labor. In this unit, the world is divided between the followers of Jesus and all the rest.

*Therefore I say to you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. (v. 31)*

*Sipre Deut., piska 328* (end) has a similar saying: "For every [sin] the Holy One forgives people; for desecrating his name he exacts immediate punishment."

*And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, neither in this world nor in the World to Come. (v. 32)*

The Hebrew idiom for the last part of the saying here is unmistakable: *lo ba'olam hazeh velo ba'olam hab'a*. For example, *Tanh. Gen.* [ed. Buber], *Vayera*, 11, states:

"Far be it from you, far be it from you!" (Gen 18:25) that you do not forgo justice for all individuals, not in this world and not in the World to Come. Thus the doubling in Scripture [signifying that justice due in both worlds will not be ignored] of "far be it from you."

For Matthew, even if other sins may be set aside, blaspheming against God's name is a sin punishable twice over.

*Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree rotten and its fruit rotten, for the tree is known by its fruit. (v. 33)*

Here and in the next verse the duality is heightened—good trees and the good fruit they produce as opposed to rotten trees and the rotten fruit they produce. The image of fruit in association with deeds is that of Jer 17:10, as is made clear in a tradition in *Midrash Panim Aherim* [ed. Buber] to Esther, version B, *parasha* 6:

For the Holy One judges each person according to his deeds, as it is said, "I the Lord search the heart and test the kidneys to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds" (Jer 17:10).

Verses 12:31–37 concern blasphemy and evil speech, so this verse in which Jesus speaks of the quality of the fruit resembling the quality of the tree when considered in context refers also to what one says. Speech is a deed and one will be judged for what one has said.

*Offspring of poisonous serpents, how are you able to speak good things, being evil? Out of the abundant things of the heart the mouth speaks.* (v. 34)

Again here the duality is clear and the anti-Pharisaic rhetoric rises to a shrill pitch. The tone and content of this verse is not unlike that of Isa 57:3: “But draw near hither, you children of the sorceress, the seed of the adulterer and the harlot.” Matthew refers to the serpent here to highlight the treachery of the Pharisees, which is not unlike the treachery of the serpent in the Garden. What Jesus means here is that although the Pharisees can make sound good whatever they say, still they say it with evil intent. The harsh rhetoric here is meant to demonize Jesus’ interlocutors and their leaders. A near parallel to the last part of the verse can be found in *Midrash Psalms* [ed. Buber], Ps 28:4: “for what is in the heart comes into the mouth.”

*The good person brings out good things from his good treasury, and the evil person brings out evil things from his evil treasury.* (v. 35)

Again we encounter a dualism, this time of a good person as opposed to the evil person. 1 Sam. 24:13 contains a similar sentiment: “As the proverb of the ancients says, ‘Out of the wicked comes forth wickedness.’”

*I say to you that for every careless word which people say, they will have to give an account for it on the Day of Judgment.* (v. 36)

A tradition recorded in the medieval *Sefer 'Orhot Hayyim* purporting to be what Rabbi Eliezer the Elder said to the Sages who were visiting him on his sickbed (quoted here from Eisenstein’s *Otzar Midrashim*, p. 29, vol. 1, paragraph 9) gives this advice:

And do not make your mouth impure or utter even a word in jest for in the future judgment you will have to give an account [even] on words between you and your wife . . . and do not make room for evil thoughts in your heart for thinking will them bring to deed.

Rendering accounts on judgment day for every word and deed is a commonplace in the extensive moral literature of the Jews.

*For by your words you will be declared righteous, and by your words you will be condemned.* (v. 37)

*Sipre Deut., piska* 307 tells us that every act will be paraded before one at the final judgment, and then one will be forced to recall that “such and such you did on this day.” Speech is also an act.

*Then some of the Scribes and Pharisees answered him, “Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.”* (v. 38)

In Matt 10:24 *didaskalos* (in Heb. *moreh* or *melamed*) is used to signify a teacher, while in 10:25 *kyrios* (Heb., *adon*) signifies the master of a slave. In minor tractate *Sem.* 12:13 we find *moreh* and *melamed* in exact parallel. *Mori* seems to have been the term used in direct address and is, in this late text, overshadowed by *Rabbi*.<sup>45</sup>

The “sign” the Pharisees ask for is of course a miracle but instead Jesus takes the word to refer to himself as teacher who in that role condemns his interlocutors. While they treat him with respect he responds with taunts and sarcasm.

*He answered them: An evil and adulterous generation seeks a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah the prophet. For just as Jonah was in the stomach of the giant fish for three days and three nights, so too will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.* (vv. 39–40)

Jesus’ mention here of his coming to rest in “the heart of the earth” for three days and three nights, just as Jonah spent the same number of days and nights in the belly of the fish (Jonah 1:17), is not, strictly speaking, what happened to him, according to the Gospels record. Jesus was only in the tomb three days and two nights. For the Gospels tradition, the story of Jonah’s being in the belly of the fish for three days provides a direct foretelling of the three days (and two nights) that Jesus spends in the tomb between his death and resurrection (see Matt 27:63–64 and 28:6). The point is that, for Matthew, biblical stories are seen as signs portending events in the life of Jesus. Christian

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45 See b. *Ta'an.* 20b: “Peace upon you, Rabbi, Rabbi, *Mori, Mori.*” He said to them, “Whom are you calling ‘Rabbi, Rabbi?’”

interpretation, from its earliest times to the present, has understood the Hebrew Bible to be a collection of signs pointing toward the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This method of reading the biblical text has often been compared to *pesher*, a method of interpretation practiced by the Qumranites, who read biblical texts in light of that group's own situation. However, the form and intent of *pesher* is only broadly suggestive of this particular type of Christian exegesis, whose rules are not nearly as formal as those that governed *pesher*.<sup>46</sup>

*The Ninevites will awaken in judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at Jonah's proclamation, and look, something greater than Jonah is here. (v. 41)*

The point is that although Jonah did not preach repentance among the Ninevites but merely warned them of impending destruction, still they repented (Jonah 3.5). On the other hand, although Jesus, who says of himself here that he is greater than Jonah, has preached repentance among the Jews of this generation, they have not repented. Because the Jews of this generation have refused to repent, they will be condemned by those of a nation once sinful that did repent.

The obvious sense, as many commentators note, is that at the time of the last judgment, when the dead are to be resurrected, the people of Nineveh, who because they repented were saved from destruction, would by their own example serve to condemn the rebellious generation of the Jews in Jesus' day.

This view fits well with the Jewish idea of condemnation by example at the last judgment. A text from *b. Yoma* 35b includes a story of the final judgment concerning those who did not study Torah. Or rather this text contains three stories, the first two of which speak of those who did not study Torah; while the third, though in its redacted form does appear to do so (but this is only because it is included with the others), in fact does not. Moreover, only the third story relies on proof-texts, which shows it to be different in structure from the other two. The point of the third story is that the wicked are condemned by Joseph's refusal to be wicked, even though he was faced with severe temptations. I suspect it was the original prototype of the whole text, which was later reworked by the Rabbis to also include the stories about those who did not study Torah.

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46 The rules are illustrated in Basser, "Pesher Hadavar."

The Rabbis taught: In the World to Come, when (a poor man, a rich man, and) a wicked man<sup>47</sup> come[s] to the judgment—when the poor is asked, “Why have you not studied Torah?” if he answers: “I have been poor, I had to earn my bread, and had no time,” they answer him: “Were you poorer than Hillel the Elder?” Of Hillel the Elder it was said: Every day he went to work, and earned a Tarpeik. Half he gave away to the attendant of the college, to let him in, and on the other half he and his family lived. Once it happened he did not earn anything, the attendant did not let him in. He ascended the roof where there was an opening, and listened to the words of the living God, from the mouths of Shemaia and Avtalian. It was said: That day was a Friday, and in the season of Teveth [Dec/Jan], and he was covered in snow. When it became dawn time, Shemaia said to Avtalian: “My colleague, every day it becomes light at this time, and now it is dark. Is it such a cloudy day?” They raised their eyes, and saw the figure of a man. When they went up, they found on him a layer of snow three cubits thick. They took him down, washed him, dressed him with oil, placed him before a fire, and they said: “For such as this, it is proper that the Sabbath should be violated for him.”

When the rich man is asked: “Why have you not studied Torah?” if he answers: “Because I was a rich man, and had many estates, and had no time to study,” they answer him: “Were you richer than Rabbi Eleazar ben Harsum?” Of him it was said: His father had bequeathed to him a thousand towns on land, and a thousand ships on the sea, and he himself used to take a bag of flour on his shoulder, and wander from town to town and land to land to study Torah. Once his own slaves found him, and put him to hard labor. He said to them: “I pray you, let me go to study the Torah.” They replied: “We swear, by Rabbi Eleazar ben Harsum’s life, we will not let you go before you work.” Thus, as long as he lived, he did not attend to his affairs, but studied Torah all day and all night.

(When) the wicked man is asked: (“Why have you not studied Torah?”) [reconstructed: Why have you sinned?], if he replies: “I was handsome,

<sup>47</sup> To be consistent the text should have read “handsome man” here. The questions are always of the sort: “Were you poorer than Hillel?” etc., but here we get: “Were you more handsome than Joseph?” instead of: “Were you more wicked than X?” This is the form we would need to have consistency. This section of the text in which Joseph represents the ideal of behavior must at one point have been independent from the others. In substance, it is closer to the meaning of what Jesus says here in Matthew: “The Ninevites will rise up in judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at Jonah’s proclamation.”

and was tempted by my sins," they answer him: "Were you more handsome than Joseph?" It was said of Joseph the Righteous that every day Potiphar's wife used to try to seduce him by her talk. The clothes she used to put on in the morning (to attract his attention) she did not put on in the evening, and vice versa, and her refrain was always: "Listen to me; do what I ask of you." He answered: "No." She said: "I will imprison you." He replied: "The Lord frees prisoners" (Ps 146:7). She then said: "I will bend your loftiness." His reply was: "The Lord raises up those who are bowed down" (Ps 146:7). She said to him: "I will blind you." He answered: "The Lord causes the blind to see" (Ps 146:8). She gave him a thousand talents of silver. He was averse to her, or "to lie with her, or to be with her" [Gen 39:10]. "To lie with her" in This World, "to be with her" in the World to Come.—*From here we see that* (Hillel condemns the poor man, Rabbi Eleazer ben Harsum the rich, and) Joseph [condemns] the wicked (*b. Yoma* 35b).

It is also noteworthy that in *y. Sanh.* 11:5 the point is made that God will severely punish Israel because they did not repent whereas the Ninevites did.

*The Queen of the South will awaken in judgment with this generation and condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and look, someone greater than Solomon is here.* (v. 42)

The queen here is said to be "Queen of the South," several of whose ancestors may be referred to in Genesis (10:7, 25:3). While most scholars see that an actual kingdom is being referred to here which was geographically to the south of the Jewish homeland, it is possible that something else was meant by this designation which is now unknown to us. For some reason rabbinic tradition equated the south with wisdom (e.g., *b. B. Bat.* 25b: Rabbi Isaac said: He who desires to become wise should turn to the south [to pray]). However that may be, there can be little doubt that Matthew speaks of the queen here as "of the South" rather than "of Sheba" in order to show how very far she had to come to hear Solomon's wisdom. That is, Matthew makes plain how much effort the queen made in order to hear the wisdom of Solomon while Jesus, of far greater wisdom than Solomon, is ignored by the Jews. The argument of condemnation is the same as in the previous verse which speaks of the Ninevites. The reason Matthew includes the story of the Queen of the South and her devotion to wisdom is so that he can say that not one but two witnesses will rise against Israel to condemn it at the judgment.

First Kings 10:6–9 tells of the Queen of Sheba's visit to Solomon.

And she said to the king, “It was a true report that I heard in my own land of your deeds and of your wisdom. However I did not believe the words, until I came, and my eyes saw it: and, behold, the half was not told me: your wisdom and prosperity exceed the report which I heard. Fortunate be your people, fortunate be your servants, who stand continually before you, and who hear your wisdom. Blessed be the Lord your God, who delighted in you, to set you on the throne of Israel: because the Lord loved Israel for ever, therefore he made you king, to do judgment and justice.”

The theme of God delighting in the king who performs judgment and justice echoes that of Isa 42:1–4, cited above in reference to Jesus.

And again echoing what is said in Isa 42:4, both the Ninevites and the queen of the South are examples of Gentiles who either repented or else sought out and/or received wisdom, unlike the Jews, for which reason they will be condemned by them. Unlike the prophets of Israel, Matthew’s Jesus proclaims that the Jews are doomed and does not foresee their return to God and his Torah.

*When the impure spirit has left a person, it travels through waterless places to seek rest, but it does not find it. (v. 43)*

Now Jesus explains why this generation will never be able to repent. Demons rushed to water in chapter 8 when Jesus performed an exorcism and by extension it is claimed here that they cannot rest if they do not find water. This is not the case in Matthew 17. Ironically, Matt 8:28–32 shows us the demons in the form of swine charging headlong into the Sea of Galilee only to drown because they are in swine form. The Rabbis instituted “a ban on pouring impure water on the ground” (when that water had been used to wet the hands at a meal’s close). A tradition in *b. Hul.* 105b states:

At first I thought the reason you cannot pour *after waters* on the ground was because of the *grease*, but Mar told me it was because of the *evil spirit*.

Demons (impure spirits) are the forces that inhabit a person to incite his passions to rebel and sin. The exorcist can remove the demon but not for long. For the Rabbis, a person does not sin unless a “strange spirit” enters him.<sup>48</sup>

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48 See *b. Sotah* 3a and “The Meaning of ‘Shtuth’ ” (Basser 1985), 148–51.

*Then it says, “I shall return to my house where I came from.” And when it comes it finds things vacant, swept, and put in order. Then it goes and brings along with itself seven other spirits more evil than itself, and enters and settles there, and the last things of that person are worse than the first. So will it be with this evil generation.* (vv. 44–45)

When the evil desire has been purged it finds seven allies to come and capture the person's body (house) again and take it over. I do not know if seven is anything more than a symbolic way of saying “a magical, potent host of demons” here (and also in Luke 8:2: “Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had come out”).

*While he was speaking to the crowds, look, his mother and his brothers and sisters stood outside, seeking to speak with him. Someone said to him, “Look, your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, seeking to speak to you.” He answered the one who spoke to him, “Who is my mother and who are my brothers?” Extending his hands to his students, he said, “Look, my mother and my brothers and sisters. Whoever does the will of my heavenly father, that one is my brother and sister and mother.”* (vv. 46–50)

The final few verses of this chapter do more than reflect the theme of the ideological group insisting that its adherents make a clean break from their families, for it is now the members of the group who are family to the adherents. Jesus' language here concerning the disowning of the family goes beyond the rhetoric of the Cynics, in that it also implies a division of past from future, Jew from Gentile. The one who is God's child, Jesus says, is his sibling, whatever his ethnicity. In relation to this, *y. Qidd. 1:7 (Midrash Tannaim to Deut 14:1, commenting on Prov 4:3: “For a son I have been to my father”)* states:

When Israel does the will of the Holy One they are called “children,” and when Israel does not do the will of the Holy One, they are not called children.

The text's location at the close of this chapter on dualities highlights this message of breaking with the past, and also the destruction of the final generation of Jews, but in particular their leadership. The next chapter will continue the theme of those who are inside and saved and those outside and doomed.

# Chapter 13

## Introduction

In this chapter we find an assortment of parables, whose apparent purpose is to confuse the listener into thinking that a prophecy in the Book of Isaiah might be fulfilled by asking that Israel be instructed in such a way as to close them off from repentance.<sup>1</sup> At least, that is the message of the Gospel's take on the Isaiah passage. Parables are literary analogies that yield abstract lessons, expressed in terms of situations that are recognizable to the listener. In these seemingly familiar scenarios, however, there is always something peculiar that draws our attention, hinting that the meaning of the scene being described is not quite what we expect. The parable requires we exchange the recognition of that peculiarity for the key to the expository context that is required to unlock it and render it intelligible. The familiar yet opaque scenario requires the master to bring its decoded message into focus.<sup>2</sup> He must explain the required exchanges or substitutions that enlighten and satisfy the listener. Without the key to solving the parable's puzzle, the untutored listener feels defeat; with the key to the deeper meaning of the parable, the listener values the revealed lesson.

Three types of parables that have their counterparts in form in rabbinic literature are:

1. A series of analogies tied together in one scene, usually based on a reading of biblical verses (Matt 13:18–23).<sup>3</sup>
2. Stories and anecdotes invoked to illustrate a point, often enhanced by linkage to a biblical verse, which has been creatively read in order to inspire the given parable.<sup>4</sup>

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1 The actual Isaiah passage is discussed in context by Christopher R. Seitz, “How is the Prophet Isaiah Present in the Latter Half of the Book? The Logic of Chapters 40–66 Within the Book of Isaiah” (1996), 232.

2 In rabbinic writing, parables are certainly a common device for explaining concepts. In many cases, they relate abstract concepts to more familiar social dynamics in order to make the abstract concepts more understandable, more believable. In Matthew (and Luke) the message of the parable is often purposely blurred for the casual reader/listener.

3 See discussion in Basser, *Midrashic Interpretations of the Song of Moses* (Basser 1984), 132–37.

4 *Y. Ber.* 2:8:

“When Rabbi [A]bun the son of Rabbi Hiyya passed away [while young] Rabbi Zera came to deliver the eulogy. He decoded the allegory of the verse in Eccl 5:11/12: ‘Sweet is the

3. An analogy drawn from an experience which is somewhat rare but nonetheless testifies to an improbable occurrence being within the realm of the possible, and which, by an inductive stretch, could be normal at some time in the *Eschaton*, at the end of days (Matt 13:33).<sup>5</sup>

*shenat* of the laborer..." and pointed out the verse did NOT say "sleep" but DID say "*shenat*" (on the surface it does mean *shenah*—sleep, but its deeper meaning is shanah, "year." And in this light we read the continuation of the verse) "If of few (years) he consumed as much as if of many." To what can the situation of Rabbi [A]bun be compared? To a king who hired many laborers amongst whom was one who accomplished more [than his daily share]. What did the king do? He took him out to stroll about the long and short paths with him. When evening came the laborers went to collect their wages. He paid this one equally with the others. The laborers complained, "We have toiled the whole day, while this man has toiled only two hours. Should he be given the same wages as we earned?" The king said to them: "Why are you angry? He accomplished more in toiling two hours than you accomplished in the entirety of a whole day." So Rabbi [A]bun accomplished more [and will be rewarded as such] in his twenty-eight years [*shanah*] than a diligent student might accomplish in one hundred.

The idea of equal pay for late adherents to the teaching of Jesus together with the original members of his [Jewish] followers is the point of Matt 20:1–16. While the parables look similar, the messages are not at all alike. The title of the above might be "the good die young: equal reward for equal accomplishment" while the title of the next one might be "last come first served: equal pay for all members notwithstanding unequal efforts or work done."

For the [notion of reward in the] Kingdom of Heaven is comparable to a householder, who went out early to hire workers for his vineyard. When he negotiated with the workers for a rate of a denarius per day, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out three hours later he saw others standing idle in the marketplace. He said to them, "Get yourselves to the vineyard, and I will give you whatever is right." They left. Again he went out around the sixth and ninth hour, and did the same. When he went out around the eleventh hour he found others standing and said to them, "Why have you stood here all day idle?" They say to him, "Because no one hired us." He says to them, "Get yourselves to the vineyard!" When evening came the lord of the vineyard says to his foreman, "Call the workers and pay them their wage, beginning with the last up to the first." When the ones hired around the eleventh hour came they took each a denarius. And when the first one came, they thought that they would receive more, but he gave to each a denarius—even to them. When they took it, they murmured against the householder. These last worked one hour, and you have made them equal to us, who suffered the burden and the heat of the day. He answered one of them, "I did not treat you unfairly. Did not you negotiate a denarius with me? Take what is yours and go. I wish to give to the last as I gave to you. Am I not permitted to do what I wish with what is mine? Or is your eye wicked because I am good?" So will the last be first and the first last."

5 B. *Šabb.* 30 claims that, in the future era, women will give birth to large numbers of children and nature in general would produce food abundantly. The analogy is provided: Even today

Of the several parables found in *Tanakh* we might note the failed vineyard that had been tended very carefully (Isa 5:1–6) and its meaning: Israel failed to live the life required by its sacred covenant despite all the trouble God took to tend to Israel's needs. This motif was a favorite of the *Tanhuma* cycle of midrashim which created its own parables around a king who had a vineyard.

The first parable in Matthew 13 provides us with the key to the parable by citing a text much like LXX Isa 6:9–10 (cf. Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10). In this text the people are told that because they refused to listen, they will be punished.

By hearing, you will hear, but never understand, and looking, you will look, and you will never see. For this people's heart has thickened, and they hear slowly with their ears, and they have closed their eyes, so that they might never see with their eyes, nor hear with their ears, nor understand with their heart, and repent, and I shall heal them.

But the Hebrew of the Masoretic text of Isa 6:9–10 implies the prophet's role is to prevent the people from understanding so they will not repent or be redeemed. Repentance is to be denied to them.

Hear indeed but do not understand; see indeed but do not perceive. Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and repent and be healed.

Those who already have understanding are able to gain more.

The Gospel tradition, in its pristine form, seems to solve a problem in the Isaiah verses. Who hears but does not understand?—the one who is robbed by Satan. Likewise, who sees but does not perceive?—the one ensnared by a parched soul. And for those who might have escaped Satan, anxieties and materialism thicken the heart to rebel and so dull the ears and blind the eyes from understanding. Only those already saved who are thereby guarded from Satan will repent and be healed of all ills. Matthew's editorial has a Gnostic tinge in his explaining that only the saved can be saved. This explanation of Matthew to make sense of Jesus' use of parable is actually embedded in the solution to the parable of the sower.

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chickens lay eggs daily and some trees can produce more than one type of fruit. These samples are a parable for the *Eschaton*.

The style and form of the Gospel tradition explains the parable in the way that Qumran pesher explains its codes, and the biblical Joseph explained dream scenes he had heard: Item A stands for item B.<sup>6</sup>

In Jesus' first parable in this chapter he describes a farmer sowing seeds, of which those near the trodden path are snatched away by birds (Luke 8:5 "trod underfoot"); others land in stony areas with no soil (Luke 8:6 "no moisture"); others on thorn-bushes that smother the seeds; and others on good soil that yield high proportions.

Matthew 13:19–23 relates (Matthew uses singulars which I have rendered as "some" to better fit the English idiom. In the text of the chapter proper, which follows the introduction, I have given a more conventional rendition): Some people in hearing the word of the [entrance exam into the] Kingdom, and not understanding—[are disposed to let] the evil one come, and grab away that which was sown in the heart—this is [the meaning of the image of] what is "sown by the path."

Further, [as for the image of] what is "sown on the rocky places" this [means] some who in hearing the word get it and immediately rejoice but it has only a temporary root in them. So when affliction and persecution come on account of the (enemy of the) word, they immediately are snared [by Satan].

Yet [as for the image of] that sown in the thorn-bushes,—this [means] some who in hearing the word, and [are entrenched in] the anxiety of The Eon [of This Generation], and the seduction of riches, both of which smother the word, until it [the word] is rendered fruitless.

And [as for the image of ] that sown on the best ground: this [means] some who in hearing the word, and [getting] understanding, indeed bear fruit, and [so] produces [more and more]—indeed [these yield] a hundredfold, then sixty-fold, then thirty-fold.

We can see in this parable a series of analogies tied together by one common setting. The analogies are: a) Just as a bird snatches seeds from areas where crowds travel (and drop food) so Satan snatches away the understanding from those whose commitments are formed while traveling the road of the masses. b) Just as seeds on rocky terrain, even in areas of some growth, are easily plucked up by passing winds, so the early understanding of one whose

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6 See Basser, "*Pesher Hadavar*."

commitment is shaky will be uprooted by persecution until utterly dashed by Satan. c) Just as seeds fallen among thorns are smothered by them from growing, so one's growing understanding when based on a commitment subject to temptation from materialism and worry, will be choked by them. d) Just as seed grown on fertile, well cultivated ground will thrive and produce seed-bearing plants, so one's growing understanding, when based on a well-cultivated and firm commitment, will grow productively and increase to grand proportions. The parable ties the four analogies into a single scene.

In contrast, when the Rabbis (*m. Abot* 5:12) spoke of four types of student aptitudes, they categorized them somewhat differently from the Gospels: "Quick to hear, quick to lose." This has little merit but its opposite has considerable merit: "Slow to hear, slow to lose." Of greatest merit, is "Quick to hear, slow to lose"—this is the wise [person's lot]. And they pronounced, "Slow to hear, quick to lose—this is the worst lot (for a student of God's Torah)." The Rabbis did not lay the blame on Satan but on the disposition of the student.

In order to locate the thinking behind the parable it is useful to realize that the Jewish worldview has two models to locate what lies at the center of the world and what lies at the periphery. One model is that of the Holy Temple/Tent sanctuary, where divine revelation and holiness are concentrated in the center of three camps, each one with decreasing sanctity until the periphery and the excluded *tameh* are on the outside. Here the priests are the central focus of divine blessing, and through them and through their service the world is sustained. The Gentiles are at the edges.<sup>7</sup> The other model is that of Sinai/Torah where revelation and well-being are centered in the teaching and interpreting of the Holy Torah through its scholars and their houses of learning. The learned are in the inside, while the ignorant are distant, and the nations removed far to the edge. While initially the two models were largely conceived as coinciding with each other such that priests were teachers and the Great Sanhedrin was situated near the Temple's altar, in point of fact the two models, ritual intercession versus Torah learning, competed with each other and finally culminated in a bitter rift, the *hasid-mitnagid* antagonism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

So, too, the Gospels located two centers in their scheme of the world, Temple and priest/Pharisee (scribal teacher). In both models the Gospels will revel in

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<sup>7</sup> See Josephus, *Against Apion* 2:8; 103–9. The model of the Temple shows the world hierarchy from center to periphery. In prayer, the Temple axis remains the central fixed point to locate the divine (*b. Ber.* 30a). *M. Hor.* 3:8 preserves the Temple hierarchy but shows that Torah knowledge trumps everything.

the fall of these central institutions and reverse the insides and outsides of the worldview scheme. In Matt 21:42–45 (Mark 12:10–13, Luke 20:17–19) Jesus will proclaim in the Temple that the people of Israel are to be replaced as well as their leaders, 1) intercessor-priest and 2) the guardian-of-Torah Pharisee. They will be displaced by Gentiles. In Matthew's "Great Commission" (Matt 28:18–20) the scribes/teachers will be displaced by those of the gentile nations. The two central models of Jewish life are to fall and in their stead completely reverse models are to arise. Israel and her leaders will be at the darkest outer region while the Gentiles will be in the center of the kingdom.<sup>8</sup>

This binary reversal has its echoes in the parables in Matthew 13. The ones at the edge of the field are under the sway of Satan and are kept in the dark; the ones closer to the center progressively find enlightenment. This is the model of the new kingdom: those so endowed by virtue of their being untainted by the worldviews of Temple/Torah will occupy the center and have open ears to hear the message; those at the edges of the kingdom cannot hear it at all. The Jews therefore miss the point; the Gentiles do not. Even Jesus' disciples cannot find their way without their teacher revealing to them the new setup. They too have been raised on the worn out, sterile models. The orientation of the sacred cosmos has been turned completely inside out, the first are now last and the last are now first.

The parable of chapter 11 has now come full circle. Those, at the old center, who refused to listen to Jesus and John the Baptist, are now not able to listen at the new center. They have migrated to the edges and will soon be cut off and destroyed in the fullness of time. And so the interpretive keys of the parables allow the suggestions of the oppositions of the worthy and the unworthy. However, the key breaks down with the mustard seed and leaven in the dough parables, where another key is called for, the key of "much from little." The parables in chapter 13 find their realization in narrative events within chapters 13–14: a) those deaf to Jesus' teachings and b) small amounts of food increasing to feed multitudes. One must be careful to examine each parable on its own merits. It seems that the style and message of the parables come in pairs.

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8 The message is hardly new at this point. Jesus stated to those following him in Matt 8:10–12: "Amen," I say to you, never have I found such faith in anyone in Israel. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west and they will recline at the table with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the heavenly kingdom. But the children of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be wailing and the grinding of teeth."

### Commentary

*On that day, Jesus left the house and sat by the seashore. (v. 1)*

It seems the text is disjointed and refers to some day when other things happened, which Matthew does not preserve. The sentence is strange because the previous chapter seems to have taken place on the Sabbath. So are we now to assume in this day, in addition to hiking through fields and debating Pharisees, that he addresses huge crowds? In chapter 12 the crowds were already there. In the Hebrew Bible the phrase “that day,” or “that night” sometimes signals “a certain day” where simple events in a story begin to turn toward the climax. It might not mean literally that it was the same day in which prior events occurred. That “turn” has to do with his seeking those who are tuned to him and weeding out those who are not. His leaving his private space to go to the public area seems to suggest he went looking for an audience to address.

*Many great crowds gathered to him, so he got into a boat and sat there, and the whole crowd stood on the beach. (v. 2)*

While the substance of the Jesus parables usually hinges on the deafness of most of his audience, it seems here the storyteller seeks a place for himself from which he can address the waiting crowds. Yet, what he has to say is both obscure and, if understood, rather demeaning.

*He told them many things in parables: “Look, the sower went out to sow . . .” (v. 3)*

The use of “look” suggests the biblical language of dreams, as in Gen 41:1: “[And it was at the end of two full years that] Pharaoh had a dream—namely, ‘look, he was standing at the River . . .’”; Judges 7:13: “Look—I had a dream—a loaf of barley bread was tumbling into the camp of Midian”; Isa 29:8: “It will be like when a hungry man dreams, and look, he eats; but he awakes.” The term, in dream or prophetic context, usually introduces an unexpected turn of events and portends something of profound consequence. In the passage that unpacks the parable (vv. 19ff) we discover that the seeds of instruction all fall on the ground of the heart, that is, the mind. The psychic vision of the person represents the degree of distraction that hinders the growth of understanding (absorption and germination of the seed) in the mind.

*And in the process of sowing, some seeds fell alongside the path, and the birds came and ate them. Others fell upon the rocky ground, where there was not much soil, and they grew up suddenly, on account of not having deep soil. When the sun rose, they were scorched, and they withered, because they had no root. Still others fell upon thorn-bushes, and the thorn-bushes grew up and smothered them. Others fell upon good soil and bore fruit, once a hundred, then sixty, and then thirty. Whoever has ears should listen.* (vv. 4–9)

Only those with unencumbered spiritual understanding will grasp the sense. Not all have eyes to see or ears to hear the message. We saw this expression earlier in chapter 11 to introduce the parable contained in the children's chant.

*The disciples came and said to him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" (v. 10)*

The irony is that they, who should most clearly grasp the meaning, are troubled by this style of preaching—hiding more than is revealed. If they cannot fathom the message, how will others manage to appreciate the messages of Jesus? The point seems to be that if Jesus is complaining that he and John are being ignored by the masses, why does he teach in such an inaccessible form without including the key to his parables?

*He answered: Because to you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven, but to them it has not been granted. (v. 11)*

"You already know my teachings, and are eager to learn so you have no need to be stimulated to hear more. But there are others, whose spirits are alive but inadvertently sleep. Hearing my words in parables, their ears awaken, and by watching, their eyes will awaken, for their spirit will envision that they are the subject of my parables. You are already awake." The Gnostic dualism that delineates the saved and the damned is discernable in these passages.

*For whoever has, it will be given to him, and it will be abundant; but whoever does not have, whatever he has will be taken from him. (v. 12)*

Only the saved will gain rewards; the others will be deprived of all. In the next verses we hear that the people of Israel are the ones who are the unsaved, blind and deaf. The clear implication is that non-Israel, the Gentile, is to know the

mystery of the Kingdom of Heaven.<sup>9</sup> The masses are not meant to understand. That is his point. No one should try to see the sayings of Jesus as being consistent with each other. At times it will seem the Jewish leaders are guilty of ignoring Jesus, at other times it will seem they are not guilty but so it has been ordained. At times it will seem the advent of the Son of Man is imminent and at others that Jesus himself is unaware of the time for his advent.

*Thus I speak to them in parables, because “Looking, they do not look, and hearing, they do not hear, nor do they understand.” (v. 13)*

Much of the background necessary to grasp the sense of the following verses has already been explained in the introduction to this chapter.

*The prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled for them, “By hearing, you will hear, but not understand, and looking, you will look, but not see. For this people’s heart has thickened, and they hear slowly with their ears, and they have closed their eyes, so that they might never see with their eyes, nor hear with their ears, nor understand with their heart, and repent, and I shall heal them (Isa 6:10). But blessed are your eyes, because they see, and your ears, because they hear.” (vv. 14–16)*

Jesus remarks that the disciples are not of Isaiah’s sinful, ignorant Israel but of the kingdom’s saved. And the parable of the sower is precisely about those who understand the secret of salvation and those who do not.

*Amen, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people yearned to see what you see, and they did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and they did not hear it. (v. 17)*

The very sentiment that the disciples are privileged to see what greater prophets did not see is echoed in many passages in rabbinic literature—the disciples are glimpsing the heavenly revelation of coming age. This is not unlike the tradition that the lowliest maidservant, at the time when the Israelites were crossing the Red Sea, saw more than Isaiah and Ezekiel (who gazed on angels

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<sup>9</sup> Acts 28:26–28 has Paul interpreting Isa 6:9–10: “Saying, Go unto this people, and say, Hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and not perceive:—For the heart of this people is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes have they closed; lest they should see with [their] eyes, and hear with [their] ears, and understand with [their] heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them.” Be it known therefore unto you, that the salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles, and [that] they will hear it.

and the divine throne) ever saw (*Mekhilta of Rabbi Yishmael* to Exod 19:11). An ordinary person witnessing miracles at the time of redemption represents a higher form of knowledge than prophecy. The Rabbis took note that the events of the *Eschaton* and the Coming World were unseen and unheard by the greatest of visionaries. The language and sentiment reveals that Matthew, using similar language, is making a claim here of the redemptive process reaching historical realization at this point in time:

Job 13:1 relates, “My eyes have seen all this, my ears have heard and understood it.” Yet, as for the Coming World, the Talmud notes:

And Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Abba said in the name of Rabbi Yoḥanan: “All the prophets, bar none, only envisioned [up to] the Days of the Messiah [preceding the advent of the Messiah] but as for the [actual] Next World.” *From of old no [ears] have heard or given ear; [no] eye has seen, O God, except for you, what He will make happen for those who hope in him* (b. Ber. 32b).

The italicized quote is from Isa 64:3, which in its targumic (Aramaic) form reads as follows:

*From of old no ear has heard the Mighty sound, not listened to the Awesome utterance; the eye has not seen—[including] what your people already witnessed [in seeing] the glorious divine Shekhina, for there is no other but you!—[they wonder] that You in the future are to make happen for your nation of saints who from time immemorial have been hoping in your [ultimate] redemption.*

The Septuagint version is phrased as “we have not heard nor have our eyes seen any God besides you and your works which you will do for those who hope for your mercy.” The switches from second to third persons in Isaiah are perplexing. The Targum seems to echo the outlook of the Septuagint, and Matthew’s Jesus relates that the experience of the disciples signals the onset of the new era.

Jesus now tells his disciples that only to them have the secrets of the future kingdom been shown. And since they have the eyes and ears to see and hear they will grasp his parables. The chapter now relates more parables, but Matthew in the meantime inserts a footnote containing the sense of the parable of the sower. The disciples, having prepared hearts, are able or should be able to discern the message.

*You, then, hear the parable about the sower. (v. 18)*

The expression “hear” may signal a further tradition in the early Gospel corpus where we have the parable decoded. Parables about sowing were a commonplace in apocalyptic sources.<sup>10</sup>

*When anyone hears the message of the Kingdom and does not understand, the evil one comes and seizes what has been sown in his heart; this is what was sown alongside the path. (v. 19)*

All messages that come into the heart are subject to the condition of the mind—is it spoiled by conforming to the popular ways of the times? The introduction to this chapter has dealt with the pertinent issues here.<sup>11</sup> It is worth noting the style here is different from the rest of the decoding passages. Everywhere else in that exercise we are given a sentence and then its commentary but here the commentary comes first and then the sentence it interprets (i.e., “*what was sown along the path*”). I think the point is that what needs to be stressed is that those at the edges of society, the marginals, have the best chance to receive the vision of the kingdom. It is not the mainstream Jews of the generation who stand at the entranceway. The question must be asked here: why does the listener not understand? Is that because they have some defect, moral or intellectual? It would seem the heart cannot absorb the message because this heart has been hardened by crowds who have well-set ideas to the contrary. The message that was sown in the heart is not familiar enough to be processed into understanding without lengthy effort. Intermediary teachers obstruct the heart from being able to directly grasp the message and hence aid Satan’s work. The evil tempter is now easily able to confuse the hearer so he forgets about messianic teachings.

The message of the Kingdom seems to refer to those teachings that enable one to enter the Kingdom. One must prepare the heart first and then the Kingdom will appear. The form of first message and then symbol makes this

<sup>10</sup> Compare 4 Ezra 9:31 “I sow my Law in you.”

<sup>11</sup> Some scholars assume that Matthew has taken a Gospel parable from his source and affixed to it his own interpretation. Some introductions to the New Testament still state it as a fact. Be that as it may, we deal here with Matthew who provides the meaning of the figures and we leave it at that. See Kee, *Understanding the New Testament* (1983), 142. Kee accepts the arguments of J. Jeremias’ *The Parables of Jesus* (1963), 81–85; 224–27) that the interpretations of parables in Matthew are the evangelist’s creations and were never affixed to the original parables attributed to Jesus. The vocabulary is purely Matthean, according to Jeremias. There is no point in a commentator to Matthew’s Gospel trying to decide this particular issue, since the commentary is intended to explain the Gospel of Matthew that assuredly does contain these interpretations.

opening statement the operative key to the parable from which the other symbols derive meaning. Seeds give birth to produce what comes of their own; God has designed the seeds to do so. The same is true of teachings. In themselves they do little but they are catalysts in the prepared heart to give birth to new eyes and new ears to see the Kingdom. Those who have ears are already of the Kingdom since they can grasp the intent of what is transpiring in the historical present. The meaning of the parable leaves open the question of whether the unprepared hearts are so because these hearts belong to Satan or whether unhappy circumstances are the cause. The latter seems to be the case and Satan merely takes advantage of this turn of events. In the next parable, Satan plants unbelievers in the world.

*The one sown upon the rocky ground, this is the one who hears the message and takes it with joy right away. But he does not have a root in him, and he is temporary, so when trouble or persecution comes on account of the report, he stumbles. The one sown among the thorn-bushes, this one is the one who hears the message, and the anxieties of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the message and it becomes fruitless. The one sown upon the good soil, this is the one who hears the message and understands, who indeed bears fruit and produces once a hundred, then sixty, then thirty.*  
 (vv. 20–23)

The next parable might appear to suggest that once those who are prepared are in place there needs to be a separation of those who will enter and those who will not. But the next parable is a variant of this one, where those who reject Jesus are creatures of Satan. It is Satan who has placed the unworthy among the worthy. The final destruction of Satan's weeds (those who follow the Jewish leaders) is assured to happen at the appointed time. Patience is required. Why wait? The next parable explains why matters are delayed.

*He gave them a different parable: The Kingdom of Heaven is compared to a person who sows good seed in his field. (v. 24)*

Who does enter the next world and who does not is the subject here.<sup>12</sup> The "Kingdom" means events concerning the entrance to the Future World. The dualism here is good-seed/bad-seed. This parable requires no code as the previous one did. The method of interpretation in these cases follows a form

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<sup>12</sup> Compare 4 Ezra 8:41: "For just as the farmer sows many seeds upon the ground . . . not all that were planted will take root."

we might call *pesher* that was a commonplace in the decoding of allegories.<sup>13</sup> Of course, not all parables are allegories where there are specific codes in place that assign a reference for each noun in the story; sometimes the story transcends the details.

*While he was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed poisonous weeds in the midst of the wheat, and left. (v. 25)*

The image is close to the generic myth of the Gnostics. Satan has created his own soulless creatures in this world of Creation. They are noxious weeds. No one is aware that he has done this but God. At the end a divine messenger, Jesus, will redeem the spiritual children of God (the wheat). The noxious poisons are of Satan. The Pharisees (or, perhaps more widely, the Jews) are the tools of the Devil to pollute God's world and must be eradicated. These teachings and their images have had a toxic effect on Christendom's treatment of Jews from early times through the twentieth century.

*When the plants sprouted and bore fruit, then the poisonous weeds appeared as well. The slaves of the householder came and said to him, "Master, did you not sow good seeds in your field? Then, where did these poisonous weeds come from?" (vv. 26–27)*

The story now names the person who did the sowing as "the householder"—a figure used by Jews to refer to God in their parables (*m. Abot* 2:15: "Rabbi Tarfon says: The day is short, and work is plentiful, and the workers are lethargic, but the reward is great and the householder is eager"). Matthew will tell us that the householder, in such images, refers to the "Son of Man" rather than God as Jewish tradition has maintained.<sup>14</sup>

*He said to them, "A person who is my enemy did this." The slaves said to him, "Do you wish us to go out and gather them?" (v. 28)*

Satan, the enemy of God is responsible for planting the weeds. The slaves must be the attending angels and this is confirmed later in the decoding of the parable in verse 39. We are faced here with radical evil, not a messenger of the divine angels meant to test, as did the biblical Satan of Job and the rest of the Hebrew Bible.

<sup>13</sup> I discuss this form at length in "*Pesher Hadavar*".

<sup>14</sup> See Matt 9:37–38 for the parallel.

*He said, “No, for when you gather the poisonous weeds, you will uproot the wheat with them at the same time.” (v. 29)*

Hence the parable shows delay is required. The evil ones and the good ones might not be distinguishable until the time when the evil are completely ugly and the good completely beautiful.

*Leave them both to grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will ask the harvesters, “Gather first the poisonous weeds and bind them into bundles in order to burn them, and gather the wheat into my barn.” (v. 30)*

Now at the end of time, the apocalyptic separation of the saints and the sinners will occur and the evil ones will be destroyed. This image has been used in chapter 3 where John threatens the Pharisees and Sadducees. My comments to 3:1 show that the parable here has a biblical referent. Here end the parables drawing distinctions between the chosen and the damned. The harvesters are heavenly beings who have this task.<sup>15</sup> The interpretation of this parable is given further down in verses 36ff. Also see my comments to Matt 3:10. Gathering can be used of inanimate objects or of people: “A time to scatter stones and a time to gather them” (Eccl 3:5). Also note:

“I will *gather* you and I will blow on you with my fiery wrath, and you will be melted inside her. As silver is melted in a furnace, so you will be melted inside her, and you will know that I the Lord have poured out my wrath upon you” (Ezek 22:21–22)

and

“[T]hen they will know that I am the Lord their God, for though I sent them into exile among the nations, I will *gather* them to their own land, not leaving any behind” (Ezek 39:28).

*He gave them another parable: The heavenly kingdom is like a mustard seed, which a person took and sowed in his field. (v. 31)*

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<sup>15</sup> *The Rule of the Community*, 1QS columns III and IV, draw similar distinctions between the saved and the damned. The task of uprooting these latter falls to the Angels of Destruction.

The mustard seed parable is not really a substitution-coded parable like the others we have seen, but rather an example of what is now possible that reflects the World to Come. Mustard plants have been known to grow, albeit rarely, to very large sizes. The future is a present possibility, not an eruption or miraculous change of the present world order. The present has some of the future. The style of parable is different from the previous one, and its message is different. It is not an allegory and is not to be interpreted as such.

*Seder Eliyahu Rabbah* chap. 3 (ed. Friedmann, 14) presents similar teachings about good fortune in the *Eschaton* in parable form:

They gave a parable, to what can the thing be compared. . . . This is how it will be at The End in the Future World while a part of it is reality today.

Matthew's words here echo the beginning of Luke 13:19: like a mustard seed, which a person takes and sowed (Luke too has past tense) in his garden.

*It is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it grows it is the greatest of the garden plants, and becomes a tree, so that the sky's birds come and nest in its branches.* (v. 32)

There is a puzzle here. This sentence mirrors Mark 4:32, "becomes [Mark too uses present tense] the greatest of all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade." The conclusion is unavoidable that our texts of Matthew conflate the forms of Luke and those of Mark. Although the tenses are completely inconsistent, no attempt has been made to harmonize them.

Compare the following traditions where the abundance of the Messianic Era is noted as evident in our world. The difference is not one of substance but of degree. What is sometimes evident now will be normative in the New Era.

*Sipre Deut., piska 316–17:*

- A: In the Eschatological Age every grain of wheat will be like two kidneys of a big ox, weighing four Sephorian liters.
- B: And if this surprises you then consider the case of the turnip heads, for it once happened that one weighed thirty Sephorian liters. And it happened that a fox made a nest in the head of a turnip. It once happened there was a mustard stock with three twigs and one of them fell off and they covered a whole potter's hut with it. They struck it and they found in it nine *kabim* of mustard. Rabbi Simeon bar Halafta reported: A cabbage stalk was in the middle of my house and I could go up and down on it like a ladder . . .

- C: You will not be wearied by treading or harvesting the grape but you will bring it in a wagon and stand it in a corner and it will constantly renew the supply that you may drink from it as from a jug.<sup>16</sup>

The Church Fathers cite Pappias, who quoted John of Asia Minor in the name of Jesus:

- C1: The days will come in which vines shall spring up and each grape when pressed shall yield five and twenty measures of wine.
- A1: Likewise also a grain of wheat shall cause to spring up . . . ten pounds of fine, pure flour. And so it shall be with the rest of the fruits and seeds and every herb after its kind.<sup>17</sup>

*He told them another illustration: The Kingdom of Heaven is like yeast, which a woman took and hid in three measures of flour until the whole of it was leavened. (v. 33)*

Once again the parable stresses that what is now visible is a taste of the future. The word “parable” here means “an illustration” of what will be. Here “Kingdom of Heaven” refers to the changes in nature that will occur in the Future. The mustard and yeast parables have the same message: much from little and find fulfillment in 14:17–20. The narrative “proves” the meaning of the parable. Of the four parables in this chapter the first two show anger against a group that rejects Jesus while the last two show the abundance of what is in store for those who accept him. They form two doublets.

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<sup>16</sup> A/C forms a single unit, introduced in A by “In the Eschatological Age,” and its theme is found in the Second Apocalypse of Baruch, 29:5–8 (post 70 CE) but may well be prior to it. B interrupts this unit. Such interruptions are not uncommon in the Talmuds and Midrashim of the Rabbis, and tend to signify what we might call “notes.” They are rarely scribal interpolations. B shows us an unaffected expectation of prosperity since such abundance is even evident, although rare, in the present era. The examples of B are not of wheat or wine but of cabbages and turnips and mustards. *B. Ketub.* 11b has variants of these themes.

<sup>17</sup> J. Klausner (*Jesus of Nazareth*, 401), cites the passage at length. Nevertheless, since the teaching of physical bounty in the Kingdom reported by Pappias flies in the face of the post-Jesus spiritualization of God’s Dominion, we might well accept this declaration was suppressed from the Gospels by those who preserved Christian tradition. However, what escaped suppression (and likely did so because of its ambiguity) was preserved in the Gospels, namely, I suggest, the mustard seed parable.

*Jesus said all these things in parables to the crowds, and except for parables, he told nothing to them. (v. 34)*

Those to whom Jesus' message was directed would understand while others would not. The parables have messages that separate the worthy from the unworthy and that the reward of the worthy will be great, even in material and physical terms.

*Thus was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet, "I will open my mouth in illustrations, I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world" [Ps 78:2]. (v. 35)*

Illustrations are parables. In the introduction to the next chapter I discuss that the parables of the weeds and mustard seed are more than parables—they are prophetic images awaiting fulfillment.

*Then, leaving the crowds, he went into the house. His students came to him, and said, "Explain for us the parable about the poisonous weeds of the field." (v. 36)*

It is remarkable that they ask for explanation but since the parable of the sower has been decoded and this parable is a variant with a different mind-set, it needs to be spelled out.

*He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man." (v. 37)*

We might have thought it to be God. We see here the mission of the Son of Man is to prepare minds for the coming kingdom.

*The field is the world, and the good seeds are the kingdom's children. The poisonous weeds are the children of the evil one. (v. 38)*

Here the radical dualism is spelled out. This Satan is not merely a tempter, he is the ruler of the Kingdom of Evil and his children are likely meant to be Jews (as Gnostic myth often related).

*The enemy who sows them is the devil, and the harvest is the culmination of the world, and the harvesters are angels. (v. 39)*

He speaks of the End of Days—the period preceding the coming of the Kingdom.

*So just as the poisonous weeds are collected and prepared for fire, so will be the culmination of the world. (v. 40)*

This style of comparison is completely Jewish in style: “Just as . . . so . . .” Note the following explanations of poetic biblical verses which speak of Israel as comparable to sand (Hosea 2:1) and stars (Gen 22:17) utilizing this type of rhetorical device:

“In the messianic era they [Israel] are compared to sand—*just as sand grinds the teeth so* Israel will destroy all the nations.” Israel is compared to stars—*just as* in the case of stars one is able to burn up the whole world **so** to the righteous [as Elijah could bring down fire through his word (2 Kings 1:10)]. (*Num. Rab.* 2:13)

Of course, in the Gospel, it is sinful Israel that is meant to suffer extinction, not the sinful Gentiles.

*The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect from his Kingdom all the offenses and all who do lawlessness, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and the grinding of teeth. (vv. 41–42)*

Note how the same image of *grinding of teeth* occurs in *Num. Rab.* 2:3 above and v. 42.

*Then the righteous will shine like the sun in their father’s kingdom. (v. 43a)*

The passage prefigures the Transfiguration scene in Matt 17:2 (recalling Exod 34:29): “And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun.” The image of “shining” is an image of sharing in the divine, Next World. Consider the imagery in *Abot of Rabbi Nathan* (version A, chap. 1), where it is said the righteous will sit with crowns on their heads and they will be basking from the glow of the *Shekhina* in the Next World.

*Whoever has ears should listen. (v. 43b)*

Again we meet with this expression inviting people to hear a parable, more so “to listen.” The following parables all contain messages of investment, giving up everything for one single item of overwhelming value and not caring about the other things, which may be ignored. In this way the message is something like the weed parable. Within the decoding of the weed parable is a set of parables, the last one of which is to be decoded in much the same way as the weed

parable. Those who are worthy are admitted into the Kingdom; the others are cast away.

*The Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure box hidden in the field, which a person who found it hid, and in his joy he goes and buys that field. (v. 44)*

He has no interest in the field but only in the treasure. God only cares for his treasured ones and will discard everything else in the field.

*Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a person in business, who searches for beautiful pearls. And, when he found one especially precious pearl, he went out and sold all that he had and bought it. (vv. 45–46)*

God will exchange faithless Jews for precious Gentiles of faith (see further v. 49 for narrative fulfillment).

*Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a net thrown into the sea, and all types of things were gathered into it. When it was full, they pulled it upon onto the shore and, sitting down, they gathered the good things into containers, and the rotten things they threw outside. (vv. 47–48)*

Only those who are worthy will be gathered into the Kingdom. The others will be discarded and incinerated.

*So, it will be in the culmination of the world. The angels will go out and remove the wicked from the midst of the righteous. And they will throw them into the fiery furnace. There will be wailing and the grinding of teeth. Do you understand all these things? They said to him: "Yes." (vv. 49–51)*

In the next few verses the narrator shows us that the Jews have no faith in Jesus—Jesus turns his back on them and so the parable of the weeds finds immediate prophetic fulfillment.

*So he said to them: On account of this, every scribe who has been taught about the Kingdom of Heaven is like a person who is a householder, who brings out of his treasury everything, both new and old. (v. 52)*

As is typical in Matthew's reconstruction of Jesus' teaching, he ends with an exhortation. The exhortation seems to be a message to the preachers, the scribes of all the nations. Here I think Matthew would identify with the

message: You are like a householder who needs to use whatever is at your disposal—old teachings to some groups and new teachings to others.

*When Jesus finished these parables, he left from there. Coming to his home town, he taught them in their assembly, so that they were amazed, and said: From where did this wisdom and these miracles come to him? (vv. 53–54)*

The Greek says *patris*—his home province—but it likely reflects the Semitic *medina* which can also refer to his city.<sup>18</sup> What is amazement here ends up as being criticism, sarcasm and dismissive. How can this common man be a teacher and a miracle-worker?

*Isn't this the builder's son? Isn't his mother called Mary and his brothers Jacob and Joseph and Simon and Judah? (v. 55)*

Who is this person who claims to be more than we know him to be? He is a boy from a local family—and no more than that.

*And aren't his sisters all with us? From where did all these things come to him? (v. 56)*

"We know his friends and family oh so well. Although fools might believe the stories told of him, we do not." This response to Jesus is likely meant to deal with the question of his rejection. If his miracles were so public, why did so few Jews follow him? The answer is that, to the Jews of his city and to his family, he was just a neighborhood boy with nothing special about him. This is the Gospels' explanation of why none of the members of Jesus' own family were among his disciples.

*And they were offended by him. Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not dishonored, except in this home town and in this house." (v. 57)*

The sentiment is universally strong and some universities do not hire their own graduates to teach in the institutions that trained them. Yair Chaim Bacharach in his *Havvat Yair* (Lemberg, 1896; reprinted, Jerusalem, 1987, p. 230b) notes the custom in Worms: "In our community, it cannot happen that one homebred (*ben bayit*) will become the city Rabbi." Three years before his death (1701/2) he actually received such an appointment and served as

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18 Luke 4:16 tells us the city is Nazareth, the city where Jesus grew up.

the Rabbi of Worms until his death. The words of Jesus here reflect the same disappointment that Bacharach discusses in his work, but the bitter phrasing in the Gospel suggests outright condemnation of the attitude of his former friends. They should be proud and his strongest supporters, even those who think of him as “the kid down the block.” However, 14:35 provides the rest of the key. While the Jesus-character seems to be distraught at what is happening, Matthew pushes forward with his subtle narrative.

*And he did not do many miracles there, because of their faithlessness. (v. 58)*

One might have expected him to prove himself and dispel all doubts, but the Gospel tells us he did not do this.

# Chapter 14

## Introduction

Early in the Gospel, Matthew relates the manner in which Jesus' mission was revealed to him at the time of his meeting with John the Baptist (chapter 3). Subsequently, Matthew presents John and Jesus as highly unsuccessful in their efforts to create meaningful change on the historical stage of their lifetimes (chapter 11). Indeed, neither figure looms large or even at all in the writings that have been preserved from the first half of the first century. Nonetheless, it might be gathered from the late first-century writings by Josephus (*Ant.* 18:118–19) that John was loved by the people and feared by the authorities. Jesus also left his mark in that his following continued to grow in the first century. The writings of Paul, Acts, Didache, and Barnabas show us the growth of churches and their organization.

In this chapter, we get historical flashbacks showing us the senseless execution of the saintly John. The plot of Herodias and her daughter manipulates the Tetrarch to utter a rash oath. The machinations of those in power, feeling threatened by his message of impending salvation from tyranny and his loyalty to Jewish law, risked antagonizing the masses by making a martyr of him. In near parallel, at the end of the Gospel, those in power felt Jesus' threat to them was equally strong and execute him. While no curse is attached to those who murdered John, in the most straightforward reading of his narrative Matthew will expand the blame for the spilling of Jesus' blood to all Jews living at the time of Jesus and to their children who are to descend after them (Matt 27:25).

The gruesome beheading of John ends the historical setting of the events of the chapter. What follows is Matthew's ingenious structuring of the theological setting of the chapter. Just as Jesus went into the desert alone after his first encounter with the Baptist, so, too, did he after the Baptist's death. Whereas in the early scene Jesus refuses to demonstrate his divine powers proving his entitlement to the title "Son of God," here he demonstrates them fully.

The scene has shifted; historical time has ceased. In this twilight desert scene, between two worlds, present existence is at the threshold of change. Everyone present now stands at the entrance to the Kingdom. The disciples fail to grasp they have entered a spiritual space. The meaning of the parable of the mustard seed of chapter 13 and the leavening is suddenly, starkly realized. The crowds are huge, a dozen thousand or more, including women and children. Morsels of food give rise to not only enough to fill the crowds but also the leftovers will fill twelve baskets. Abundance is everywhere. The disciples failed at

first to grasp the change in scene and would have dismissed the usual followers who sought Jesus' cures. There is one other place (chap. 21) where historical time stops and huge crowds stand at the entrance to the kingdom. While the model of the narrative might be based on 2 Kings 4:41–43, the Gospels use of the motif, feeding many from little, serves a completely new Gospel function: entering the time tunnel of *Eschaton*. In chapter 21 Jesus enters Jerusalem as throngs proclaim his glory. In this chapter, the Jewish leaders and the Jews as a whole are told they will be deserted by God who will choose another nation and so the parable of the weeds of chapter 13 is now brought to reality in that scene.<sup>1</sup> In a similar way, 21:9 find the crowd reciting Ps 118:26, "Blessed be the one who comes in the name of the Lord." A few chapters later in 23:39 we read: "For I say to you, You will not see me from this time till you say, *Blessed be the one who comes in the name of the Lord.*" The fulfillment of the later verse occurs two chapters earlier. Furthermore, in Matt 21:9 the crowds welcome Jesus as he rides his messiah-charged animals to Jerusalem, but in the next verse, 21:10, we read, "And when he came into Jerusalem, all the town was moved, saying, Who is this?" The people in the Temple have no idea who he is until informed by the followers from the previous scene. We have two episodes viewed through an interstitional forward movement of donkey canter, prayer, and rejoicing—then backwards to the old conflict scenes. Time is divided between now and future expectancy. The symbols here mark the ambiguity in the narrative. Time moves between historical present and the entrance to the kingdom in the future. Chapter 14 shares the same ambiguous time switches (and parable fulfillment) with the scene in chapter 21 portraying Jesus' entrance to Jerusalem. The halfway point in this Gospel is a kind of marker at the center of the Gospel that moves the action to its climax: death in historical time, salvation in sacred time.

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<sup>1</sup> For Matthew, the Gentiles are signified in Ps 118 as the new chosen group to replace the Jews. This is the Psalm of victory for Matthew. The Jewish nation, defined as a nation by their teachers and leaders, are not present in the *Eschaton* when Jesus ushers in the New Age. In essence, this has already taken place in mythic time; in 21:42–45. Matthew describes how ancient prophecy was now being fulfilled:

"Jesus said to them, 'Did you never see in the Writings, 'The stone which the builders rejected, the same has been made the chief stone of the building: this was the Lord's doing, and it is a wonder in our eyes' [Ps 118:22]? For this reason I say to you, *The kingdom of God will be taken away from you, and will be given to a nation producing the fruits of it.* Any man falling on this stone will be broken, but he on whom it comes down will be crushed to dust." And when his stories came to the ears of the chief priests and the Pharisees, they saw that he was talking of them."

## Commentary

*At that time Herod, the Tetrarch, heard the report about Jesus. (v. 1)*

This Herod in chapter 14, also called Herod Antipas, was the stepson of Herod the Great mentioned in chapter 2. As Tetrarch he was ruler of a province, in this case the Galilee.

*He said to his slaves, “This is John the Baptist. He has risen from the dead, and on account of this the miracles are accomplished by him.” (v. 2)*

Up to this point the narrator suggests that Herod Antipas had never heard of Jesus. Now that he had executed John and soon after Jesus appeared on the scene curing invalids, Herod thought that the two men were one and the same.

*For Herod had seized John and bound him and put him in prison on account of Herodias, the wife of Philip, his brother. (v. 3)*

Herodias was the granddaughter of Herod the Great and the wife of Herod's son Philip until she abandoned him for his half-brother, Herod Antipas. The arrest of John may have been either because she manipulated Herod Antipas to silence John's condemnation of their marriage, or, more likely, because of John's messianic preachers (see below in v. 5), which threatened Rome's authority. The Gospel's account subsequently makes Herod look sympathetic to John.

*For John used to say to him: It is not permitted for you to marry her. (v. 4)*

Herodias left Herod's son and then married her husband's half-brother, Herod Antipas, the Tetrarch of Galilee. Even had she been properly divorced by her husband, she was nonetheless marrying her husband's brother, as Jewish law would have it; a brother from the same father, an act considered incest (Lev 18:16). Only when a man dies without leaving any offspring may his wife enter into a living arrangement with a surviving brother. The law of Deut 25:5–10 spells out the laws of *yibum* (Levirate marriage). Josephus (*Ant.* 18:136), like Matthew, mentions that when Herodias when her husband's half-brother the couple flouted ancestral laws.<sup>2</sup> He says this was because she parted from a

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<sup>2</sup> LXX Deut 25:5–10, like the rabbis and the Sadducees in Mark 12:19, rules that a child of any sex will suffice to close off the possibility of levirate marriage. E.W. Davies, “Inheritance Rights

“living husband.” I have no idea what is gained by having the word “living” here. The problem to my knowledge would not be any less had Philip died while they had still been married.

*And while wishing to kill him, he feared the crowd, because they held that he was a prophet. (v. 5)*

This verse does not accord well with the previous one (v. 3), in which Herod had arrested John due to the pressure of his wife. Here it says that he wished to kill him but below in verse 9 it says that he had no such intention and repeats that Herodias forced his hand. I suspect this verse comes from a variant story that Herod, Tetrarch of the Galilee, feared that John’s messianic speeches might cause popular uprisings against himself and Rome, as Josephus remarks in *Ant. 18:118–19*.

*But at the time of Herod’s birthday, Herodias’ daughter danced in the middle of the court, and pleased Herod. (v. 6)*

In Josephus’s *Antiquities 18:136* it is reported that Herodias gave birth in her first marriage with Philip to a daughter. It is usually assumed that the reference here, in Matthew, is to that daughter.

*So that he promised her by an oath to give her whatever she asked. (v. 7)*

Public oaths were serious promises that people were duty-bound to keep.<sup>3</sup>

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and the Hebrew Levirate Marriage, Part 1” (1981) 142 n. 15, suggests that Josephus, in his discussion of marriage laws in *Antiquities 4:8*, is of the opinion that a son is necessary but his translation of Josephus does not substantiate this claim:

“This is clearly the way in which Josephus (*Ant. iv. viii. 23*) understood the Deuteronomic provision, for in his comment on Deut 25:5–10 he makes the following remark (I have added the emphasis): ‘When a woman is left *childless* on her husband’s death, the husband’s brother shall marry her, and shall call the *child* that shall be borne by the name of the deceased and rear him as heir to the estate; for this will at once be profitable to the public welfare, houses not dying out and property remaining with the relatives, and it will moreover bring the women an alleviation of their misfortune to live with the nearest kinsman of their former husbands.’”

3 We note in this regard that, while under some circumstances it is possible to have private promises remitted, under no circumstances does any Jewish law permit remitting of public promises.

*She had been prepared for this by her mother: "Give me," she said, "here on a board, the head of John the Baptist." (v. 8)*

Herodias had plotted the occasion and knew Herod would kill John if he made an oath in front of others. In the end it was her daughter, Herod's niece, who actually made the demand. Herod, knowing the vindictive grudges held by Herodias, would never have offered "whatever you desire" to her. But she out-smarted him and "set him up" to get her way.

*The king was grieved, but he called for this to be granted, on account of the oaths and the dinner guests. (v. 9)*

The Tetrarch was also referred to as king. The verse suggests remorse, as if to say—what else could he do? He acted impatiently and made an oath that might now create disturbances. The Gospels tradition seems to express some sympathy for his dilemma—not a bad guy, just a victim of circumstances.

*He sent and beheaded John in the prison. (v. 10)*

Beheading with a sword was a normal Roman way of doing away with those sentenced to death by Roman courts. The next verse seems to say that the prison was nearby. Events are likely truncated for the sake of keeping the narrative at a quick pace. Josephus' account of John's death differs from Matthew's, as I pointed out in the introduction to chapter 4 (discussing v. 4:3).

*His head was brought on a board and given to the little girl, and she brought it to her mother. (v. 11)*

The gruesome act is a brilliant piece of writing that shows us the callousness and wretchedness of those involved. The picture of the girl, whom we might have expected to be gentle and kind, with the severed head of the prophet on her platter, makes us shudder at her vileness. She presents the head to her mother. The two of them appear completely depraved and Herod appears as weak and ineffective. The actions tell the story, not the dialogue at all. It is all done in silence in the narrative. The horror of the scene depends on the rapidity of the five verbs "sent," "beheaded," "was brought," "given," "she brought." The effect shows us one continuous action from Herod's first command until her mother receives the head. What happens then is left open to the imagination as nothing further is said—it would be anticlimactic to say another word. The mother's reaction is left off the page. The words "her mother" would normally

sound kind and gentle, but here there is an ironic twist. In verse 8 we are told “her mother” had put her up to having the king order John’s death. The daughter was the mother’s agent to connive John’s murder and finally her agent to deliver his lifeless head to her. The final act shows the daughter again—the mother’s hand is unseen but always there behind each of the five verbs.

*His students came and took the corpse and buried it, and they came and reported to Jesus. (v. 12)*

John is buried and we now get the impression that Jesus is the one who must continue the work of John in spreading the message of repentance and redemption. At the same time, the students likely warn him that the Tetrarch suspects he is a reincarnation of John.

*When Jesus heard he left from there in a boat to a desert place by himself. When the crowds heard, they followed him on foot from the cities. (v. 13)*

Jesus had not gone so far that he could not be found. Seeking solace, he is pursued by crowds of lame and sick who were somehow able to walk the distance.

*Coming out, he saw a great crowd and he had compassion for them, and he healed their sick. (v. 14)*

Jesus attends to their needs, performing miracles.

*As evening arrived, his disciples came to him, “This is a deserted area and the hour has passed. Discharge the crowds, so that they might go into the villages and buy themselves food.” (v. 15)*

Mark relates (during the scene depicting the confusion of the stormy sea) that the disciples had not understood the significance of the feeding (and further in Matt 16 and Mark 8 we learn there are mystical interpretations behind the bread episodes). Luke gives meaning to the event by placing the Transfiguration (a kind of baptism by light) of Jesus in chapter 9, eight days after the miracle of the loaves. John 6, while relating the same events, tells us that Jesus is the true bread and that the manna in the desert was just a sign of Moses to tell us that eventually one will come who will be the bread of everlasting life.<sup>4</sup> Apparently,

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<sup>4</sup> John 6:16–35:

“When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The

the Gospels accounts reflect the controversies in the churches to make sense of the miracle. This is the only miracle shared by John and the synoptics. This sharing shows it to have been an ancient tradition. The miracle was understood to mean something more than just another miracle performed by Jesus.

The present narrative makes the reader work and may reflect various subtle changes introduced by the evangelists into an early apostolic tradition. Chapter 14 began with historical time, projecting Herod the Tetrarch's arrest and beheading of John, then forwarding to Jesus' withdrawal to a lonely, deserted place. Incredibly, hordes of people appear to whom Jesus, presumably, preaches about the kingdom and cures their illnesses. Then the narrator reports that in this desolate place it was evening. The disciples remark that the time, the hour, the era has passed—on the surface they seem to be noting that the hour is growing late and the people need to be sent away now. However, that is not what they say—they say, “the time has passed.”

Matthew's organization of the passage when compared to Mark's shows us his literary skill in taking highly complex and poetic images and showing us the mystery through subtle shifting and editing. Elsewhere in Matthew (v. 23) (cf. Mark 6 and John 6) evening comes after they have eaten—quite logical, for otherwise the people would have been eating in the dark.<sup>5</sup> We will need to account for Matthew's mention of evening so early in the account. Also, markets closed at dark, and we are told in Matthew the people still have time to get to market on foot from the desolate location. It was clearly not evening yet. So why does Matthew say it is? The intent is to illustrate that they are living in dual time and space—liminal, desert, a twilight zone of historical time and eschatological time. The time of This World is passing through an ontological portal, through the looking glass into the dream reality of the Next World.

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sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about twenty-five or thirty *stadia*, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were frightened. . . . But he said to them, ‘It is I; do not be afraid.’ Then they were glad to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going. On the next day . . . ‘Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal.’ Then they said to him, ‘What must we do, to be doing the works of God?’ Jesus answered them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom He has sent.’ Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.’ They said to him, ‘Sir, give us this bread always.’ Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life . . .’”

5 Luke 9 omits any mention of evening.

*Jesus said to them, “They have no need to go; you give them something to eat.”* (v. 16)

Jesus rebukes them, “Hey guys, wake up—you can supply them. In this vision of the New World there is no difference between much and little.” The verse recalls, as does the entire episode, 2 Kings 4:41–44.

*But they said to him, “We have nothing here except five loaves of bread and two fish.”* (v. 17)

The disciples do not get it. They are stuck in the historical present. Since they are oblivious to the fact that they stand at the entranceway to a new realm, they ask Jesus to have the people return to the markets to purchase food. Jesus, knowing they are at the edge of the *Eschaton*, supplies much from little. The parable of the mustard seed and the leaven comes to fruition—the feeding of the thousands is no longer a miracle—it is the norm for the *Eschaton*, the new world.<sup>6</sup> The disciples fail to see what they are experiencing, and behave as if all is normal.

*He said, “Bring them here to me.”* (v. 18)

Jesus is not stuck in any particular time frame. He is now in the entrance to the future.

*Calling the crowds to lean back upon the grass, he took the five loaves of bread and the two fish, and, looking up to heaven he said the blessing, and, breaking them, he gave the loaves of bread to his disciples, and gave them to the crowds.* (v. 19)

Eyes upward toward God, he blesses over the bread with a *berakhah* (blessing), giving thanks to the Lord who sustains. Then he broke (Greek *klasas*—breaking bread, used precisely like Hebrew *pores* or its equivalent *botse'a*) the bread into pieces to have them distributed to the masses. Everything seems normal—no one claims that a miracle occurred, no one takes note that such little food could feed the masses and have leftovers. The phrases of “blessing,” “breaking,” and “giving of the food” have found their way into church liturgy, suggesting the framers of the liturgy understood that the meal was a sign of the future communion of his followers. The verb used here to signify that

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<sup>6</sup> See my commentary to Matt 13:31.

they should sit for the meal is *anaklino*, literally to recline and is equivalent to Hebrew *lehasev* which is “to recline.” Meals of the upper classes were customarily eaten on dining couches in Roman times, and the word came to mean simply to “sit at a meal” as here and by extension “to eat a festive, substantial meal.”

Early Jews were divided as to whether one should first break the loaves and then bless or the reverse (bless first and then break) before distributing the bread. The Talmud decides that first one should bless and then break the bread. Rashi (*b. Ber.* 47a) neatly summarizes an involved discussion by citing the Talmudic decision of *b. Ber.* folio 39b (eight pages earlier) that the blessing had to be concluded before commencing the breaking: “he would break off a piece and give it to whoever was beside him saying, ‘take from the slice of blessing [i.e., one that had already been blessed before being sliced].’”<sup>7</sup> The order of blessing first and breaking afterwards is fixed in Jewish law and we see it to be precisely the order found in the “Last Supper” descriptions in 1 Cor 11:24 and Matt 26:26.

*And all ate and were satisfied, and they took what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. (v. 20)*

The disciples might be amazed but no one else seems to be—and even the disciples say nothing. The image of eating and being satisfied and having leftovers is found in Ruth 2:14: “And she did eat, and was satisfied, and had leftovers.” The mystery of the scene has not been lost on commentators and preachers who have speculated on its illusive and elusive sense. The numbers here may have some allegorical significance, but I will refrain from speculating on such matters in this commentary. The parables of “much which comes from near nothing” are here illustrated in the dramatic events. The reader, as I said in comments to verse 16, might consult 2 Kings 4:43–44 for a similar story including the leftovers (“and they [100 men] ate and they left thereof”).

*The ones who ate were about five thousand men, not counting women and children. (v. 21)*

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<sup>7</sup> James 2:21–22 speaks of Abraham’s faith being justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar. Ramban (commentary Gen 15:6), some twelve centuries later, said the very same thing but provided the scriptural hermeneutic of shared wordings (Gen 15:5–6 and 22:17) that yields this conclusion. Medieval works are not irrelevant to the study of the New Testament.

In discussing the 600,000 men who journeyed out of Egypt (“besides young ones”) in Exod 12:37, *Mekhilta of Rabbi Yishmael (Pisha Bo 14)* tells us that “besides young ones” means “not counting women and children.” The manner of counting those present is decidedly Jewish.

*Right away, he compelled the disciples to go into the boat and to go ahead of him to the other side, until he dismissed the crowds. (v. 22)*

Jesus pushes the students to get into boat where they will be tossed in stormy waves and high winds. These disciples have been singled out for a more personal journey to “the other side” of the world. They did not see the dual blurred worlds of the twilight existence (between the past-day and the not-yet-night) that marked the deserted place. So they will now journey into the unknown night until daybreak, where they will have an ascension-like experience over the waters that threaten to drown them. The conquering of the threatening sea, the home of satanic monsters, is a motif of new creation (Isa 51:9–13), and intimates that a new mode of existence awaits those who are prepared. In the end, and the Gospel primes us now (see v. 31), Peter will fail; he will at early dawn (the time of v. 31) deny Jesus (Matt 26:74). The storytelling here is rich with allusions that prefigure the closing chapters of the Gospel.

*He dismissed the crowds and went up to the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he alone was there. (v. 23)*

Now Jesus is left alone on the mountain and he offers his solitary evening prayer. This is now “true evening”—the world he is in is no longer that of history. He offers his prayer closed away from the others in accord with his dictum to pray in private (Matt 6:6).

*But the boat had already sailed many stadia from the land, and it was being tossed about by the waves, for the wind was up against it. (v. 24)*

The disciples have lost control of the boat and seem to be victims of ill winds. The measure of a *stadium* (pl. *stadia*) is approximately 607 feet or 185 meters. This episode mirrors halfway through the Gospel and foreshadows the ending. The disciples are tested by the storm and lose faith and Jesus will tell Peter he is “of little faith”. At the end of Matthew (chapters 26–27) Peter denies having known Jesus or being associated with him. This final test Peter fails dismally. That lack of complete trust betrays a lingering doubt—Peter will not risk his life on the certainty Jesus is the chosen one.

*In the fourth watch of the night he came to them walking upon the sea.*  
(v. 25)

Likely, the sense is that this event occurred just as dawn was about to break. The night was divided into four watches in the Western empire, while Babylonia and the East held on to the older system, also used in ancient Greece, of three watches. Jews in Judea and the Galilee sometimes used the one and at other times the other. It is of interest to note that Judg. 7:19 and every version of it reports a three-watch night ("Gideon and the hundred men with him reached the edge of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, just after they had changed the guard"). Josephus, *Ant.* 5:223–28, readjusting one system for the other, takes some liberty by pushing the time forward ("about the fourth watch, Gideon marched forth his army . . . confusion and panic seized the hapless creatures," i.e., sometime around 10 pm to 3 am). That time must have been thought to be the time when ghosts and specters are prone to attack people. Hence it would have been fitting for Gideon to have frightened the Midianites at that time. Josephus' audience would have appreciated Gideon's cunning in that context. And so the Gospel finds this to be the auspicious moment to have the disciples imagine they see a "ghost."<sup>8</sup>

*His disciples saw him walking on the sea, and they were disturbed and said, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out from fear.* (v. 26)

Because it is the time when phantoms roam and fear rules the world, Jesus has trouble convincing the disciples that they are mistaken. The transition from one world to the next is by faith and belief in Jesus' ability to transform time and place from one world to the next. Jesus needs to persuade them all is well. Ghosts and demons have no rule over those of the Next World.

*Right away, Jesus spoke to them saying: "Be brave (Deut 31:6). It is I (Exod 3:14). Do not be afraid" (Deut 31:6).* (v. 27)

The citations from Deut 31:6 (Moses' farewell address) and Exod 3:14 (God revealing his name) not only inform the disciples that salvation is at hand, a statement that should be taken to allude to a much larger salvation, but also may be seen to be propitiatory and effective words to calm the raging sea. Similarly, rabbinic literature (*b. B. Bat.* 73a) also reports a story about Jewish

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<sup>8</sup> In *Ant.* 5:213, Josephus remarks that Gideon saw a specter in the night.

seafarers who must confront a stormy sea. They, too, turned to the same Exodus verse alluded to in Matthew.

These Jewish sailors used amulets to save them from apparitions on the stormy seas. Obviously, the experience was terrifying and the delivery from it seen as miraculous.

A certain wave was threatening to sink their boat—it seemed as if bright beams of light were on its crest—so we showed (or beat) it with sticks that had engraved on them, “I am that which I am . . . *amen, amen, selah*,” and it stopped.

Some further analysis is called for here. Either the disciples recognize Jesus’ voice or they do not. If they do, fine, but if they do not, the response “It is I” will not help them. Peter is not completely sure who it is, and will ask for a test to discover the truth. Jesus calms everyone down, and like the amulet, repeats, “It is I”—“I am,” the phrase used in Exodus (3:14) to inform the Israelites that the worker of their salvation will save them.

*Peter, answering him, said: “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you over the waters.” (v. 28)*

Peter still has some lingering doubts concerning the figure’s identity and asks to be commanded and so be given power. Jesus’ words have authority over nature.

*He said, “Come,” and, getting out of the boat, Peter walked upon the waters and was coming to Jesus. (v. 29)*

The mere command of Jesus is sufficient motivation for Peter to focus his concentration and move into the world of belief, where nature does not impose its normal limitations.

*But seeing the turbulent wind, he was afraid, and began to sink, and called out, saying, “Lord, save me!” (v. 30)*

Peter experiences the reality of his fear in his disturbed consciousness of time and space frames. The laws of nature are not operative in any disruptive way for those whose belief transmutes them and their world out of the historical present into the realm of the transcendent.

*Right away, Jesus stretched out his hand and took hold of him, and said to him, “You of little faith, why did you waver?” (v. 31)*

Jesus castigates him—if Peter cannot see over the edge, who will? With Peter’s doubt the portal is shut and historical time returns. The teachings of the Kingdom have some more to grow. Peter has failed the test that seems more than happenstance.

*When they got back into the boat, the wind stopped. (v. 32)*

Jesus imposes his miracle for those in the boat who are not yet ready to experience the world beyond. All is calm. They now understand they have failed the test and in the next verse proclaim their faith in Jesus. But this, as we have said, is not the final test—that is yet to come and they will slide yet again (Matt 26–27).

*Those in the boat worshiped him: “Truly, you are the Son of God.” (v. 33)*

What the Tempter in Matt 4:9 demanded of Jesus at the beginning of his career, Peter gives to Jesus, and Jesus does not flinch to accept—declaring himself the Son of God. Time, space, and circumstances have changed. The disciples in some sense had crossed into eternal time and now have crossed back. The meaning of “Son of God” here is “one who shares in the divine.”<sup>9</sup>

*And when they crossed they landed in Gennesaret. (v. 34)*

The boat regains balance and all is back to normal—time has resumed its steady pace. Gennesaret Sea or Lake was named after the lush region at its shore which measured some sixteen by five miles.<sup>10</sup>

*The men of that place knew him, and sent out to that whole region, and they brought him all who were ill. (v. 35)*

The location of Gennesaret has long been an issue. Mark 6:45–53 says:

<sup>9</sup> See my article, “Sharing in the Divine.”

<sup>10</sup> The name is known to the Targum of Numbers 34:11 and is the same as the Sea of Kinneret (*b. Meg.* 6a). The lush fertility of the area is noted by Josephus (*Wars* 3:515–21) and *b. Erub.* 30a.

Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray. Later that night, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and he was alone on land. He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them. Shortly before dawn he went out to them, walking on the lake. He was about to pass by them, but when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost. They cried out, because they all saw him and were terrified. Immediately he spoke to them and said, “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.” Then he climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down. They were completely amazed, for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened.” And when they had passed over, they came into the land of Gennesaret, and drew to the shore.”

As of yet no recent commentator has explained the Marcan passage without problems as Jesus appears to be moving eastward toward Bethsaida while Gennesaret is traditionally thought to be on the western shore of the Galilee. The issues are nicely portrayed by contemporary scholars who discuss the historical location of Gennesaret (according to Mark 6:52–53 it was probably a city that was located northwest of the Sea of Galilee located between Capernaum and Magdala, which no longer exists). Also note: Fausset’s *Bible Dictionary* (1984) locates the unknown Land of Gennesaret on the west side of the sea (s.v. Gennesaret):

At the N.W. angle was the fertile plain “Gennesaret,” crescent in shape, extending from Khan Minyeh on the N. to the steep hill behind Mejdel on the S., called el Ghuweir, “the little ghor,” watered by the spring Capharnaum (B.J. 3:10, sec. 8). It is also called “the Sea of Tiberias.” All its names are drawn from places on the W. side\*. “The land of Gennesaret” was close to Capernaum on the opposite side to the N.E. of the lake, where the feeding of the 5,000 took place (John 6:1; John 6:17; John 6:24–25). In the land of Gennesaret was spoken the parable of the sower. There was the grain field descending to the water’s edge, the trodden path through its midst, without fence to prevent the seed from falling on either side or on it, itself hardened with treading; there was the rich soil of the plain, the rocky hillside protruding here and there, the stony soil, and the thorn bushes springing up in the midst of the grain.

Was Mark mistaken about the voyage towards Bethsaida? Were there two such cities, one on the eastern shore and another on the western coast? Did

Matthew have a better text or did he alter Mark's text as he says nothing of Bethsaida? Fortunately, this is not our issue here.

*They urged him so that at least they might touch the fringed-hem of his cloak, and those who touched were healed. (v. 36)*

Jesus' power was extremely strong. The compromise was that Jesus need not touch them but they would touch the mere fringes of his garment. The Greek *kraspedon* is the Aramaic *keruspad* (pl. *keruspedin*).<sup>11</sup> In the end, the mere trace of a touch of a tassel that he was wearing at the hem of his garment sufficed to bring the ailing person complete health.

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<sup>11</sup> LXX Num 15:38–39 speaks of the *tzitzit* fringes as *kraspeda* while the Aramaic *Targum Onqelos* translates these fringes as “*kruspedin*.” The Hebrew *tzitzit* is used to this day and many Jews observe the commandment daily. Obviously, it was part of Jesus’ daily attire. Its purpose is to remind Israel to perform their sacred commandments, avoid physical or mental distractions, and to cement their bond with God who redeemed Israel from Egyptian bondage. The Gospel writers do not hide this Jesus from our eyes, from our touch.

# Chapter 15

## Introduction

Up to this point in the Gospel, Jesus has insisted on the proper application of Pharisaic and scribal rules, rather than their abrogation.<sup>1</sup> The macro-view of chapter 15 initially shows Jesus to be in conflict with embodiments of the traditions of the elders (particularly Pharisees ignoring the importance of inner character refinement), next in conflict with embodiments of Jewish particularity (the disciples demanding Gentiles be excluded from the Kingdom), and then with the embodiment of the disciples' hatred of the worst of worst of Israel's enemies, who is seeking divine mercy (the Canaanite woman). The rhetoric of Matt 11:21–22, declaring Tyre and Sidon to be more worthy than Israel, takes a step forward: faith in Jesus' messengership finds at least one proponent. The chapter concludes with Jesus again feeding huge crowds from meager resources, a scene which allows us to slip into a dimension of the New World, the ultimate Kingdom, the author of the Gospel bolstering his Gentile audience's sphere of trust and hope.

Let us reflect on some of the details we will encounter in chapter 15. The controversies between Jesus and Pharisees are not mere repetitions of tropes already witnessed in previous chapters, but rather are expositions of major points at issue between Matthew's Jesus and the Pharisees. A close examination will show us that, earlier in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus argued from within the premises of the scribal tradition, but from here on in this is not necessarily so. This distinction allows us to notice that Jesus dismisses scribal tradition in this chapter only in very limited cases: (1) when scribal law prevents the fulfillment of Mosaic law; and (2) when the metaphors and motifs underlying the scribal laws contravene his philosophic approach to morality, such as his insistence that the inner person determines the outer person, not the other way around. In chapter 15, Jesus does not completely accept the scribal premises in these cases without complaint, as he does in earlier chapters, where he defines scribal Sabbath laws quite capably for his purposes. Rather, he suggests that because certain specific rules can be egregiously abused, they should be made

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<sup>1</sup> In Mark 7:19, the text remarks (either by the hand of Mark or by that of another) that when Jesus said that what matters is what comes out of the mouth and not what goes into it he thereby abrogated all Jewish prohibitions against various foodstuffs. I do not read Matthew's understanding of what matters as going in that direction.

exceptions to the generally applicable rules governing oaths and purity laws within the “Tradition of the Elders.”

Through close reading we can discover that the Gospel writer (or his source) intends for us to notice the exceptions proving the rule that Jesus largely accepted Pharisaic authority, except in some limited cases. (The presentations of these conflicts in similar passages found in the other Gospels need not detain us, as they have their own agenda.) Matthew (and most likely his source) has a specific agenda: to show us a Jesus who was skilled in, and accommodating of, scribal law. Yet at the conclusion of the Gospel, the scribes have rejected his plea for reforms and his demand for much more than the Law requires in the area of human relationships. In short, the narratives in this chapter allow the Gospels to compare Jewish and Gentile responses to Jesus’ severe, perhaps even unreasonably severe, demands for caring about the other. Jesus has made a concentrated effort to teach the Jews his program that will usher in the New Age. But by the close of the Gospel, it will be the Gentiles who respond to his message, not the Jews.

In chapter 15, Jesus has no warrant (yet) to waste his meaty words on Gentile “dogs.” Nonetheless, it is shown in deep relief here that the Gentiles are the ones with faith in him; they can make do with leftover crumbs of his healing powers. The end-time vision, so prominent in chapter 14, is doubled as well here, but stands in tension with the earlier chapter’s intent. The previous feeding scene had been a surrealistic slide into the next world. Now, although the theme of large quantity repeats the earlier language, the food is given away because of utilitarian need. The present miracle—to feed people who have been fasting for three days—is not only a vision of the abundance in the Kingdom, it resonates with compassion. That Matthew considers the miraculous feeding of chapter 14 to be distinct from the feeding in chapter 15 is explicitly noted in Matt 16:9–10, which refers to them as separate incidents. Certain episodes in chapter 15 can be taken as an addendum, but they are much more. The miraculous feedings are doubles, not simply repetitions or alternates, of earlier accounts. They demonstrate that what is at present a utilitarian miracle produced out of mercy and kindness will, in the future, be routinely provided as a matter of course; there will be no wants or needs.

As the Kingdom approaches, certain rules enacted for a backsliding nation can now be given fuller force. For Matthew, the pristine human soul in Eden needs to be cultivated and encouraged to re-emerge. Rules that ensure proper technical conformity with outward behavioral norms, while overlooking inner emotional dynamics, need to be dropped. The move is toward greater “inwardness” and heightened essential purity, away from concerns about exteriority and merely symbolic purity. Such stress on interiority alone is somewhat alien

to traditional Jewish concepts, which emphasized striving for balance between inner direction and outward compliance, at the very least until the spread of Kabbalah in the 13th century.

Thus in chapter 19, Jesus will invoke his own extra-biblical definition of adultery which, although based on a biblical argument, is not found among the laws of Moses. Mosaic prescriptions and proscriptions were generally not as stringent as later scribal or rabbinic rules. Nevertheless, even in the absence of any suggestion of scriptural support, Rabbi Meir (*b. B. Mes.* 55b) is willing to legislate concerning “scribal adultery”—with ramifications as severe as Mosaic adultery—if certain legalistic details or customary procedures in a woman’s divorce proceedings are lacking.

Attacks on scribal rules in Matthew are actually quite limited, suggesting that the original layer of material portrayed a Jesus who wanted to slowly adjust scribal law to what he saw as the dawning of a new human condition, with interior concerns.<sup>2</sup> Most likely a bare core of chapter 15 originated with the earliest Jesus followers, and was reworked over the years. Mark 7 represents a later form than Matt 15. Mark makes a more far reaching attack on scribal law, and even revises Mosaic legislation itself. The Gospel rhetoric of both Mark and the revised versions of Matthew will attack both Jewish leadership and their followers, the Jews.

I found it illuminating to read Solomon Schechter’s analysis of C.H. Toy’s *Judaism and Christianity, a sketch of the progress of thought from Old Testament to New Testament* (London, 1890).<sup>3</sup> Toy wrote: “[T]he great legal schools<sup>4</sup> which grew up in the second century . . . did not fail to discriminate between the outward and the inward, the ceremonial and the moral.” Schechter points out that, however true that may appear, Jews at no point denigrated the ceremonial, and never regarded it as anything less than necessary for the proper moral training. Only abuse of the ceremonial could push the moral aside. Schechter draws our attention to the high level of the moral injunctions embedded in laws of sacrifice in Leviticus, and to the extraordinary emphasis on both ritual and the concomitantly relentless demand for moral excellence in Ezekiel and Hosea:

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<sup>2</sup> I am reminded of Mark Twain’s observation, “Habit is habit, and not to be flung out of the window by any man, but coaxed down-stairs one step at a time.” Similarly, traditions cannot be changed quickly.

<sup>3</sup> Solomon Schechter, “The Law and Recent Criticism,” (1891), 754–766.

<sup>4</sup> i.e. the rabbinical academies.

"The ways of the Lord are right and the just shall walk in them, but the transgressors shall stumble therein. (Hosea 14:9)" [Rabbi Yohanan] explains that while one man, for instance, eats his paschal lamb for the sake of the Mitzvah (that is, to do God's will who commanded it) and thereby commits an act of righteousness, another thinks only of satisfying his appetite by the lamb, so that his eating (by the very fact that he professes at the same time to perform a religious rite) becomes a stumbling block for him (*b. Nazir* 23b).

Schechter points out that both Jews and Christians in the first century can be shown to have understood that the ritual laws—when properly observed—have both spiritual and moral dimensions. The dichotomy is not between ritual and moral, but rather between ritual properly observed and ritual improperly observed. I would qualify this by suggesting that Christians in the earlier part of the first century shared this view, but by the latter decades, gentile Christians and the Gospel writers had rejected it. We discuss scribal traditions shortly.

We now need to take stock of some of the issues that will arise in the course of the commentary to this chapter and set the stage for the conclusion of the Jesus drama. In-depth examination of chapter 13 revealed Jesus' use of two types of parables. The first type speaks of those who receive his axiological, moral teachings, preparing for the new Kingdom, who will receive abundant growth of insight, but also addresses those whose predispositions obstruct the message's coming to fruition. The second type of parable suggests that physical and material abundance will be the norm in the Kingdom.

In this chapter, the debate scenes with the Pharisees reveal that their inner mechanisms are not prepared to receive the greater sense of his axiological teachings, which are requisite for membership in the Coming World. The debate with the Canaanite woman puts forward the notion that Jesus can include her in his mission of preparation for the Kingdom. Following this is a scene in which Jesus is welcomed by the masses of people he heals and nourishes. I have argued that parables are followed by narratives that suggest the "real life" illustration of the parable.

We move through conflict scenes to episodes of healing and abundance. The centerpiece of the chapter is an incident in which a gentile woman is found to be deserving of the leftover scraps of Jesus' healing powers. Since the Canaanite woman compares the feeding of dogs from scraps and leftovers to meeting the needs of Gentiles after meeting the needs of Israel, we might well see its fulfillment in the miracles of nourishing masses. At the end, seven bushels of leftovers are gathered. Why? Just to show the amount of abundance? Perhaps these bushels are for Gentiles in accordance with the parable of this

woman. Taken as a whole, we discover Jesus blessing the loaves, then giving food to his disciples, who in turn give it to the people, and they have abundant leftovers (i.e. scraps for the dogs). The implication is that these leftovers will feed the gentile nations although Matthew does not explicitly say so.

While in chapter 14 the emphasis is on the sheer quantity of food generated by the miraculous—five loaves and two fish feeding five thousand people, with abundant leftovers—the twin scene in chapter 15 reveals a stunning and new significance to feeding the masses. It is more than physical food that is at issue here; there are eschatological concerns. My reading is that Jesus hands nourishment to the disciples, who deliver it to the people, with the leftovers going to the Gentiles who also depend on God's beneficence. The smaller, philological details of the chapter deserve special attention in order to allow the larger picture—one drawn by a true artist—to emerge. We now consider scribal laws.

Extra-biblical traditions said to have been passed down from antiquity by official teachers, the Sages,<sup>5</sup> are attributed to the “elders” and “fathers” mentioned in Deut 32:7: “Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations; ask your father, and he will relate it to you; your elders and they will tell you.” These teachings were transmitted orally rather than in writing. One must ask about them because they cannot be found in the text of the Torah. They are taught through telling (*yagid/yomru*). Deut 17:9–12 mentions courts announcing decisions (*yomru*) that obligate the people.<sup>6</sup>

Josephus refers to these “traditions of the fathers” as being at the core of the disagreements between Pharisees and Sadducees:

*What I would now explain is this, that the Pharisees have handed down to the people certain laws (paredosan) by succession (diadoxēs)<sup>7</sup> from the fathers (paterōn) which are not written in the laws of Moses; and for that reason it is that the Sadducean group rejects them, and say that we are to consider only those laws to be obligatory which are in the written word, but*

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 23:8–10 equates the title “Rabbi” with “Father and “Master.” Whoever first wrote this understood “father” was a term for an authorized teacher. Likewise, the Targum to 2 Kings 2:12 renders “Father” as “Rabbi,” *b. Sanh.* 14a mentions “5 Elders” who were ordained and carried the title “Rabbi.” Ordained Elders and Fathers and Rabbis were authorized to teach oral traditions which had the force of ancestral law. *B. Mak.* 24a equates the titles “Father,” “Rabbi,” “Master.”

<sup>6</sup> See Y. Elman, “Why Study Talmud? Wellsprings of Torah and the Individual Soul” (Soccken 2009), 144, concerning Jews who lived in areas dominated by famous Rabbis who did not accept rabbinic institutions which were not found in the Torah.

<sup>7</sup> Most likely referring to a continuous oral tradition passed from generation to generation.

*are not to observe those from the Tradition of the Fathers (paradoseōs tōn paterōn).* (Ant. 13:297)

“The Sadducees say that there is a tradition (*masoret*) in the hands of the Pharisees to afflict themselves,” according to *'Abot R. Nat. A* (end chap. 12). These kinds of self-afflicting Pharisees are referred to as “*makkot perushim*” in *m. Soṭah* 3:4. *Mekhilta of Rabbi Yishmael, Yitro Bahodesh* (on Exod 19:14) states, “Not by a *masoret* did I tell you but you yourselves have seen.” *Paradosis* and *masoret* are both terms referring to these same unwritten traditions which were orally passed down as law. Theodotion (2nd c.) renders *masoret* as *paradosis*,<sup>8</sup> the same term found in the Gospels.

Washing hands before eating bread, for example, is referred to by both Talmudic and Greek sources as a tradition handed down by authorities known as “Sages,” “elders” and “fathers.”<sup>9</sup> The Talmud (*b. Sukkah* 46a; *y. Sukkah* 3:4) refers to rabbinic laws requiring taking the *lulav* on the last six days of the Festival of Booths. Midrash (*Tanh.*, *Naso* 29) refers to all non-scriptural legislation as “commandments of the elders.”

The Pharisaic “Tradition of the Elders” of which Matthew’s Gospel speaks are not God’s laws (Matt 15:3). Jesus is asked, “Why do your disciples break the *Tradition of the Elders*? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread!” (Matt 15:2). According to Mark 7:3, “the Pharisees, in fact all the Jews, will not eat unless they wash their hands ritually, keeping the *Tradition of the Elders*.”

Is there any evidence in Jewish literature at all of such a concept of man-made laws, among them the requirement to wash hands before meals, that had the title “Tradition of the Elders”?

To unravel the origin of the name “Tradition of the Elders” we should note that both Paul<sup>10</sup> and Josephus<sup>11</sup> refer to a corpus of Pharisaic law called

<sup>8</sup> In Origen’s *Hexapla* to Ezek 20:37.

<sup>9</sup> My article “Confirming that ‘Tradition of the Elders’ (*paradosis*) Refers to an Oral Body of Law (*masoret*)” (Basser 2012, 173–180), makes a number of salient points on this subject, engaging both A.I. Baumgarten (1987, pp. 63–77) and S. Mason (2001, pp. 241–243). I learned a great deal from both and, I tried to tie up their loose ends based on sources they cited and some they did not cite. This brief summary of my article will serve as an introduction to a topic that is still of interest to scholars who undoubtedly will investigate this body of teachings handed down from antiquity and its development. See also Shaye J. Cohen, “Antipodal Texts” in *Envisioning Judaism* (Boustan and Ramos 2013), 965–984.

<sup>10</sup> He says he was “steadfast in the Traditions (*paradoseōn*) of my Fathers (*patrikōn*).” (Galatians 1:14).

<sup>11</sup> “What I would now explain is this, that the Pharisees have handed down to the people a great many laws by succession (*diadoxēs*) from the Fathers which are written not in the

“tradition of the fathers.” So now we have a variant substituting “Fathers” for “Elders.” Also, *b. Hulin* 106a refers to the enactment of hand washing before meals, not as a “Tradition of the Elders,” but as a “Commandment of the words of the Sages.” Adding Sages is certainly a conscious variant of Fathers/Elders as I now demonstrate. *B. Šabb.* 23a explains the authority of “Commandment of the words of the Sages” to derive from the verse—Deut 32:7, “Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations [perhaps *shenot dor vador*=the recited traditions of many generations]; ask your *father* and he will relate to you, your *elders*, and they will tell you.” Here we have Fathers and Elders, the communal authorities, as in the expressions *av beit din* (Father of the Court) and *zaqen* (Elder of the Court), leading to a tidy rabbinic summation of the verse as a requirement to heed the ‘words of the Sages.’<sup>12</sup> Of course here “words of the Sages” means, as it sometimes does in rabbinic literature, “enactments of the Sages.” This verse from Deut 32:7 then exposes the root sense of “Tradition of the Elders/Fathers” to be “words of the Sages” and both of these expressions were used to designate the human authority requiring, among other things, hand washing before eating bread. As for “paradosis” reflecting the Hebrew *masoret*, meaning oral tradition, see my short study in *REJ*.<sup>13</sup> Philo (*Hypothetica* 7.6) refers to oral transmissions of “unwritten customs and ordinances of the nation.”

The long history of passed-down custom in later testimony is unequivocal. A.E. Harkavy’s *Teshuvot HaGeonim* 228 records, “We have traditions in our hands from our fathers and from our fathers’ fathers through many generations.” A statement in *Tanhuma Naso* 29 refers to all non-scriptural legislation as “commandments of the Elders.” Rashi refers in *b. Erub.* 5a to knowledge passed to us through “the *masoret* (oral tradition) from our Fathers, the *minhag* (custom) from our Rabbis.”

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laws of Moses; and for that reason it is that the Sadducees reject them, and say that we are to esteem those laws to be obligatory which are in the written word, but are not to observe [laws] from the Tradition of the Fathers; (*paradoseōs tōn patirōn*) and concerning these things it is that great disputes and differences have arisen among them” (*Ant.* 13:297).

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 23:8–10 equates the title “Rabbi” with “Father” and “Master.” Whoever first wrote that understood “father” was a term for an authorized teacher. Likewise, the Targum to 2 Kings 2:12 renders “Father” as “Rabbi.” *B. Sanh.* 14a mentions “five Elders” who were ordained and carried the title “Rabbi.” Ordained Elders and Fathers and Rabbis were authorized to teach oral traditions which had the force of ancestral law. *B. Mak.* 24a equates the titles “Father,” “Rabbi,” “Master.”

<sup>13</sup> Basser, “Confirming that ‘Tradition of the Elders’ (*paradosis*) Refers to an Oral Body of Law (*masoret*),” 173–180.

*B. Hullin* 106a tells us that hand washing is a commandment based on the injunction that one must obey the traditions of the Sages and refers to Deut 32:7. Hence, the special teachings of the Sages (called *paradosis* in Greek and *masoret* in Hebrew) were ascribed to the ancient “elders” and “fathers” alluded to in Deut 32:7:

Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations; ask your father, and he will relate it to you; your elders and they will tell you.

Rabbinic teachings underlie the promulgation of our present Mishnah and its cognate compositions.<sup>14</sup> For Rufinus, *deuterōseis* refers to the recondite traditions the Rabbis call “*ma'asei bereshit*” (works of the creation) and “*ma'asei merkavah*” (works of the divine realms).<sup>15</sup> Jerome calls the Rabbis of the Mishnah or Oral Tradition “*hoi sophoi deuterōsin*.<sup>16</sup> Epiphanius offers the most detail, claiming *paradosis* is the *deuterōsis* (Mishnah) passed by repetition from Moses the prophet to later generations and, through time, being subject to codifications by various teachers.<sup>17</sup>

We also need to pay close attention to Rashi’s formulations. Talmudic Aramaic has specialized meanings, particularly its terminology referring to how information is processed and derived.” In the 11th century, Rashi explained the word *naktinan*, used by Rabbi Nachman (*b. Eruv.* 5a), refers to knowledge passed to us through “the *masoret* (oral tradition) from our fathers, the *minhag* (custom) from our Rabbis.” Rashi saw the continuum from the ancient fathers to the Talmudic Rabbis much the way Epiphanius did.

Successors of the Pharisees would note that some of them play-acted,<sup>18</sup> pretending to be pious, and showing off their piety in various ways.<sup>19</sup> This was

<sup>14</sup> J. Hauptman examines and further argues the proofs for the existence of uniforms of these materials in her book (2005).

<sup>15</sup> *Origenis Comm. in Cant. Canticorum*, Prol. 1:7.

<sup>16</sup> *Epist. ad Algasiam* (CSEL 56, p. 49.) ed. Hilberg, Leipzig (1918).

<sup>17</sup> See *Panarion Haer.* 5.2. I thank Hermut Lohr who spoke on these matters at length during the 14th World Congress of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem in Aug. 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Note *b. Soṭah* 22b: King Yannai said to his wife, “Fear not the Pharisees.... but fear the painted hypocrites who impersonate the Pharisees; because their deeds are the deeds of Zimri but they expect a reward like Phineas.”

<sup>19</sup> Various explanations of the labels assigned to show-off Pharisees are suggested in two sources. *B. Soṭah* 22b appears to say that 1) *shikhmi* (either “Shekhemite” or “shoulder”) Pharisees act as did the Shekhemites, who circumcised themselves for self-serving motives. *Y. Soṭah* 5:5 claims they carry ritual materials on their shoulders up and down streets to show off; 2) *nikfi* (“clang” or “lend”) Pharisees, who *b. Soṭah* claims walk heel

not intended as an indictment of their teachings (with which Jesus will identify himself in chapter 23), but rather a condemnation of the character of those Pharisees who were dishonest. There are only two explicit objections leveled against the Pharisaic tradition in chapter 15 of Matthew, besides the general and pervasive accusation of hypocrisy directed at Pharisees: 1) using symbols that overemphasize the external to the exclusion of the internal; and 2) using scribal notions of vows and oaths to bypass a divine moral law.<sup>20</sup> The first charge challenges the symbolic discourse of the scribes, while the second questions some rulings that seem to undermine the Torah. The second charge is clearly a problem, while the first is only a problem for those claiming to understand what the proper meaning of the *paradosis* was intended to be and how the hand wash-

to toe, gazing upwards and so their shoes “clang,” in order to draw attention to their not involving themselves in the world. *Y. Soṭah* claims they go about asking to be lent some money to use to perform commandments, in order to draw attention to their piety; 3) *kizai* (“letting blood” or “knocking”) Pharisees, who the Babylonian Talmud (*Bavli*) claims close their eyes in public so as not to see women, and bash their own heads into walls until “blood spurts.” The Jerusalem Talmud (*Yerushalmi*) remarks that they have a habit of knocking one good deed against one sin, keeping score so they can figure out how much room they have to sin until their credit runs out; 4) *medukhia* (var. *menukhia*, “pestle” or “reduce” respectively) Pharisees who the *Bavli* claims walk like pestle handles, bent over, to show false humility. The *Yerushalmi* claims they make a point of telling others they do not withhold anything from their total income for performance of commandments; 5) the Pharisee who says, “Tell me my obligation or my sin and I’ll correct it,” and either keeps repeating it to show how obedient to the Law he is, or else does one good deed to show he has atoned. Two additional sorts of Pharisees are not in the category of pretenders but have considerable merit: namely, 6) the Pharisee who acts out of love; and 7) the Pharisee who acts from fear.

<sup>20</sup> The tenor of the objection in the Gospels is to see here a case of what the Rabbis sometimes referred to as avoiding the Torah’s injunctions, “*matneḥ al mah shekattuv batorah*” e.g. *b. B. Bat.* 130a. It was a matter of controversy whether this could be done by using casuistic technicalities to avoid Torah duties. But the citation from the *paradosis* is not a simple case of by-passing the divine law. The categories are summarized by J.D. Eisenstein (*Otzar Dinim uMinhagim*, New York, Hebrew Publishing Co., 1938: s.v. *mizvot*) as follows (my translation):

“Vows are binding in respect to divine commandments, e.g. ‘*Qonam* be the *sukkah* I would dwell in’ which results in a prohibition to dwell in a *sukkah* (*b. Ned.* 15a) [since he has legally made the *sukkah* an item beyond his reach by a vow which affects the object and not the person] . . . On the other hand, if he declared using an oath form, ‘I swear I will not sit in a *sukkah*,’ the oath effects no result since the prior corporate oath to keep the law at Mt. Sinai binds him to sit in it. [The oath cannot prohibit this person from observing the law, since the commandment of *sukkah* remains an obligation and a prior oath at Sinai (Lev 23:42). In the case of a vow, however, the item is never available, and the *sukkah* remains an object beyond his reach.]”

ing laws of purity subvert that symbolic meaning.<sup>21</sup> In the commentary, we will have to view both the pros and cons of these two arguments. What is noteworthy now is that these two charges have a common theme.

The first concerns a rule that hands are to be washed before the eating of bread. Mark knows all Jews do this in a prescribed way. The Sages' hand washing requirement seems to have been based on the extension to non-priests of laws that applied to the Temple priesthood when they ate *terumah* (mandatory gifts to them from non-priests). According to priestly rules, these offerings were eaten in a degree of purity above the eating of common bread; non-priests were not allowed to eat such gifts. But Sages decreed that non-priests who were not allowed to eat the priestly gifts could and should wash their hands, in imitation of the priests, when they ate their non-holy bread. This ancient washing custom, when subjected to allegorical techniques, appeared to Jesus to exaggerate the external aspect of the purity mechanisms to point of exclusion of the spiritual, moral mechanisms (an ever-present danger not lost on the Rabbis).<sup>22</sup>

The second rule involves a kind of curse, which extended vow formulas protecting Temple donations from secular use to protecting ordinary, non-dedicated private property from any use by specific persons. By pronouncing the vow-curse formula used for Temple gifts, one could appear to be summoning Divine wrath against trespassers. However, by this mechanism one could also circumvent Mosaic laws requiring the support of parents.<sup>23</sup> The two points of contention here both draw on scribal enactments that extended the applicability of Temple rituals into the profane world. Jesus would see a danger in extending some of the priestly practices and requirements of the Temple service into the lives of ordinary householders, to be observed in the course of their carrying out their day-to-day activities, when these practices interfered with moral injunctions. Observance of these enactments could open the way to abuse once removed from the sphere of their legitimate cultic concerns. Matthew's Jesus will not criticize the cultic practices *per se*, but he will point out that when requirements applicable within priestly domains spill over into secular space, the results must not be allowed to lead to counterproductive behavior.

According to Mark's version of the hand washing controversy (Mark 7), the original charge levied against the disciples of Jesus is that they eat with "defiled hands." The equation of "defiled" and "unwashed" hands illustrates

<sup>21</sup> Mark, or an addition to his Gospel, goes overboard in viewing this indictment as an absolute and all inclusive claim that no Jewish purity rituals have any validity.

<sup>22</sup> *B. Yoma* 23a–b.

<sup>23</sup> Elsewhere (Basser, *Studies in Exegesis*) I have described the precise mechanics of these scribal enactments and will discuss here matters of further interest insofar as they contribute to the sense of Matthew's argumentation.

the conceptual expansion of serious ritual purity and defilement concerns applicable within the Temple to ordinary eating. As we have explained, this type of defilement, in the case of non-priests, is not such that it could render one's daily bread unsuitable for consumption (unlike defiled *terumah*). Hand washing was mandatory for priests in order to prevent contamination of holy food-stuffs. Extending the hand washing requirement to non-priests imparted to them a sense of holiness and prevented scribal impurity concerning vessels, a concept which now must be discussed.

Some Rabbis mandated hand washing not only before eating bread but prior to any meal at which liquids would be served in a metal vessel (*b. Ber.* 52a). According to these Rabbis, unwashed hands functioned as though they conveyed second-degree impurity (i.e. not by Torah rules, just within the system of scribal rules). The upshot of this scribal rule was that these second-degree impure hands would render liquids (and foods) subject to a status of first-degree impurity: the liquid on the surface of a vessel would cause the outside of the vessel to become impure, but not the inside. This vessel would, according to scribal law, require ritual immersion in a *mikvah*, a designated pool for purifying utensils as well as people. It is to such and only such enactments of impurity that Jesus will object.<sup>24</sup>

Jesus' issue is not with Torah-based impurity rules where both insides and outsides of metallic vessels always required washing, regardless of where the initial impurity occurred.<sup>25</sup> We are speaking of an involved Pharisaic purity

<sup>24</sup> In order to show the impurity is scribal they decreed impurity only on the outside of the vessel where the hands touched. Hence, only the outside of the vessel needed ritual washing to become pure again. Torah impurities would affect the outside and inside of cups equally. See *m. Kelim* 25:1; *t. Kelim Batra* 3:1; *b. Pes.* 17b. The rule further states that if the inner side of a vessel contracts impurity from a liquid, the outside also becomes unclean, but if the outer side contracts uncleanness, the inner side remains clean.

<sup>25</sup> The scribal rules of purity are somewhat counterintuitive and the Talmud (*b. Hag.* 26a) notes a ruling by a rabbi who explained that, in very unique circumstances, liquids could be ritually, scribally impure, while he taught that the vessels holding those impure liquids would be completely pure. The passage continues, remarking that this is no more surprising than a law in the Mishnah rules, in another set of unique cases, that vessels could be impure, while at the same time asserting that the liquids contained within those impure vessels would be entirely pure according to scribal law. The disconnect between the status of the vessel and that of the contents seems to fly in the face of general principles operative in biblical and rabbinic laws concerning the ritual contamination by physical contact in most cases of food, liquids and vessels. Scribal laws concerning purity of vessels are so complicated that they strain the cogent explanations we are used to within the rabbinic legal machinery and so it is not surprising to see the anomalies as grist for ethical teachings.

system; if Jesus is to react against it he must show cause.<sup>26</sup> It cannot therefore be claimed that, on the basis of his reaction, Jesus in the synoptic passage was contemptuous of biblical laws of purity or even of most of the normative scribal purity conventions of his era.

The connection of the teachings in Mark 7, Luke 11 and Matthew 15 might be assumed. Mark 7 may present the variant closest to the original about this controversy, since it makes mention of Pharisaic rules about the defilement of the outside of vessels. It is also the target of Luke 11:39, where this objection is not explained as carefully:

The Master said to him, “You Pharisees purify the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of plunder and evil.”

Mark does not mention immersing outsides or insides of vessels as part of the larger debate over hypocrisy, hand washing and the defilement of food. Nevertheless, Luke's tradition may well lay behind Mark 7, which underlies Matthew 15. Each version of the pericope contributes a piece to our understanding of Jesus' argument that the other does not.

These passages deal with hypocrisy. People's outer “lips” (Isa 29:13) that Jesus cites as showing honor to God—the outer show of purity of character—now become allegorized as the lips upon the drinking goblet. The inner “heart” and purity of intention become allegorized as the inside of the cup. The citation from Luke seems to have said at one point something like: “You Pharisees purify the outside of the cup and of the dish (when a scribal impurity infects it) but not the inside. Outwardly you show yourselves as pious but inside you are full of plunder and evil.” Luke lacks the citation from Isa 29:13, given by both Mark and Matthew, and does not mention the question of impurities inside of vessels.

The conclusion presented in Mark 7:20–23 and Matthew 15:18–20 may indeed be based on very complex scribal purity laws and rules, cited partially and referred to exclusively in Luke 11:39. Mark and Matthew include no reference to rules regarding the impurity of vessels. Nevertheless I wonder whether their versions derive from an obvious biblical exhortation found in Lev 11:33: “If one of them falls inside of a clay pot, everything in it will be unclean, and you must break the pot.” The outside of the glazed claypot is of no bearing,

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<sup>26</sup> *M. Kelim* 25:1: “All vessels are subject to different laws in regard to their outer and inner sides respectively . . .”; 25:6: “If the outer side of a [metal] vessel contracted [scribal] impurity from a liquid, only its outer side is unclean but its inner side, rim, hanger and handles remain clean. If its inner side contracted uncleanness, the whole is unclean.”

only the inside counts. If it is pure, all is pure; if it is impure, all is ritually contaminated. Metal pots with impurities inside them could be ritually washed and purified, but the entire vessel would have to be immersed. This is the Torah ruling.

For Luke 11,<sup>27</sup> Pharisaic law distinguishes between insides and outsides of vessels. His tradition is correct that scribal purity rules legislate that outsides of vessels which have contracted impurities need to be ritually purified. The analogy becomes clear. People are vessels too. According to Jesus' view of moral purity, external, physical impurities do not contaminate the true spiritual inside of a person. So Pharisees wash externally before eating to avoid contaminating liquids and foods in vessels. But they will not then recognize that their scribal law creates an interpretive difficulty. Laws of vessel impurity cannot be separated from moral sins which the Torah also says defile. The natural tendency would be to open a door between the two and recognize that internal factors govern both Levitical purity laws because they symbolize moral truths. For Jesus, the comparison is unavoidable. However, since the Gospel contends that Pharisees do not think in moral terms, the direction of their legislation, obsessed with formal matters of ritual, precludes their realization of the greater moral lessons concerning purity of the inner heart.

Matthew identifies seven sins that begin in the heart, while Mark 7:20–23 presents twelve:

But the things that come out of mouth come out of the heart, and they make the person impure. For coming out of the heart are wicked thoughts, murders, adulteries, sexual immoralities, thefts, false testimonies, blasphemies.

Jesus argues that inner moral purification would obviate the need for symbolic outer cleansing. (According to scribal law, an impure inside pollutes the outside as well.) He and his disciples are pure on the inside, and therefore need not purify themselves outwardly.

The metaphorical leap from ritual impurity to spiritual impurity makes the case that, according to the terms in which they themselves reason, Pharisees concentrate on outer purification because they ignore inner purity. Jesus, on the other hand, needs no outer purification since he is pure on the inside, and

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. Thomas 89. Thomas utilizes both considerations but separates them. Thomas 89 reflects Luke; Thomas 14 reflects Mark.

his inner purity radiates to the outside.<sup>28</sup> The implied critique of the Pharisees is that they are impure on the inside, and therefore no exterior ritual cleansing of the outside can purify them. No new biblical legal or ethical system is being set up here and none is being destroyed. Jesus simply expresses the idea that the Pharisaic system exemplifies concern with outer social behavior, but not with underlying personality training. The critical stress is upon the Pharisaic aim of perfecting outward behavior, rather than perfecting personality traits which would determine behavior.<sup>29</sup>

An ancient fragment concerning Jesus in the Temple is of interest in this context. Part of a passage in *Fragment of an Uncanonical Gospel from Oxyrhynchus* reads:

The Savior answered and said unto him, “Woe you blind, who see not. You have washed in these running waters wherein dogs and swine have been cast night and day, and have cleansed and wiped the outside skin which also the harlots and flute-girls anoint and wash and wipe and beautify for the lust of men; but within they are full of scorpions and all wickedness. But I and my disciples, whom you say have not bathed, have been dipped in the waters of eternal life . . .”<sup>30</sup>

A. Büchler demonstrates that the details of the fuller story date from Temple times. He shows Jesus and the disciples are actually blameless in their actions. What they did can be justified according to rabbinic sources. Christians were aware that Jesus and the disciples paid strict attention to purity matters and actually justified themselves by recourse to scribal teachings.<sup>31</sup>

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28 See Mary Douglas, “Atonement in Leviticus” (1993–1994), 129. “Purity acts as moral symbol: The moral lesson is etched into the universe by physical exemplars . . . parallelism constructs the macrocosm, and is a fundamental condition of existence.”

29 The permitting of carrion was not the issue for Jesus but rather for the Jewish Church with its missionaries and the Gentile churches as a whole. The addition to Mark 7:17 permitting carrion to all (in saying this, Jesus declared all foods “clean”) comes after Thomas 14, which permits carrion only to missionaries to the Gentiles “When you go into any region and walk through in the places where people receive you, eat what they serve you and heal the sick among them, for what goes into your mouth will not defile you, rather it is what comes out of your mouth that will defile you.”

30 Bernhard Grenfell and Arthur S. Hunt, *Fragment of an Uncanonical Gospel from Oxyrhynchus* (1908).

31 A. Büchler, “The New ‘Fragment of an Uncanonical Gospel’” (1908), 330–346.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the early Christians understood purity regulations as moral signs. Rabbis did as well.<sup>32</sup> Philo, who considers the observance of the Torah in its accepted customary form as incontrovertible, nonetheless views rituals as symbols of moral instruction.<sup>33</sup> Maimonides, one of the most comprehensive legalists of the entire Talmudic tradition, writes in his great Code of Jewish Law (*Mishneh Torah*) that the commandments concerning the sacrificial pilgrimage festivals in the Bible have a moral design:

When one eats and drinks, one must also feed the stranger, the orphan, the widow, the other unfortunate paupers. But one who locks the doors of his courtyard, and eat and drinks with his children and wife but does not feed the poor and the embittered soul—this is not the joy of a commandment but the joy of his belly... (*Laws of the Festivals* 6:18).

It is the alleged hypocrisy of Pharisees, of chief priests, and of leaders in general that provides one of the major themes of Matthew's Gospel. All institutions are predicated on trust of leadership and of those in power, who can—and do at times—abuse those who depend upon them. Talmudic culture understood that integrity of character had to be a *sine qua non* of its scholarly class. The great sage Rava, well aware that this requirement was part of a long tradition, taught that the Torah itself required leaders to be entirely free of hypocrisy, just as pure on the inside as on the outside.

Rava said: from this verse we can derive that any scholar whose insides are not as pure as his outside in fact is no scholar. (*b. Yoma* 72b)

Not unlike our Gospel passage, Rava compared vessels to people. In the case of the scholar, the vessel that held the tablets of the Law would form the basis for this lesson. Exod 25:11 describes the construction of this vessel, the Holy Ark of the Covenant: "And you shall coat it with *pure* gold, inside and outside you shall coat it." The scholar is one who contains the Law.

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<sup>32</sup> See Paula Fredriksen, "Did Jesus Oppose the Purity Laws?"; Edward L. Greenstein, "Biblical Law" in *Back to the Sources* (Holtz 1992), 85. "The various norms that God commands the Israelites in the Torah were calculated to instill abstract values through concrete acts."

<sup>33</sup> Philo, *On the Migration of Abraham* 93.

## Commentary

*Then Pharisees and Scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem, and said . . . (v. 1)*

Matthew's differentiation between Pharisees and Scribes is moot. In general, members of the sect that subscribed to the authority of the "Tradition of the Elders" were called "Pharisees," while those scholars responsible for maintaining its systems, whether as teachers, legislators, or judges, were known as "Scribes."<sup>34</sup> *Targum Onqelos* renders *mehoqeq* (staff of authority, legislator) as *safra* (scribe) in his rendition of Gen 49:10. Sometimes the ancient Rabbis referred to the authoritative guardians of the Torah's interpretation as "Scribes." Discussing Num 5:15, Rabban Gamaliel<sup>35</sup> declares (according to *Sipre Num., piska 8* and *b. Sotah 15a*): "Permit me, O Scribes, to interpret . . ."

The epistle of an earlier Gamaliel (probably his father or grandfather) to the Upper and Lower Galilee is recorded in *t. Sanh.* 2 and *b. Sanh.* 11b: "To our brothers in Upper Galilee and to those in Lower Galilee: Great be your peace." This letter was said to have been written by Yoḥanan the scribe,<sup>36</sup> who evidently attended to the records and correspondence of the Court of the Elders on the Temple Mount. Messengers were sometimes sent from the Jerusalem courts to the Galilee and other parts of the country for various administrative reasons. *T. Šeqal.* 1:1 records that "On the fifteenth day of that month [Adar] emissaries of the Court attend to the repairing of the roads, which have become damaged in the rainy season." These emissaries not only went to inspect the wells and supervise the manner of digging ditches and the digging of ritual bathing-pools, but also tended to public matters of ritual purity. They enforced compliance with the Court's directives, especially where a specific situation could result in inconveniencing others (*t. Šeqal.* 1:2). *M. Šeqal.* 1:1 speaks of Court inspectors going out to inspect fields, supervising compliance with complex religious laws concerning planting.

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34 *M. Yad.* 3:2 knows laws of washing hands as "words of the scribes." Daniel Schwartz, "Between Priests and Pharisees (1992), 89–101, argues these scribes fulfilled the duties of the Levites and indeed, were actually Levites. The term "scribes," he claims, designates, among other things, members of the tribe of Levi who were official court and Temple functionaries.

35 See J.Z. Lauterbach, "Ancient Jewish Allegorists in Talmud and Midrash." *Jewish Quarterly Review* (ns) 1 (1910–11), 514.

36 Here the lower-case word "scribe" refers to one who is skilled in accurately recording what he is told to write.

It is unlikely that the Gospel tradition wants us to think that Jesus' questioners were sent on a specific mission from Jerusalem just to challenge him. It is more probable that the Gospel scene records the common practice of scribes and Pharisees who were emissaries or even heads of the Court supervising Jerusalem's public interests in the districts including the Galilee. Those scribes and Pharisees who were routinely sent from Jerusalem on official court business were apparently investigating the behavior of the disciples and Jesus, and likely others as well. It is advisable to understand "from Jerusalem" in v. 1 as meaning "from the Jerusalem central administration of religious good and welfare."

I cannot subscribe to the commonly held claim that Matthew represents the state of his Church in the year 85, struggling against the Pharisees, or the Jesus of Matthew's Gospel a law-breaking Jew in the year 25, opposing Jewish custom and ethos. Nor can I see Matthew as tampering in major ways with his received texts, to the extent that it convinces us that Matthew tells us more about himself than he does about Gospel tradition.

Of course anything is possible. Nevertheless I accept Paula Fredriksen's view that the actions of the historical Jesus, and the apostolic reports about him, accorded with the conventions of their respective time periods.<sup>37</sup> In the absence of definite proof to the contrary, the assumption of Jesus' conventional behavior must guide our understanding of the Gospel texts. Occam's Razor (*Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem*)—in everyday parlance "Why make things more complicated than necessary?"—is probably the best guide here.

Jewish debate conventions help us to understand Matthew and vice versa. Typical debate began with an initial confrontational question and an acerbic rhetorical question in response: Question: "Why do they violate?" Response: "Why do you violate?"

My commentary will follow a rabbinic interpretive convention: the least assumption is the best assumption. "Overreaching will not reach anything."<sup>38</sup>

*Why did your disciples violate the Tradition of the Elders? Namely, they do not wash their hands when they eat bread! (v. 2)*

The custom of washing of hands with a specified amount of water from a vessel prior eating bread developed into a requirement of the scribes. They

<sup>37</sup> Paula Fredriksen, "Did Jesus Oppose the Purity Laws?" *Bible Review* 11/3 (1995): 20–25, 42–47.

<sup>38</sup> *B. Roš Haš. 4b.*

mandated washing the hands not only before eating bread, but also prior to consuming anything dipped in liquid and, some Rabbis said, even touching cups with liquids in them. Matthew's account proceeds with an interchange between Jesus and some questioners. The encounter was outdoors and a crowd gradually gathered to watch the exchange. Jesus does not attack them with his whole arsenal of rhetoric as in v. 3, but instead saves his sharpest rhetoric for subsequent private conversations with his immediate disciples in verse 12.

At the beginning of verse 2, we notice these questioners do not say anything at all about Jesus' usual behavior. Perhaps they take for granted that he adheres to their traditions. Why else would they have bothered to ask the question of him at all? Perhaps they are being diplomatic, and they refer to his disciples but also intend their question to apply to Jesus himself as well.

This debate in Matthew differs somewhat from earlier debate scenes, in which the narrator informed us that some violation had occurred about which the Pharisees sought an explanation.<sup>39</sup> Here the question emerges as though the infractions committed by his disciples are more general and widespread, rather than referring to a specific incident that had attracted attention. Mark's version—*Seeing that some of the disciples ate the bread with impure hands, that is, unwashed* (Mark 7:1–5)<sup>40</sup>—accords better with these earlier passages that point to specific incidents. Also, in previous confrontations with his challengers, Jesus has responded from the standpoint of his critics. But now, rather than arguing from within the system and demonstrating the validity of the grounds for exception to or exemption from a scribal rule, as is typical in such debates, Jesus boldly dismisses the basis for the particular practice at issue, invoking an allegorical and ethical argument, rather than a legalistic one, as he transitions from the ritual realm to the moral realm.

This dismissal is interesting from a number of viewpoints. In all cases where scribal practice was at issue, as it is here, a moral point was at the center of the argument. The business-like question posed by the Pharisees is neither accusatory nor threatening. They ask for an explanation for what seems to be a matter of public knowledge: Jesus' disciples, and perhaps he himself, neglect washing their hands before eating bread. Is this because they wish to demonstrate their defiance of ancestral authority and its rules, or is there is some other factor involved in their abstaining from hand washing?

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39 For example, see Matt 12:1: "At that time, Jesus went on the Sabbath through the fields of grain. His disciples were hungry and began to pick the ears of grain and eat."

40 I am inclined to consider Mark's version as later since it seems to have worried about formal consistency.

Hand washing before eating, as evidenced here and in the Talmud, where it was “recommended” before eating bread, was, and remains, a common practice. According to one school of thought, the ritual seems to have extended to lay-folk a rule initially designed to safeguard holy foods from inadvertent contamination by priests when they had eaten non-holy foodstuffs.<sup>41</sup> The hygienic benefits have served Jews well, especially in times of plague and disease.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, the hand washing requirement apparently was not always taken seriously or meticulously observed by non-priests. *B. Soṭah* 4b attests to its neglect when it finds warrant to suggest that God will punish transgressors with poverty or even premature death if they disregard the hand washing rule.<sup>43</sup>

A cryptic *baraita* cited in *b. Yoma* 83b claims that “Neglect of hand washing before meals resulted in eating pig’s meat.” *Num. Rab.* 20:21 clarifies the sense of this *baraita* when it states that, while it is true that ritual washing before eating bread was indeed voluntary (and could not be enforced or punished, although courts may have at times made examples of some who publicly challenged Pharisaic practices),<sup>44</sup> it nonetheless had become so widespread that it distinguished Jew from pagan. (Mark 7:15 testifies to this.) This particular *baraita* is said to refer to a time when it was dangerous to disclose one’s Jewish identity in public places. Hand washing served as a convenient means by which Jewish innkeepers could recognize Jews, to whom they would serve kosher food. Consequently, neglect of this widespread Jewish custom might result in a Jew being served pork, leading to the transgression of the biblical prohibition against eating swine, which is subject to divine punishment. The practice of hand washing evolved into one of seven primary laws legislated by rabbinic authority.

Matthew introduces us to an aggressive Jesus who, according to the Gospel report, uses this reproach as an opportunity to attack the traditions held to be sacred by the messengers of the Jerusalem court.

<sup>41</sup> See *Mishnayot* of: *Erub.* 1:10, *Hal.* 1:9, *Bik.* 2:1 and also see *t. Ber.* 4:2; 8:2–4 and *Sifre Num* piska 116 for the expression “wash the hands” and see the discussion of the history of the legislation in Albeck, *Yadain* (vol. *Tohorot*), 473. Strack-Billerbeck lists 10 pages of sources in fine print for this Matthean verse. The pertinent material for our present purposes can be found in Basser, *Studies in Exegesis*, 34–36.

<sup>42</sup> It seems Greek and Roman magistrates also washed their hands in water after pronouncing capital judgments. Cf. *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, Stuttgart, XVII (1914), 362.

<sup>43</sup> See also *b. Šabb.* 62b. *B. Ḥul.* 105a calls it voluntary and *b Ber.* 53b suggests it is a way to signify holiness and separateness as warranted by Lev 20:7: “You shall sanctify yourselves.”

<sup>44</sup> *B. Sanh.* 46a. Thus, *m. Ed.* 5 mentions the excommunication of Elazar ben Ḥanoch for disrespecting the custom of hand washing for bread.

*He answered them, “Why do you violate the commandment of God on account of your tradition?” (v. 3)*

When one's religious position is under attack, however gentle the phrasing, the Jewish mode of response is a threatening and belligerent rhetorical question. *T. Hag. 2:12* portrays such a confrontation: “Do you know the rules of leaning?” He answered him, “Do you know the rules of silence?” While the questioner in v. 3 did not attack Jesus but only inquired about his disciples (perhaps gently rebuking Jesus himself by implication, perhaps not), Jesus reacts strongly. He points out the tradition of the scribes has a counter-productive teaching that seems to violate the commandments God dictated to Moses in the Torah. Criticism of the scribes for violating Torah law is integral to Matthew's own Gospel tradition.

There is another scribal tradition that even allows biblical laws to be transgressed. So why should one complain about the infringement of a minor custom of Pharisaic practice when the Pharisees, by adhering to the formal traits of their tradition, permit transgressions of God's written law? What follows is indeed a sharp attack.

*For God said: “Honor the father and the mother,” (Exod 20:12)<sup>45</sup> and: “Whoever reviles the father and the mother let him be condemned to death” (Exod 21:16).<sup>46</sup> (v. 4)*

The fifth of the Ten Commandments requires children honor their parents. The Hebrew word for “honor” derives from the root *k-b-d* which indicates an attitude of *gravitas* and importance. The Greek *timaō* also has the idea of giving something high monetary value and social esteem. The antonym of this word is *qll*, which means “to curse”; it is this specific offense that Scripture (Exod 21:16) uses to condemn an ungrateful son or daughter to death. The same root, in a different form, is used in Deut 27:16, where the added sense of bringing disgrace and shame upon parents is highlighted. Matthew uses the Greek *kakologeō* (lit. “speak ill of,” found in the LXX Exod 21:16); the LXX Deut 27:16 uses *o atimazōn* (dishonor). One is supposed to treat one's parents with great deference. One who puts them in a position of disgrace and curse is himself/herself

45 LXX Mark 7:10; Eph. 6:3 follows the wording of the Hebrew texts by including the possessives: “Honor your father and your mother.”

46 The possessives are also included in the MT, LXX and Mark 7:10: “Whoever insults his father or his mother shall be condemned to death.”

not worthy to inhabit the world with decent individuals. The understanding of the Rabbis here is that one who curses one of his parents is liable to receive extreme punishments, while the Greek tradition suggests that one who mocks them is so liable. These are the words of God.

*But you say: Whoever says to the father or the mother, “As a votive offering is what you enjoy of mine”... [effects a vow]. And [thereby] that person cannot honor his father (or his mother), and you nullify God’s message on account of your tradition. (vv. 5–6)*

The point of “you say” is to contrast what God says with what the Pharisaic “Tradition of the Elders” says. Your traditions state, “*One who declares [to his parents], ‘whatever you might enjoy from my property is [in respect to you as forbidden as] a Temple sacrifice*<sup>47</sup> [and so effects a vow].” But God says you have to provide for your parents. For the Gospels, God insists that nothing, including vows, should prevent one from honoring one’s parents, which is God’s commandment. We need to take stock of the references here.

Ancient Jewish custom allowed one to pronounce a vow formula in order to place the benefit of his property beyond the reach of others. The literature of the Rabbis contains numerous examples of vows that prevent others from deriving benefit or enjoyment (Hebrew: *mudar hana’ah*) from one’s property. Indeed, the mention of votive offerings (*qorban*) introduces a vow, and so I have completed the understood ending of the sentence accordingly as “and so effects a vow.” Joseph Fitzmyer discusses an inscription using a specific vow formula, with *qorban* as a dedicated sacrificial vow that had the effect of placing an imprecation on anyone who would benefit from forbidden funerary remains.<sup>48</sup> Josephus, in *Apion* 1:22, refers to *qorban* as oath,<sup>49</sup> but the terms “oath” and “vow” are interchangeable in common speech.<sup>50</sup> *M. Ned.* 2:5 has an

<sup>47</sup> Mark 7:11 gives the Hebrew as *qorban*.

<sup>48</sup> J. Fitzmyer, “The Aramaic Qorbān Inscription from Jebel Ḥallet Et-Tūri and Mark 7:11/Matt 15:5” in *The Semitic Background of the New Testament* (Fitzmyer 1997), 98. The evidence not only points to first century usage for *qorban* but also to 4th c. B.C.E. evidence. Clearly, by the first century people used the term “votive gift” to forbid others the use of their property.

<sup>49</sup> Compare *Tg. Onq.* to Gen 28:20. Here Josephus obviously means vow, since that is the only possible usage invoking a gift to the Temple.

<sup>50</sup> See S. Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine: Studies in the Life and Manners of Jewish Palestine in the II–IV Centuries C.E.* (1965), 129, n. 106.

instructive parallel: *qonam*<sup>51</sup> (Gk: *dōron*=as a sacrifice) *ishti* (in respect to my wife) *neheneit* (Gk: *o ean ὅφελέθης*)=is whatever she enjoys) *li* (Gk: *ex emou*=of mine).<sup>52</sup> Except for the interchange of “wife” and “parents,” the striking similarity between the mishnaic formulation and the Matthean one is noteworthy, as they coincide completely.

A further mishnaic passage is also instructive. *M. Ned.* 5:6 records an event, when the Temple still stood, in which a son had taken a vow depriving his father of any enjoyment from the son’s property. While these cases might linguistically be construed to mean, in the one case, that a wife vowed or, in the other case, the father vowed, the context makes it clear that indeed the husband vowed in the one passage and the son in the other. How did it come about that such vows were given force in Jewish society when the Torah expresses respect and honor for these family members? Indeed, *b. Qidd.* 30b compares honor of parents with honor of God which, as Prov 3:9 stipulates, must come from one’s material substance. Moreover, we will want to know what it means to deprive another of benefit from one’s property through a formula referring to dedicated sacrificial animals.

The mechanics of the *paradosis/masoret* traditions appear to have developed in pre-Christian times, and long before the time of Jesus. By Matthew’s day, and certainly by the time of the even later Rabbis, many of its laws were already time-honored customs, *consacrés par l’usage*. Jewish leaders expressed their displeasure or unease with the system but did not tamper with it. Later Rabbis sometimes noted these laws were not good but considered them part of the divine system they inherited and dealt with matters within their control.<sup>53</sup> For them, while only wicked people took vows and while they disapproved of the practice, the Rabbis were unwilling to outlaw vows altogether, since they were common practice in ancient societies. This is the gist of the Talmudic discussion in *m. Ned.* 9:1, which appears to make use, as does Matthew, of both Exod 21:16 and Deut 27:16.

51 An alternative to *qorban*, since *qorban* was in fact once totally reserved for a vow term when one intended to bring a sacrifice and one might not want to say *qorban ishti* in respect to his wife.

52 Danby, *Mishnah*, 266, translates that he was not to eat of his wife’s belongings. The context suggests this is not the sense here.

53 Eze 20:25 states, “Wherefore I gave them also statutes that were not good, and judgments whereby they should not live.” Rabbi Yoḥanan recited this verse in relation to legislation of earlier generations concerning laws practiced in the lands of exile outside of the Land of Israel.

Rabbi Eliezer says (regarding one who vowed to deprive parents from enjoying his property) the vow can be untied by asking him if he intended to dishonor his father or mother.

Albeck explains in his commentary to *m. Ned. 9:1*:

For example the authorized council will say to him: If you had known that you would bring shame (*contra Deut 27:16*) upon your parents since you have gone down the path of evil people who misuse vows—would you have uttered your vow? (And so people will revile them for having raised such an impudent son).

*M. Ned. 9:1* goes on to say:

Sages and Rabbi Eliezer agree that (one who vowed to deprive parents from enjoying his property) in a matter affecting him and his father and mother the vow can be untied by pointing out to him the honor due his father and mother (Albeck's *Mishnah* vol. *Nashim*: 174).

And again Albeck comments:

The authorized council will say to him, “If you had known that the Torah obligated you to honor them (Exod 21:16) would you still have taken such a vow?” (vol. *Nashim*: 175).

In other words, the assumption is that someone vowing to deprive a parent most likely indicates their ignorance of filial obligations to parents rather than outright wickedness. Such a mistaken vow was foolish to begin with, and consequently is easily untied. The wise of the city swing open the door to dissolving the son's words by indicating that the vow as articulated was never intended to cause embarrassment to the parents, or to prevent the son from fulfilling the filial duties the Torah required of children.

The traditions surrounding this mishnaic statement reveal that the system of vows is fraught with dangers and difficulties. Only evil people take oaths in the first place since no one can foresee later regrets. It is most probable that the tradition now extant in *m. Ned. 9:1*, which speaks of untying vows by pointing to the disgrace a vow can cause a parent, was once preceded by a text declaring “*Whoever says to his father or his mother ‘As a votive offering is what you enjoy of mine,’*” the precise text quoted in Matthew.

The Torah covenant, embodied in the system of scribes and sages, is comprised of one huge oath. The word for “oath” (i.e. *qayama*) is also rendered “covenant” in the Targumim that translated the Torah into Aramaic. Every Jew was bound by the covenant at Sinai, and its laws were inviolable. Any oath that attempted to abrogate the slightest commandment binding upon a Jew was considered null and void, and a challenge to the power of the Great Oath at Sinai. Oaths dealt with people and their responsibility to fulfill them, whether for good or for bad.<sup>54</sup> Not so vows. Vows placed force-fields around objects, with dire consequences for those who transgressed the boundaries of these force-fields. These force-fields surrounded property, not people. Rabbis, in their picturesque terminology, likened marriage vows (*Qiddushin*, i.e. consecrations) to a force-field created around a married woman such that no man except her husband could have intimate access to her. But even concerning “dispossession vows” the language is figurative, not literal. In fact the language used to pronounce such vows simulated, although it did not actually enact, the method by which animals and stuffs were dedicated as Temple property. The word *qorban* is used to introduce a vow because, when someone devoted a gift to the Temple as a *qorban* for sacrificial purposes, it immediately assumed a degree of sanctity making it fit solely for God’s possession. A donor who subsequently derived any benefit from this animal after its “*qorban* dedication” not only was a thief but a thief who stole from the Lord. By extension, anyone who invoked the *qorban* formula or any of its alternatives (*qonam* etc.) upon an object he wished to keep out of the hands of another (using a formula replicating the words used for real Temple donations) created the aura of a sacred force-field popularly considered inviolable, repelling anyone who dared presume to touch the object. This formula effected a severe prohibition against a named party having any benefit whatsoever from the item upon which the formula was invoked. This invocation of a sacred vow formula, according to laws inherent in the legal universe of the scribes, placed a specified set of objects beyond a named individual’s permissible reach. The

54 For an example of collective refusal to break an oath placed upon individuals, see 1 Sam 14:24–26:

“Now the men of Israel were in distress that day, because Saul had bound the people under an oath, saying, ‘Cursed be any man who eats food before evening comes, before I have avenged myself on my enemies!’ So none of the troops tasted food. The entire army entered the woods, and there was honey on the ground. When they went into the woods, they saw the honey oozing out, yet no one put his hand to his mouth, because they feared the oath.”

mechanism was quite simple. Animals dedicated for sacrifices (the root sense of *qorban*) were protected by force-fields and whoever misappropriated benefit from what was dedicated to God would suffer grave consequences. And so to a lesser degree, when one said this potent word *qorban*, one envisioned a threat of divine wrath protecting the named objects. The word “*qorban*” or another word (designed to avoid the awesome *qorban*) designating a “votive gift” was pronounced as a vow formula, lending the words of the vow an aura of Temple solemnity. In reality the vow concerned only one’s personal property and nothing at all was dedicated anywhere, although vowed items were to be potentially fit for Temple dedication. Were this not so, the vow formula would not be effective. This Temple aura gave weight to the seriousness of one’s vow to prohibit another from benefiting from one’s property, implying it could call down divine wrath were it to be breached. As the legal universe of vows of sages and scribes held out the consequences of ominous threats, they in turn enacted methods of absolutions and annulments allowing for the retraction of vows. Sages could demonstrate the wording of the vow was not commensurate with the best interests of those affected by the vow.

In short, there were grave repercussions due one who tampered with dedicated items or animals that had been declared to be set aside as sacrificial offerings, making them effectively beyond reach. Such consequences were now understood to be equally due to those who tampered with non-dedicated items that had been verbally fenced off and placed beyond another’s reach. The formula carried the threat, not the logic of the circumstance. The point of the vow was to make personal objects taboo to specified individuals by encasing the objects in a conceptual force-field created by the word “*qorban*”. Hence, the vow (if one placed one’s belongings out of bounds to parents) made no impact on the Great Oath of the Torah sworn at Sinai—“We will do and we will obey (all its laws)” (Exod 24:7)—which was binding upon persons and not objects. The laws of the Torah incumbent on individuals always remain intact, and any *oath* invalidating the Torah could never take effect. The case of the vow differs. When individuals attempted to use items that had been “specified” by a *vow*, these items were barred from them. Thus, even required duties under the Sinai Oath (divinely prescribed laws) could be circumvented by the pronouncement of a vow.<sup>55</sup> Parents were due support from their children who were bound by the Sinai oath to do and obey; namely, to supply support items. But these items would not be available to the parents if (having force-fields placed about them preventing their use) if the children so vowed. Had the children taken an

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55 Passages relevant to the discussion here are: *b. Ned.* 16a–17a; *b. Ned.* 13b; *b. Šeb.* 25a–27a; *b. Mak.* 3b; *b. Naz.* 4a. Also see Basser, *Studies in Exegesis*, 37–40.

oath *upon themselves* not to supply support for their parents, the oath would be null and they would need to obey the law. In the case of the vow, the objects of maintenance are placed beyond the parent's reach, while the obligation of support remains intact upon the one who took the vow. The person is not affected but the objects required to fulfill the obligation are.

In actual practice these concepts were well understood, but in time the terminology became lax as one often referred to an "oath" by the term "vow" and vice versa. Generally, the rules of oath and vows were highly functional for specific occasions. The question was whether those cases where they proved dysfunctional could be avoided. The Rabbis, to the best of their abilities, did seek ways to annul problematic vows but realized they skated on thin ice in these matters, or "flew in thin air" as they might have put it (*m. Hag.* 1:8), when they found ways to untie vows. Jesus would have none of such cases and ruled the vow to be void and null if it prevented one from enjoying a benefit mandated by the Torah. In the ancient world in general the breaking of oaths and vows was a fearful thing, calling down wrath and destruction in its wake and it would appear this attitude was no less prevalent in Jewish circles.

*Stage-actors, Isaiah prophesied well concerning you . . . (v. 7)*

It would seem Jesus is talking only to Pharisees at this point, and that the prophecy of Isaiah is solely about them. The disciples might be wondering if Jesus' words are more general, as the citation from Isaiah appears to include "the people" as well. Jesus' citation of Isaiah indicates that the people followed the rules of the Pharisees, and so they are not to be distinguished from them. This is an important point for Matthew as the sequence of the chapter unfolds. The "you" are clearly his Pharisaic interlocutors. Soon after, this will extend to the crowds whom Jesus berates for missing the point of involvement of inner experience: lips versus heart, outside rims of vessels versus their inner parts. In real terms, there is a "disconnect" between the actor's show and his true character. The actor wears masks and make-up, pretending to be what he or she is not. So too, the hypocrite wears many masks, and feigns character traits that are purely external and show us nothing of the true character of the actor.

*This people honors me with lips, and it holds its heart far from Me. In vain they worship Me, teaching human commandments as doctrines. [LXX Isa 29:13].<sup>56</sup> (vv. 8–9)*

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56 Cf. Mark 7:6–7.

These verses from Isaiah reflect the version of the Septuagint. The Septuagint includes the idea that the reverence for God of those who draw near with their mouths is one of instruction by human edict. It is possible the intent here is not only to attack those Pharisaic traditions which are made by humans and defeat divine goals, but also to attack the way in which the people adhere to the outer surface of the teachings. They subvert the originally intended inner dynamic of human spirituality. The sequence of this chapter allows for such interpretation, and the medieval Jewish interpretation of the verse from Isaiah affirms this as a possible moralistic reading of it. *Sefer HaYirah* (Rabbenu Yonah, 13c.) paraphrases Isa 29:13:

One must not have benefit from anything until he knows how to bless his creator properly—by concentrating his mind for such. And not as a well-worn human exercise to fulfill a duty without proper concentration... And not as habitual human edicts simply following “*the custom of ancestors.*”<sup>57</sup>

Professor Daniel R. Schwartz of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem has pointed out that the dichotomy between facts as they are clearly felt in the heart as opposed to legal considerations as they are clearly defined by words was an issue for Talmudic tradition. On the one hand Rabbi Dosa ben Harkinas

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57 Here the expression “custom of the fathers” is used as simply “external, rote and mindless.” The same usage occurs in the Talmud concerning idolaters who no longer care about their rituals but perform them as external cultural artifacts (*b. Hul.* 13b). On the other hand, inherited local customs of a group are also called by the same term (*b. Ta'an.* 28b, *b. Erub.* 104b, and *b. Šabb.* 35b). The usage of this expression is dependent on context, unlike *masoret*, which points to a pan-Pharisaic teaching proclaiming authoritative “Laws of Fathers and Elders” to be binding at all times and in all places. It is to this latter usage that the Gospel refers, but not without innuendo of the other expression (custom of fathers) as well. That Rabbenu Yona, a mystic, might be preserving ancient Jewish usage rather than copying Christian sources is not to be discounted. We should not forget that the mystical prayers invoking angels, that are still printed in the Rosh Hashanah liturgy for the Shofar soundings, refer to people who were translated into the heavens to become angelic figures: Elijah, Jesus-YHWH-Metatron. Much has been written about the name Jesus that appears here, e.g. Liebes, “The Shofar Blast Angels and Yeshua, Prince of the Divine Countenance” (abridged English version in *BINAH* 4). The evidence suggests this dates back to some Jewish group in the first century who identified Jesus with Metatron (and the name if not at all late). The Talmud, *b. Hag.* 15a and *b. Sanh.* 38b already argues against such identifications (possibly knowing this group) so this prayer might be very early indeed and preserved meticulously over centuries. This is remarkable since the reference to Jesus seems not to have rankled anyone until very modern times.

champions deciding legal cases by what we know as *prima facie* truth in our hearts, whereas the ruling Rabbis championed the position of following the externals of the formulated law articulated by the Tradition of the Sages, regardless of what we know in our heart of hearts. Sometimes legal systems uphold statements of the lips—the letter of the law—versus what we know instinctively to be truth and fairness in the recesses of our hearts.<sup>58</sup> The cases of Jesus in this chapter are not dissimilar to those argued by Rabbi Dosa ben Harkinas. One of the ironies in Matthew is that he pictures Jesus castigating Pharisees for allowing legal instruments that might lead to dishonoring parents, while elsewhere (Matt 8:21f; 10:34f; 12:46f) he shows us a Jesus who himself advocates dishonoring them.<sup>59</sup>

The art of the implicit argument which I reconstruct from all the various versions in the Gospels allows an argument of dichotomies: you were to honor parents but you end up with laws that dishonor Me. You worry about the outer lips of what people consume but you end up not caring about the inner thoughts of people; for you externals are sufficient.

*Summoning the crowd, he said to them, “Listen and understand.”* (v. 10)

“Listen and understand” is an expression that draws attention to a teaching and demands thorough comprehension of its philosophic underpinnings.<sup>60</sup>

58 In his lecture, Jan. 24, 2010 Toronto Canada, Professor Daniel Schwartz pointed out the arguments to this effect in *m. Ket.* 13:2; *m. Erub* 3:9; *m. Roš Haš.* 2:8–3:1; *m. Ed.* 3:2. Apparently, Rabbi Dosa, while expressing amazement at the head of the court’s decision, recognized the chaos that would ensue if one went about challenging such rulings. If one is challenged, then why not all? Clearly, for him, it is better to put up with occasional miscarriages of justice than to constantly be revising legal court procedures when decisive facts emerged after a ruling had been rendered. What mattered was that legal procedures had been followed, and while he questioned the rulings, in the end he had no choice but to accept them. Topical legalism versus heartfelt truth was an issue: which trumps which? See Daniel R. Schwartz, *Between Priests and Sages in the Second Temple Period* (1992), 63–79 (in Hebrew). The question re-merges in medieval times, according to comments the major authorities found in the *Ba’alei haTosafot* to *b. B. Bat.* 142b (final comment on page).

59 Margaret Davies, *Stereotyping the Other: The Pharisees in the Gospel According To Matthew* (1998), 423.

60 Robert Ludlum, the author of spy thrillers, points out that only humans, in contrast to technology, are capable of such understanding. Technology “can hear but it can’t listen, it can watch but it can’t observe.” (*Ambler Warning*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2005. 341.)

Jesus is setting the stage for an excoriation of the Pharisees that will reach its vituperative crescendo in chapter 23. There he will tell the crowd, “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you” (Matt 23:2–3). This will be followed by a sharp attack: “You snakes! You brood of vipers” (23:33), reflecting John the Baptist’s words earlier in 3:7. *M. Abot* 2:15 shows Rabbi Eliezer<sup>61</sup> saying very nasty things about the Sages:

[Rabbi Eliezer] said “Warm yourself before the fire of the sages, but be heedful of their glowing coals for fear that you be burned, for their bite is the bite of a jackal and their sting the sting of a scorpion and their hiss the hiss of a serpent, and all their words are like coals of fire.”

In effect both Matthew and Eliezer say to listen to Pharisees, while at the same time referring to them as vipers and snakes. Quite analogous to the form in our passage, “not what goes in but what comes out” is a statement of comparable form in *b. Ber* 33a: not the reptile kills but the sin kills.<sup>62</sup>

It is also the case that in *b. 'Abod. Zar.* 16b Rabbi Eliezer is accused of being a Christian. (I wonder if he might have shared some contempt for Pharisees/Sages who seem to have put him under a ban, along with Christians, who, according to Justyn Martyr were also placed under a ban.) At any rate it is remarkable that the juxtaposition of “listen to sages// fear their ugly snakedness” is shared by two sources. This suggestive comparison shows it was not

61 This Eliezer was said to be sympathetic to Christian expositions of Torah and was the one who wanted to find ways to annul vows by which a child could avoid honoring parents in *m. Ned.* 9:1.

62 The passage has had a long history. *B. Ber.* 33a seems to conflate two of Hanina ben Dosa's statements into one passage:

“Our Rabbis taught: In a certain place there was once a reptile which used to injure people. They came and told R. Hanina ben Dosa. He said to them: Show me its hole. They showed him its hole, and he put his heel over the hole, and the reptile came out and bit him, and it died. He put it on his shoulder and brought it to the *Beth ha-Midrash* and said to them, 1) ‘See, my sons, it is not the reptile that kills, it is sin that kills!’ On that occasion the scholars said: 2) ‘Woe to the man whom a reptile meets, but woe to the reptile which R. Hanina ben Dosa meets.’

One form had been: 1) ‘Not the [venomous] reptile kills but the [venomous] sin kills.’ Another form is given in *t. Ber.* 3:20 he said: 2) ‘Woe to the person that the [venomous] reptile bites; woe to the [venomous] reptile that bites Hanina ben Dosa.’ Combining the two, *b. Ber.* 33a attributed the first to Hanina ben Dosa and the second to the scholars in the study house.”

unheard of that one might be obedient to the teachings of the Pharisees while nonetheless detesting them. What I earlier saw as a contradiction between layers of the early and late Gospels layers seems now to be a possible single source, possibly even a sentiment shared by Christians and Eliezer the Elder. This would suggest that Matthew 23 is early, while the use of *Rabbi* in it may or may not be anachronistic.

*It is not what has come into the mouth makes the person impure, but what has come out of the mouth, this is what makes the person impure. (v. 11)*

This version of the two contrasting strophes in the saying is perfectly parallel in form: what has come into the mouth/what has come out of the mouth. Nevertheless, it does not readily accord with the version used to explain it that speaks of what comes from the heart. To glide over this problem, this explanation conflates heart and mouth as if they were the same thing, but listed sins are not sins of the mouth at all. The next sentence drops the word “mouth” and retains only “heart”.

*But the things that come out of mouth come out of the heart, and they make the person impure. For coming out of the heart are wicked thoughts, murders, adulteries, sexual immoralities, thefts, false testimonies, blasphemies. (vv. 18–19)*

Mark 7:15 lacks the pithy rhetoric of Matthew’s version but it is more consistent, as it speaks of what goes into a person and what comes out; there is no mention of mouth, no mention of heart. Still, the version of Matthew addresses the heart and the lips and thereby acts as a decent interpretation of Isa 29:13, which draws a dichotomy between outer lips and inner heart. One problem is that it is impossible to know whether Matthew or his source adjusted the texts to highlight the exegesis of Isaiah, or if Mark (or his source) made adjustments to allow for clarity.

A second problem is the one I think Peter encountered, as the Pharisees certainly would have. Comparisons and contrasts are only effective if they refer to the same items. The Rabbis were bothered by even the most minor changes: “The teacher began a statement with ‘a pitcher’ and ended it with ‘a barrel!’” (*b. B. Qam.* 27a–b). If Jesus is a proficient teacher, his statement can only mean that he affirms the Torah law denying food that is eaten can defile the body, but he then adds a non-sequitur: food that is vomited out will defile. This is ludicrous logic, and seems to be ridiculing all of laws of ritual defilement. But Jesus will make it clear that he only speaks of moral purity, and that any other

meaning will not accord with the ritual law and therefore must be discarded. In ritual law, food eaten can defile by rabbinic decree, but the digested food cannot. This discussion must await the comments to v. 15 below.

Now this saying of Jesus, I suspect, was something that mockers of ritual laws had said long before him. This understandably annoys the Pharisees, who think he is making light of the system of the common practices of Jews. Jesus leaves it at that, not wishing to further antagonize them. The disciples are aghast and will query the reason for his words in the next verse. The Pharisees probably understand he has posed a riddle that is not to be taken at face value, and they do not complain. It is the disciples who are upset that, on the surface, Jesus appears to be mocking Torah rules held dear by them all. We likely err grievously if we think Jesus and the disciples would even imagine breaking food laws or purity injunctions mandated by God's Torah.<sup>63</sup> Does he not castigate the Pharisees (v. 6) for their sidestepping God's will as expressed in the commandments? It is the rules legislated by Pharisees that are considered binding that create problems for Jesus, not God's laws. In ancient times convention held that the master could speak in a riddle and the disciples would often have to turn to other sages to unravel the secret. *B. Sabb.* 137a shows us a master uttering pithy enigmas and, when questioned, proceeded to explain them. Contrasting statements—an assertion along with its opposite—are commonplace. *'Abot of Rabbi Nathan* (version A, ch. 12), "A name extended and a name curtailed" is given explanation. Paul is a master of the form, for example, Romans 14:7: For not one of us lives for himself, not one of us dies for himself."

Isa 29:13 spoke of the heart not giving honor while the lips give honor. This comes very close to the very criticism of the hypocrites in the: "talmuds. The divine word is made as profane as orders from humans, and Jesus sees in these words that human orders have profaned the divine words. The matter of hypocrisy greatly bothered the Talmudic Rabbis and the medieval Tosafists, and their followers dealt with the issue. The Talmud had proclaimed (*b. Pes.* 50b) that "From an inside which does not have pure motivation, [this inside] can come to pure motivation." The cognitive dissonance (if one acts only to seek approval) between one's outer behavior—study of Torah and the outward performance of pious deeds on the one hand and on the other, an inner self whose motivations are not entirely so pure, will eventually resolve itself in favor of the inside changing for the better. On the other hand, the Talmud declared elsewhere that one whose religious practice is external and not properly motivated would be better off had he/she never been born (*b. Ber.* 17a). The medievalists suggested that we deal in this latter case with people whose

63 See Paula Fredriksen, "Did Jesus Oppose the Purity Laws?" (1995) 20–25, and 42–47.

motivations are for showing off, being argumentative and the like, and whose interiors are so rotten that no good can come from their actions at all. *Y Ber.* 1:2 (near end) remarks that one whose study is for reasons other than for the sake of performing good and pious deeds was better off dead.<sup>64</sup> Jesus' disciples seem to think that Jesus does not actually want to give offense to the Pharisees, and they question him on his intent. Jesus appears to be publicly castigating the Pharisees who held religious authority in these districts.

*The disciples gathered and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?”* (v. 12)

While vv. 12–14 seem to be interpolated from a collection of anti-Pharisee sayings, I tend to think the placement here is purposeful rather than haphazard. They operate as an attack on misplaced piety—a necessary footnote, since some teachers were indeed more afraid of causing impurity than murder. The following story is designed as a critique of misplaced purity concerns.

Our Rabbis taught: It once happened that two priests were equal as they ran to mount the ramp and when one of them came first within four cubits of the altar, the other took a knife and thrust it into his heart . . . The father of the young man came and found him still in convulsions. He said: “May he be atonement for you. My son is still in convulsions and the knife has not become impure.”

[The Rabbis commented] “This comes to teach you that the purity of their vessels was of greater concern to them even than the shedding of blood” (*b. Yoma* 23a; *t. Yoma* 1:8).

The point of Matthew stating that the disciples gathered seems to indicate immediate concerns that confused them. Parallel midrashic scenes (*Sipre*

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64 This citation in the Yerushalmi leads into a cryptic discussion of the weight of the performance of the liturgy of the *Shema* (based on “You shall repeat, šNN, them [these words in the written Torah]” (Deut 6:7) in respect to the constant duty to repeat the Oral Torah [šNN]. The debate centers around the relative merits of Scripture and Mishnah. While there is no criticism of the study of either Mishnah or Scripture, in either case their priorities are weighed. One view favors the study of the Oral Law while another gives them equal footing. The Talmud focuses on lexical issues either preferring the Oral law over the Written or equating them; Matthew focuses on concrete images governing legal/moral issues. The latter is more in tune with the Jewish moralists in Alexandria, the former more typical of the legalists in Jewish Palestine.

*Deut. piska: 305, 307, 355, 360*), in which people have “gathered and said,” occur in situations where Moses is asked troublesome theological questions. But they do not challenge Moses’ actions. Here, the question is directed to Jesus, who has uttered what appears to have been a common saying among those (e.g. Jews or pagan philosophers) who dismissed Jewish rituals as mere superstition. Not wishing to openly rebuke Jesus, they speak of the Pharisaic reaction, an apparent circumlocution. Indeed, it is likely that it is their own reaction they mean to portray.

*He answered, “Every plant which my heavenly father did not plant will be uprooted.” (v. 13)*

The disciples should not care about the Pharisees and their power, for it will soon end, when the Kingdom arrives. Here we have an interesting split in the interpretation of Isaiah 60:21: “Then all your people will be righteous; they will inherit the *land forever*, the branch of *My Planting*, the work of My hands, that I may be glorified.” *M. Sanh.* 10:1 understands “land forever” here to be the “ever-lasting land”; excluded from the planting of God’s hands are a number of groups given in a list. Jesus may well be referring to such a teaching. In the Talmud, one of these groups are known as *Epikoros* (Epicurean types) who are defined by *Y. Sanh.* 10:1 as those who disparage the scribes or those who disparage the Rabbis. That is, the verse is taken to exclude from the Everlasting Kingdom all those who reject scribal teachings and authority of Pharisaic sages. I found it curious that Meander, the Epicurean dramatist of ancient Athens, wrote that it is only what is within the person that can defile (frg. 540). On the other hand, remarkably, it seems reasonable to find in Jesus’ words that it is the scribes and Pharisees who are to be uprooted when the Kingdom arrives. One might be tempted to speculate that the Talmudic comment is in reaction to Jesus.

*Leave them be; they are blind guides for the blind. If the blind guides the blind, both will fall into a pit. (v. 14)*

The Rabbis could criticize their own leaders as well. The Talmud reports:

When the shepherd becomes angry with his flock he appoints for it a leader which is blind. (*b. B. Qam.* 52a)

So the Rabbis understand that leadership comes from God’s will. How then do corrupt leaders come to have power? It is the fault of the people. When God wants to punish a flock of sheep, he makes their leader blind. Presumably then,

they will all fall into a pit and be destroyed. That is what happens to lost sheep. Such an analogy seems to lie behind Jesus' words: *leave them be; they are blind guides for the blind*. So while here Jesus expresses anger against the Pharisees and, at best, indifference to the Jews who are their followers, in verse 24 he will announce that his job is to save the lost sheep of Israel and no others. I think the ambivalence results from a Gospel layer that is bitterly anti-Pharisaic.

In Luke 6:39 a proverb is phrased as a question in a series of enigmatic sayings not specifically in a context of Pharisees: "Can the blind lead the blind? Shall they not both fall into the ditch?" Perhaps the metaphorical "pit" in Matthew signifies the pit of death and destruction,<sup>65</sup> although in its Lucan context it enhances the image of the ignorant leader misleading his followers. The image is akin to the Zohar's (vol. 3, *Vayikra, Qedoshim* 85a) understanding of "do not put a stumbling block before the blind" (Lev 19:14):

"[Nor] put a stumbling block before the blind," is directed to one who has not yet reached the requisite competency to adjudicate legal matters for others, yet adjudicates them brazenly. The harm is written. "For she has cast down many wounded: and many strong men have been slain by her" (Prov 7:26). This person transgressed "nor put a stumbling block before the blind," because he caused another [who depended on him] to stumble on an obstacle with his adjudication of the law in a matter that will dispossess him of the Coming World.

*Peter said to him, "Explain this illustration for us." He said, "Are you still without understanding? (vv. 15, 16)*

Jesus is surprised that, after all is said and done, Peter and the others did not grasp the essential point of what he was saying concerning "in the mouth" and "out of the mouth"—they just understood that it was some kind of parabolic lesson. He had assumed that, as people with attuned ears and minds ready to enter the Approaching Kingdom, the disciples would have easily discerned his meaning. They seem to have understood he was not merely mocking the Pharisees, but had something of import to teach—but what was it? Surely not that vomit defiles while foodstuffs do not! In point of our knowledge of rabbinic law, likely Pharisaic ordinance (as opposed to biblical law) decreed impure foodstuffs, consumed in a specified minimum measure, do "contaminate" the body such that the body (otherwise right and proper in respect to

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65 See Ps 55:23: "But you, O God, will bring them down into the pit of destruction. Bloody and deceitful men shall not live out half their days; but I will trust in you, O Lord."

impurity) can in turn render holy foods like *terumah* offerings for the priest unfit by rabbinic standards.<sup>66</sup> Jesus seems to mock and rail against what would later be called “rabbinic decrees of purities,” yet, his real point is to open a discussion about moral purity. The technical purity issues enacted by Pharisees were neither here nor there for him, as his issue focused on pureness of heart and action. If the Pharisees are legislating on mere food issues, which even they admit do not really contaminate anything in biblical law, why do they not legislate on important moral issues that are the true discipline of biblical and scribal laws? The root of morality lies in the interior of each individual. (As Polonius tells Laertes, “This above all: to thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man”<sup>67</sup>) Moral purity requires far more attention than ritual purity, and if Pharisees attend to the trivial, they ought to attend to the serious and weighty matters that form the essence of God’s revelation. Perhaps Jesus pointed out that their own system warranted that the Pharisees lift “more than a finger” in caring about what comes out of the mouth, since they cared so much about what went into the mouth.

*Don’t you know that everything that goes into the mouth advances into the stomach and is expelled into the latrine? (v. 17)*

According to an ancient tradition (*b. Pes. 20a*), when ritually impure food is consumed, what is expelled by the body is in the category of *saruah*—putrid. The result is that ritual impurity itself becomes null and void in this state. We speak of defiled foods here, the very substances which might have transferred impurity, and not the person’s body who consumed them. The waste product no longer has the ability to defile. Jesus reminds the disciples that a physical interpretation of his words would make no legal sense: stuffs that are eaten can transmit impurities to other sacred foods and liquids while, once they have been consumed, they are simply not viable food-stuffs. Obviously he is not talking about ritual impurity. Food going into the mouth is not his issue. The laws are clear. Foods do not defile when ingested.<sup>68</sup>

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66 The scant sources which bear analysis on these rabbinic decrees are listed in *m. Tohorot* 1:3 (repeated *m. Erub.* 8:2) and its commentaries. The term “rabbinic impurity” is likely post-mishnaic, while the concept, judging from Matthew’s account, predates the *Mishnah*.

67 W. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 1, scene 3 (1881).

68 *B. Šabb.* 12b–14a tells us Rabbis decreed that impure foodstuffs should not be eaten even by non-priests. According to *m. Miqwdot* 2:2, the impure foods created a scribal scenario where the priest’s ingested *terumah* mixed in the stomach with these impure foodstuffs.

So the point is not about these food-stuffs at all. The first part of the sentence simply creates a rhetorical contrast with the parallel which follows. Readers tend to stress the first part, and clearly Mark or his editor read into it that Jesus permitted all impure foods. He never said that—he said they do not lead down the road to later defilement. This is true concerning both the legal and moral views of impurity. Once in the stomach they are benign, and there is no moral analogy to derive from the act of digestion. We deal, in the second part of his statement, with the symbols of moral purity. And the next verse informs us that this is really the focus of his teaching, which is not as much to find fault with ritual but to stress that over-concern with ritual behavior masks something more important that the rituals do not address: moral purity of the heart. If the Pharisees dwell on the one they are deficient in the other.

*But the things that come out of mouth come out of the heart, and they make the person impure. For coming out of the heart are wicked thoughts, murders, adulteries, sexual immoralities, thefts, false testimonies, blasphemies.*  
(vv. 18–19)

Matthew 12:34 has already castigated the Pharisees: “Out of the abundant things of the heart the mouth speaks.” The Gospel writer in verses 15:18–19 needs to move beyond “out of the mouth” to “out of the heart.” No eyebrow will be raised if we say that the thoughts of the heart are given expression through the mouth. That notion has already been stated. But now he drops the transition from mouth to heart, and just speaks of the heart—not as expressing itself through the mouth but conceiving evil deceits for the person to commit. Matthew provides a list of thoughts which, although purely interior, can spill over into initiating harmful activities which escape detection.

An interesting Talmudic passage (*b. B. Meṣi'a* 58b) discusses spoken words over which the heart has jurisdiction; only God knows if the hidden intentions of the heart are impure, and consequently, how impure the person is. The passage deals with the irreparable harm words can cause, even worse than fraud, for which restitution can be made.

For the Rabbis, the only means of control over what the “heart does” is one’s inner fear of the Lord. Either the intention is pure or sullied. There are things over which the inner person has jurisdiction—they are entrusted to the heart. Either one’s fear of God makes one’s heart pure or its lack sullies it. In *b. Qidd.* 32b and 33b, it is pointed out that those laws in the Torah that proclaim “and you should be fearful of God” sometimes refer to matters of which only

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As result they decreed across the board the mere eating of impure foodstuffs rendered one scribbly impure. See further *m. Šabb.* 1:4; *t. Šabb.* 1:16–20; etc.

God could be aware. Others will never know the motivation for some actions. This command to “fear God” likely applies to all such laws, even when not specifically stated. An example (*b. Qidd.* 33b, according to the accepted reading) is the law demanding that a merchant have just measures and weights, Inner fear of God is reflected in not cheating customers (Lev 19:36).

According to the Rabbis (e.g. *Gen. Rab.* 34:10), the problem of the wicked is that their hearts control them, while the righteous succeed in controlling their hearts. The heart is the key to character, and the fear of God is the key to the key. That is the sum total of the matter. Matthew’s rhetoric, couched in metaphor and delivered in harsh tones, says much the same thing. In our Gospel, Jesus condemns the neglect of the moral realm but does not criticize the ritual realm. It is not useful here to equate moral impurity (e.g., Ps 106:39), which results in idolatry, sexual lewdness, murder and the like, with levitical impurity, which requires physical rituals for reinstating the status of purity.<sup>69</sup> In the end the goal is to achieve “clean hands and a pure heart” (Psalm 24:4).

*These are the things that make the person impure; to eat with unwashed hands does not make the person impure. (v. 20)*

Moral impurity results from impure thoughts and from wicked desires. Obeying decreed rituals do not make one any more moral if the heart is impure and *vice versa*. In modern analytic terms, we would say that Jesus is complaining about the rigors of the formal, public minutiae of ritual being of greater concern than the moral internalization of ethical training. The emphasis on mastering performance of exterior rules overshadows mastering the axiological teachings of God. We now leave the disputation scene and follow Jesus as he enters the land of the Gentiles.

*Jesus left from there and traveled to the district of Tyre and Sidon. (v. 21)*

The author shows us Jesus entering another domain, the land of the Gentiles (*eretz ha'amim*), where Jesus heals the daughter of a woman’s who knows him as the Son of David.<sup>70</sup> She has true faith, the tunnel into the twilight zone of the coming world—a flash into another dimension where the Kingdom already is dawning. This scene is a stop along the way, where Jesus is caught between two worlds.

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69 Jonathan Klawans, in *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism* (2000), 22–38, makes that argument for the Qumran scrolls.

70 See the introduction to chap. 17 further for the usage of “Son of David.”

We have met Tyre and Sidon before. Mark R. J. Bredin<sup>71</sup> draws our attention to 1 Kings 17:8–24, where Elijah heals the son of a Gentile woman in the setting of Sidon, a suggestion I find intriguing. Bredin also argues that Matthew's source is not Mark's, since less than 10% of the vocabulary is shared. We recall:

Then he began to denounce the cities in which most of his miracles were done, because they did not repent. “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.” (Matt 11:20–21)

Who were Tyre and Sidon? Rhetorically they are cities whose inhabitants are declared to be more capable of faith than the nation of Israel. They also were the enemies who had plundered Israel; the prophet Joel had written about their impending punishment.

What are you to me, O Tyre and Sidon, and all the coasts of Philistia? . . . (Y)ou have taken My silver and My gold, and have carried into your temples My prized possessions. Also the people of Judah and the people of Jerusalem you have sold to the Greeks, that you may remove them far from their borders. (Joel 3:4–6)

Tyre and Sidon, the most evil of Israel's enemies, are specifically named here because the Gospel sees in them an instrument with which to condemn the Jews. If they can accept Jesus as a savior and the Jews cannot, then in the end they will inherit Israel's intended legacy and remove Israel's spiritual heritage far from their borders. The rhetoric of chapter 11 finds fulfillment in chapter 15. The genius of the writer is illustrated by his placement of this Gentile welcoming scene immediately following the Jewish rejection scene.

*Look, a Canaanite woman from those regions came out and shouted, “Have mercy on me, Lord Son of David! My daughter is cruelly possessed by a demon.”* (v. 22)

Had the author simply said “a Canaanite” we might suspect the use of the term was intended to be pejorative; in context, designating her as “a Canaanite woman from those regions” (i.e. Sidon and Tyre) should be accepted as

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<sup>71</sup> Mark Bredin, “Gentiles and the Davidic Tradition in Matthew,” in *The Feminist Companion to the Hebrew Bible in the New Testament* (Brenner 1996), 109.

common parlance. Why would the Gospel writer want to disparage a woman whom he is about to praise? “Canaanite” is a way of indicating that she is not Jewish. (Mark 7:26 has a more detailed description of her: “The woman was a Greek, a Syrophoenician by nation.” “Greek” simply means “Gentile” and Syrophoenician is her ethnic lineage.) Matthew is just interested in showing her as someone who is outside the scope of Jesus’ mission.

It is difficult to understand why, if Matthew’s Jesus saw his mission preaching to Jews, not Gentiles, he now picks an arena of operation far from a major Jewish population center. On the other hand, if we see here the plan of the Gospel story in microcosm—the Jews turn away from him and the Gentiles accept him—then we have the context in which to interpret this story. It is not to illustrate Jesus’ pathos to the social outcasts, nor his openness to a woman, nor his embrace of the enemy of Israel. I do not see any of these concerns portrayed here. Based on literary structural grounds, I find the point of this episode is to contrast the belief of Gentiles, who consider Jesus to have divine powers, with the utter disdain of the Jerusalem authorities towards him, and their regarding him as a hypocrite for preaching while breaking Jewish law. To my mind the whole episode is a literary conceit with a strong point to make.

We have already seen the trope of the blind begging for mercy from the Son of David in anti-Pharisaic settings: “As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed him, calling out, ‘Have mercy on us, Son of David!’” (Matt 9:27). This is followed seven verses later with “But the Pharisees said, ‘It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons.’” We will encounter the same motif again: “Two blind men were sitting by the roadside, and when they heard that Jesus was going by, they shouted, ‘Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!’” (Matt 20:30). This scene leads to the climax of the anti-Jewish motif that has slowly emerged in the “Son of David” stories:

We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life! (Matt 20:19–20)

The trajectory of the Gospel works through repeated scenes that deepen and move the narrative. Remarkable literary devices are employed here.

The woman’s manner of addressing Jesus—“Lord Son of David”—(as the blind men had) expresses respect when directly addressing people with titles. We commonly find “Lord High Priest” (*m. Yoma* 1:1) and “Lord King” (*Sipre Deut*, *piska* 313) in rabbinic literature. The honorific is a commonplace. It really means “O Lord (i.e. vocative)—who is—Son (i.e. nominative) of David.”

Indeed the title has the definite article before it (the High Priest, the King) but with “ben David” the grammatical construction removes the article, so it is not “Lord the Son of David”. “Son of David” is the Jewish term for “Messiah” (*b. Sanh.* 97a) and likely is a shortened form of “Messiah, son of David” (*b. Sukkah* 52a–b; *b. Soṭah* 48b; *Gen. Rab.* 97). Here the woman’s words foreshadow Matthew 21:6,<sup>72</sup> Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem as the “Son of David.”

*But he did not answer her a word. His disciples came and urged him, “Send her away, for she shouts out [from] behind us.”* (v. 23)

Matthew’s drama encompasses three conflicts. He has dismissed the Pharisees but now faces the pleas of the disciples and of the woman. The literary structure suggests that Matthew’s ploy is to heighten the dramatic tension, prolong the suspense, and convey Jesus’ initial ambivalence by his first yielding to the exclusionary outlook of the disciples, and then acknowledging the warrant to include faithful Gentiles. In the end it will be the Gentiles alone who deserve the entrance ticket offered by Jesus, keeper of Gates of the Kingdom.

Viewed in greater detail, Jesus does not ignore the woman’s pleas as she follows him and his disciples, but he does not engage her either. She pursues them, calling out for help. He pauses, allowing the confrontation to remain unsettled. This is a dramatic pause—the whole narrative from here to the Gospel’s end might be categorized as an extension of this pregnant pause.

*He answered, “I was not sent to anyone except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”* (v. 24)

Jesus contends that he is a messenger, the one who is sent, and as such he has no warrant to represent his Sender when dealing with those who are outside of his commissioned task. If he heals Gentiles, he is not following his instructions. He then ceases to represent the One who sent him.<sup>73</sup> In this case the sender must be seen as God. The sheep are the house of Israel. They are the Jews who went astray after Gentile ways, and forgot their own heritage. God, through his messenger, will gather them again. The image is borrowed from Jeremiah:

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<sup>72</sup> Matt 21:9: “The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!’”

<sup>73</sup> *M. Ter.* 4:4 illustrates the point in reference to a messenger who separates a larger amount than the householder intended to give as a priestly *terumah*-gift.

My people have been lost sheep; their shepherds have led them astray and caused them to drift off course on the mountains. They wandered over mountain and hill and stopped thinking about their own resting place. (Jer 50:6)

But God has promised to save them. The prophet uses the prophetic tense here, speaking of a future occurrence as though it had already happened, of God's word as if fulfilled. Jesus echoes the prophet: Let the Gentiles have faith through witnessing the redemption of Israel.

Hear the word of God, O nations, and declare it in the coastlands afar off; say, "He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd keeps his flock." For God has ransomed Jacob, and has redeemed him from a hand stronger than him. (Jer 31:10–11)

Jesus sees himself as God's messenger who will heal and preach and ransom Jacob from oppressors. For the Gospel, this does not mean pagan enemies, but the Pharisees and priests.

*But she knelt before him: "Lord, save me."* (v. 25)

This detail is cleverly ambiguous. Is it an act of desperation—if you want to get back to your business, you either have to deal with me or kick me away from you? Is it importuning—the way a dog begs before the master—with pleading sounds and gestures?<sup>74</sup> Is it worship of God when she kneels down in front of him? Is she reciting a line from Matthew's *Hosanna (Hallel)* scene of the coronation of Jesus "O Lord save us!" (Matt 21: 6), echoing Ps 18:25 which praises God in the highest?<sup>75</sup> Whatever the case here, I argue that in v. 27 her words are directed to God, and to Jesus as his messenger. She is not sure how Jesus will respond, but she is certain that God will not let her suffer. The full sense of her faith is that God will heal through the agency of Jesus, his anointed—the Son of David.

Again, we have foreshadowing of the future; once in the Kingdom, no one will have need to be saved; there will be no danger. Driving out the demon is banishment of evil, but there are no demons in the Kingdom of Heaven. I have often noticed that the reports of the activities of Israel Baal Shem Tov

74 See Amy-Jill Levine, "Matthew's Advice to a Divided Readership" in *The Gospel of Matthew in Current Study* (Aune 2001): 37 ("blocking the path"); 36 ("like a dog").

75 See "Planting Christian Trees in Jewish Soil" (Bassar 2005), 100.

and those of Jesus have much in common. The Baal Shem Tov also exorcized demons and believed that redemption would not come until his teachings were spread far and wide.

What is lacking in these Jesus narratives is focus on the redemption of Israel from the persecution of ruling empires, and the vision of Israel's sovereignty, with all peoples flowing to Jerusalem. (In my comments to v. 31 below, I have tried to locate the model for this narrative in the fulfillment of both Ps 72 and Exod 23:25.)

*He answered, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." (v. 26)*

The disciples are aware that their message of salvation is not intended for Gentiles. Like Sarah pleading with Abraham to have Ishmael sent away, the disciples demand: "Send out this slave woman and her son, for the son of this slave shall not be an heir with my son Isaac." (Gen 21:10). The disciples do not see this woman as having a hereditary share of salvation and blessing alongside the rightful heirs of Abraham, the Jews. They will not deal with her, and they wonder why Jesus remains silent. Now the story of the Gentiles begins to unfold in this flicker of reversal. How can Gentiles receive what is due Israel? The disciples are on one end of the stage ("Chase her away!") and the woman at the other ("Have mercy on me!").

Jesus begins by presenting the disciples' views. God is the father of Israel, they are His children. What is fit for the Jews must not be given to the dogs; what is sufficient for the children must stay with them alone. Israel has a separate destiny from the nations.

*But she said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from their lord's table." (v. 27)*

The first "Lord" addresses Jesus; the second metaphorically refers to God, the Lord of the Cosmic Table. That is the key to this story.

Jesus had compared Gentiles to dogs in their relationship to God's family and Israelites to children. However, because many commentators have invented negative Jewish attitudes towards dogs, I want to stress that the role of the dog in Judaism is not as often portrayed. To say, as Jesus does, that one should not take food from children for dogs is simply a statement of a universal human value. Of course, he is referring here to his special gifts of healing. But the kneeling Canaanite woman is right. Full human meals would normally not be given to dogs; they would be fed from the leftovers. A metaphor is only

as effective as its reality. Also, dogs are seen as the most pious, if menacing, of creatures in medieval literature, perhaps even comparable to sheep. *Yalkut Šim'oni Torah*, 187 (*Bo*) preserves a mystical statement of unknown date but attributed to the first century. According to it, the common dog recites, “Come, let us bow down in worship; let us kneel before the Lord our maker” (Ps 95:6). [*Midrash Psalms* puts Ps 96:7 into the mouth of Israel: For he is our God and we are the people of his flock.] *B. Šabb.* 155b contains instructions about the duty of feeding dogs scraps of food and better, since they are dependent on handouts (Exod 22:30). *B. Ta'an.* 11b warns the disciple of sages, who wants to act overly pious and fast, that if he does, then the dog deserves to be fed the meal he refused out of mistaken piety. Jesus sees his mission as directed toward the sheep, not the dogs; nonetheless the dogs cannot be ignored.

A Jewish cultural tendency to see boilerplate binary opposition between Jews and Gentiles/dogs, accounts for a Talmudic discussion of what is compatible with the category “Jews.” There is a curious phenomenological resemblance between that discussion and Matthew’s (perhaps originally Jesus’) categories of Jew, Gentile/dogs. According to the Talmud, the Torah permits cooking “for all living beings” (an expansive category) on festival days and yet only “for yourselves” (a restrictive category).<sup>76</sup> Rabbi Yosi HaGalili understood the limitations to exclude cooking for one’s dogs (and also Gentiles). We see the mind-sets of the binary at work in the legal interpretations of this verse. Rabbi Akiva permitted sharing cooked food with one’s dogs (“i.e. living beings”) but on the basis of “for yourselves” excluded Gentiles (*b. Beṣah* 21b). The dogs are a part of “your household” and Gentiles are not. Jesus seems to have upheld the binary attributed to Yosi HaGalili that Gentiles and dogs should be equated (and both excluded) but the woman espoused the view that if Gentiles are excluded she might be treated as minimally in the dog category because she worships God unlike Gentiles. That would be the default category for her. Jesus finally sees even in his view healing her is legitimate because her faith raises her to deserving status in this regard beyond dog or gentile categories. While Matthew deals not with festivals or even food, the woman herself has introduced a comparison with dogs so we might see cultural sets of choices. We might even push our imaginations further to consider moments of healing as a miracle analogous to the historic festivals of salvation where God wrought wonders for Israel. What is reserved to do for Jews might be expanded as it is for animals as in one view. Jesus seems to hold a different view, yet grants her an exceptional deserving status as far as healing goes because of her faith—neither dog nor animal

76 Exod 12:16: “And on the first day a holy assembly . . . all manner of work may not be done on them. Only that which may be eaten for any *living being*—it alone shall be done for *yourselves*.”

status. It is doubtful the background of festival considerations in reality played any part in the thinking of the Gospel. Still, I have given a *prima facie* argument for a common mindset to be operative that was shared by Gospel and Jewish tradition. It is true that one would be hard pressed to find other choices to exclude but the phrasing of binaries (“not Gentiles” or “not dogs” rather than “not cattle”) illustrates a shared way of thinking. This insight, reductive as it may be, allows us to appreciate the narratives (given by mishnaic teachers and evangelist records) through a single cultural lens. The defined categories agree on shared language to express “the other” so that the narratives look mutually compatible.

Some commentators point out that the dialogue that ensues in the Gospel is not unlike the Talmudic passage concerning a humble, unrecognized but deserving mendicant during a famine asking for food promised to scholars. He overcomes the objections to his unworthiness (in fact, he is worthy) by asking to be fed like the animals in the wild.<sup>77</sup>

Placing phenomenological arguments to explain the images of Gentile and dog, we proceed to find that the metaphors operate deeply on a literary level. The woman is referring to the Lord’s table, God’s table, as Jesus had intimated. Her parallel retort retains Jesus’ metaphor. Just as Jesus referred to the Father feeding the children, God’s feeding—so she refers to the lord’s (the lord of the manor as it were) feeding the dogs, God’s feeding. The indeterminate references blurring Jesus and God are open to many interpretations. Matthew’s purposes are well served by the genius of his ostensible simplicity, which is complex upon detailed examination. The rhetoric of Matthew in portraying these Jesus/God scenes is a way-station to the portrayal in the *Gospel of John* of Jesus as the “Divine Son”.

In the coming scene we will be reminded of this dialogue between the woman and Jesus. We will see that matters are such at the dawn of the *eschaton* that the leftovers, even the crumbs of the crumbs, amount to huge portions.

*Then Jesus said to her, “Woman, your faith is great. It shall be for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed at that very hour. (v. 28)*

Matthew interprets her act of kneeling and plea as addressing God, not Jesus. Her retort trusts God to do what good lords and masters do—provide for the weak who are dependent on them. She has faith that God will show no less mercy than the normal householder towards his children and indeed, a great deal more. What Jesus intends to say is that her faith is so great that God will reward her for it and grant her wish. The key is not her clever argument on

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77 See b. *B. Bat.* 8a.

its own but her prayer to God to allow the messenger (Jesus) to act. We now understand that her initial pleas were neither to the disciples nor to Jesus *per se*—they were to God all along. Jesus had not fully grasped her belief in the God of Israel until this point. “*Woman, your faith is great*” seems to be referring to Lam 3:22–23:

Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; *great is your faith.*

When the Prophets spoke of faith, the Rabbis had much to say. Some traditions discussing the virtue of faith look to Hab 2:4, Jer 5:3 and Isa 25:1 as their springboards, others (and I find it most relevant here) to Hos 2:22 (NT 20): “I will bind you to me in faithfulness: and you shall know the Lord.” The Rabbis rendered the verse as “I (God) will bind you to me *because of faith*.”

*“And I will bind you to me because of faith”* (Hos 2:22.): Great is faith to the Holy One” for in reward for the faith with which Israel had believed in God the Holy Spirit rested upon them.” (*Mekhilta of Rabbi Yishmael, Beshalah (Vayehi par. 6) and Mekhilta of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai*, ch. 14)

So this Canaanite woman’s argument for mercy as a creature is now to be recognized as a statement of faith in God. Jesus assures her that God will reward this faith. That her faith was in God, rather than just in Jesus, is apparent in v. 31, which only mentions God; we are told that the people who were healed through Jesus “praised the God of Israel.” Jesus now realizes God will certainly let him drive the demon from her daughter. Prior to this Jesus might have been worried that God would not drive a demon out of a Gentile, especially in foreign territory; he would look foolish if he tried to do it. One cannot resist thinking that Isa 56:6–8 cannot be too far from his mind:

And foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord to serve him . . . “these I will bring to My holy mountain and give them joy in My house of prayer . . . for My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.” . . . He who gathers the exiles of Israel. “I will gather still others to them besides those already gathered.”

The episode closes. The narrative continues as Jesus returns to the Galilee and, for the time being, his mission to the Jews. But we have not forgotten the failure of his mission as portrayed in Matt 13:13–14, and especially in 13:57. The mission to the Jews may fail, but the one to the Gentiles will succeed.

And they were offended by him. Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not dis-honored, except in this home town and in his house.” And he did not do many miracles there, because of their faithlessness. (Matt 13, vv. 57–58)

*Jesus returned from there and went down along the Sea of Galilee, and he went up to the mount and sat there.* (v. 29)

We have advanced forward in the Gospel of Matthew, but the cycle of events is similar. Rebuffed by the Pharisees, Jesus goes into seclusion. Previously he had gone to the desert.<sup>78</sup> We learn later in v. 33 that they are also in a desert now. Jesus will sit atop a mountain and heal the sick, as he did earlier in chapter 14.

*Many crowds came to him, having with them lame people, blind people, crippled people, mutes, and many others, and they cast them at his feet and he healed them.* (v. 30)

The passage adds detail to the earlier account of a similar healing scene, which may be a variant of it, but Matthew’s placement of it here is masterful. The passage still resonates with the very important confrontation with the Canaanite woman. That singular encounter foreshadows the prophecy that the faith of the Gentiles will surpass that of Israel in the end. Gentiles have the future. Israel will be lost. Earlier (chap. 14:14) Matthew had related: “Coming out, he saw a great crowd and he had compassion for them, and he healed their sick.” Here we see, in action, the message sent to John the Baptist in Matt 11:4–5:

Jesus answered them, “Go, tell John what you hear and see. The blind receive sight, and the lame walk, the plagued with leprosy are cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised, and the poor have good news proclaimed to them . . .”

Without actually seeing the healings himself, John is informed of the proof that Jesus was the Messiah, the expected one. Now there are witnesses to that proof:

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<sup>78</sup> “When Jesus heard he left from there in a boat to a desert place by himself. When the crowds heard, they followed him on foot from the cities. Coming out, he saw a great crowd and he had compassion for them, and he healed their sick.” (Matt 14:13).

*So that the crowd marveled seeing the mute speaking, the crippled healed, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel.<sup>79</sup>*  
 (v. 31)

The end of the verse reports the reactions of those ill and disabled people who were cured of their ailments through Jesus. In my discussion above of 11:4–5, I illustrated the pan-Israelite expectations of the Messiah that Jesus fulfills in these miracles of healing. Ziony Zevit traces the history of these healing miracles from Hebrew Bible and rabbinic literature through the New Testament in “Jesus, God of the Hebrew Bible.”<sup>80</sup> I would have preferred that Zevit have placed a question mark at the end of his title. The point is that, in the present chapter, Jesus performs miracles, but all understand that he does so as the messenger of the God of Israel, not of some foreign god or demon.

The reference to the “God of Israel” possibly indicates a formal boilerplate liturgy rather than a spontaneous response to the miracle. According to Psalm 72:11–19:

Yea, all kings shall fall down before him: *all nations* shall serve him. For he shall *deliver the needy when he crieth*; the poor also, and him that hath no helper. He shall spare the poor and needy, and shall save the souls of the needy. He shall redeem their soul from deceit and violence: and precious shall their blood be in his sight. And he shall live, and to him shall be given of the gold of Sheba: prayer also shall be made to him continually; and daily shall he be praised. *Let there shall be a handful of grain in the earth upon the top of the mountains; the fruit thereof shall shake like Lebanon: and they of the city shall flourish like grass of the earth.* His name shall endure forever: his name shall be continued as long as the sun: and men shall be blessed in him: all nations shall call him blessed. *Blessed be the Lord God, the God of Israel, who only doeth wondrous things.* And blessed be his glorious name forever: and let the whole earth be filled with his glory; Amen, and Amen.

79 See Solomon Zeitlin, “The Temple and Worship: A Study of the Development of Judaism. A Chapter in the History of the Second Jewish Commonwealth” (1961), 226, which explains the term was used in Second Temple times in contexts of God’s faithfulness to his covenant and promised redemption.

80 See Ziony Zevit, “Jesus Stories, Jewish Liturgy and Some Evolving Theologies until Circa 200 C.E.: Stimuli and Reactions” in *The Jewish Jesus: Revelation, Reflection, Reclamation* (Garber 2011), 65–92.

To my understanding, it is this Psalm that has guided the narrative of the twin episodes in Matt 14 and now in chapter 15. The episode of the crying, needy woman of the nations fits nicely into the pattern of Psalm 72, with its imagery of the “top of the mountain,” where Jesus sat after curing her daughter. The notion of small grains becoming as huge as the cedars of Lebanon in the psalm finds its reference in the story of the feeding of thousands from a mere handful of foods. Furthermore, *Eccl. Rab.* 1:9 cites Ps 72:16 as pointing to, as with the manna in the days of Moses, the people in messianic times being nourished miraculously. Praise of the “God of Israel” who does wondrous things makes the identification of the events in Matt 15 with Psalm 72 both convincing and useful.

Perhaps even more telling is a passage in Exodus (23:20–27) that can be understood as referring to the figure of the Son of Man/Metatron.

Behold, I send an Angel before you, to keep you in the way, and to bring you into the place that I have prepared. Beware of him, and obey his voice, provoke him not; for he will not pardon your transgressions: for *my name is in him*. But if you will indeed obey his voice, and do all that I speak; then I will be an enemy unto your enemies, and an adversary unto your adversaries. For my Angel shall go before you, and bring you in against the Amorites, and the Hittites, and the Perizzites, and the Canaanites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites: and I will cut them off. You will not bow down to their gods, nor serve them, nor do after their works: but you will utterly overthrow them, and quite break down their images. And you shall serve the Lord your God, *and he shall bless thy bread, and thy water; and I will take infirmity away from the midst of you*. There shall nothing cast their young, nor be barren, in thy land: the number of thy days I will fulfill. I will send my fear before you, and will destroy all the people to whom you will come, and I will make all your enemies turn their backs unto you.

The place of Jesus in early Jewish thought still requires much investigation. Some traces of his role as an angelic figure linger, based on the above citation from Exodus, in the current *Rosh Hashanah* liturgy. We can point to Jewish traditions which contain references to 1) divine blessing of sustenance; 2) obligations to bless and then break bread, (*b. Ber.* 48b) and 3) such abundance of wine that it will flow like water (*b. Eruv.* 65a). The correspondences between healing, blessing and breaking bread, and mass feedings and abundance of wine are quite remarkable.

The crowd responds by noting—in reverse order—the ailments enumerated in v. 30. The emphatic reversal of the repetition of who had been healed of what, produces the narrative pattern ABCDE||EDCBA, concluding with praise of the God of Israel. Not only do these people believe, but the crowds who patiently wait for three days without food will now experience a surrealistic step into the Kingdom. The stages of progression graphically represent in microcosm the unfolding of ultimate redemption. The scene is about to segue into the New World of a redeemed cosmos. Foreshadowing Jesus' three day fast in the tomb, on the fourth day of hunger they find themselves in a new existence, where the limitations imposed by the laws of nature do not apply and miracles are the norm.

The previous narrative of chapter 14 culminates and finds completion here. The healing of the lame and the blind is a stage in the necessary process of redemption, offering proof that Jesus is the redeemer. We meet the crowd now in a new vision of future time, a slippage into the Future. What has been intimated in parables and in these surrealistic scenes will now spread slowly across Matthew's canvas but remain incomplete at the story's end. That is why these episodes guide the expectations of the reader to go beyond the Gospel's conclusion, into their own act of faith, in the promise dramatized here. Clearly these are not the crowds who will clamor for Jesus' death in chapter 27 but seem like the crowds whom Caiaphas fears if he touches Jesus in chapter 26. We will revisit the issue further at the scene of the Crucifixion.

*Jesus summoned his disciples and said, "I have compassion for the crowd, for they have remained with me for three days and they have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away fasting, or they might pass out on the road."*  
(v. 32)

Apparently, the disciples saw the crowds which had been following Jesus and wanted them to return to their homes, as they had no provisions for them. The scene occurs far away in some mystical, enchanted location—but the disciples are unaware that they have crossed over into a mysterious realm. Hunger is still a fact at this point of the Gospel between the world that is fading and the world that is arriving. These verses (15:32–38) in many respects mirror the earlier verses in 14:14–21. The few differences between these accounts may or may not be significant, for example, the number of initial loaves. The quantity of bushels of leftovers and the number of people fed varies. Matthew specifically refers to them as separate incidents, although clearly replicated in Matt 16:9–10. At any rate, any interpretations I might offer

of these details would be highly speculative, and it is not my purpose here to offer speculations that have no clear evidence in their favor.

*His disciples said to him, “Where can we get enough bread in the desert to feed such a crowd?” (v. 33)*

The disciples are oblivious to their situation and are still thinking in totally *pre-eschaton* terms. The parable of the mustard seed and the leaven (Matt 13:31–33) is far from their minds. They do not realize that in their present circumstance, at the edge of the *eschaton*, a little will suffice for many, just as the parable related. Indeed, throughout the episode, no one is astonished, except for the narrator, at the miracle of the abundance that they are about to enjoy.

*Jesus said to them, “How much bread do you have?” They said, “Seven loaves, and a few little fish.” (v. 34)*

In Matt 14:17 they had five loaves and two fish. In the Galilee, fish were abundant. It is not surprising that this is what the disciples have. The meager portions will grow and grow as promised by Jesus in his parable in chapter 13.

*Ordering the crowd to sit upon the ground, he took the seven loaves of bread and the fish, said the blessing, broke them and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples to the crowds. (vv. 35–36)*

As is the Jewish practice to this day, the Talmud notes it is proper that one first offer a blessing and then break the loaves of bread (*b. Ber.* 39b). The seven loaves, scant food to feed four thousand men and larger numbers of women and children, suffices generously, with the excess filling seven huge baskets. There is a definite order of transfer given here, Jesus to disciples to masses, and even then a surplus remains.

*They all ate and were satisfied, and they took up the leftovers of the broken pieces, seven full baskets. (v. 37)*

The discarded leftovers are plentiful and in view of the scene above (vv. 26–27) the implication is that they are meant for the Gentiles. The reference to scraps for the dogs in the woman's parable was meant to signify Jesus' powers to exorcise and heal. Now these words seem to have literal meaning as well in this narrative fulfillment of the parable.

No one seems to be stunned by what has transpired and the report is offered casually. The reader is left in amazement at the staggering quantities mentioned. Ruth 2:14 mentions “And she did eat, and was satisfied, and had leftovers” but the amount was not spelled out and there is no sense of the miraculous, only the kindness of a kinsman. On the other hand, 2 Kings 4:41–44 conveys sense of miraculous mystery in the quantities of food consumed and of leftovers.

*Those who ate were four thousand men, not counting women and children.*  
(v. 38)

As I noted in my commentary to Matt 14:21, in discussing the 600,000 men who journeyed out of Egypt (“besides young ones”) in Exod 12:37, *Mek. R. Yish. (Piska Bo 14)* tells us that “besides young ones” means “not counting women and children.” The manner of counting those present is decidedly Jewish.<sup>81</sup>

*Having sent away the crowds, he went into the boat and came to the region of Magadan.* (v. 39)

I have no idea where Magadan is but I do know the story is meant to occur in real time and space. The boat, both here and in the end of chapter 14, brings us out of the dimension of peace and abundance, wholeness and healing, to the present, and to the restless region where a disappointed Jesus will persevere in his preaching.

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81 See earlier comments to Matt 14:21.

# Chapter 16

## Introduction

Until the beginning of chapter 15, Matthew depicts the conflict between the Pharisees and Jesus as centering on scribal laws applicable to healing people on the Sabbath. Jesus correctly argues that scribal laws may be set aside for the sake of compassion or other overriding considerations. In chapter 15, Matthew portrays Jesus as challenging certain scribal laws regarding purity and issues concerning vows and oaths. His challenges suggest, in quite clever ways, that 1) scribal law might deprive parents of the honor the Torah commands their children give them, and 2) the scribal purity laws metaphorically should have distinguished, in ways that Torah law alone would not, between the inner moral decisions of the heart and outward pretenses of piety. The discussion moves from ritualistic experience of the divine, through scribal purity practices, to moral questions of inner benevolence and purity of heart.

One might well get the impression from the debate over handwashing that Matthew's Gospel advances a Sadducean point of view. Sadducees, according to the reports of the Talmud and Josephus, inveighed against the interests of scribal *paradosis*. But chapter 16 quickly disabuses us of the notion that Jesus might have been a Sadducee, since it begins by pointing out that Sadducees also complained against Jesus. Like the Pharisees, the Sadducees are skeptical that Jesus is the Messiah, God's anointed messenger, sent to redeem Israel from foreign subjugation. (The Gospel writer stresses that the major Jewish powers in first century Judea and Galilee also made light of Jesus' messianic claims.) Thus Sadducees, like the Pharisees, will have no share in the Kingdom. Yet their challenge to Jesus is not based on outright rejection, but rather on their demand that he provide some kind of proof that he has been sent on a divine mission, and that the Messianic Era is about to erupt. Their insistence that he do so is neither absurd nor intolerant of Jesus.

Apparently they have a tradition that certain signs will appear to usher in this Era, and those signs are nowhere to be seen. Nonetheless, even though no one has, as yet, seen any indications of the cosmic changes believed to be harbingers of the arrival of God's Kingdom, Jewish authorities will nonetheless consider Jesus' claims that the Kingdom is all but here if Jesus can establish that he is a prophet and confirm his messianic identity. There are also signs that prophets and sages must be able to offer as evidence in order to confirm their stature. The test of a true prophet is the ability to foretell some unusual event, while in no way asking or requiring that any of the laws given by God in the

Torah be violated (Deut 13:1; Matt 24:24). In chapter 4 of Matthew, Satan also had asked Jesus for signs as proof of his credentials (vv. 3–7).

Some insights into the construction of the first verses of chapter 16 can be gleaned from comparing them to Luke's description of the trials of Paul in Jerusalem. It is arguable that the author of Acts and Luke structures Paul's life on a Jesus model. Paul is first warned against going to Jerusalem by a "prophet" (Acts 21:7), whose advice he ignores. Paul is then arrested by the Temple authorities who interrogate Paul about his beliefs, ranging from theological questions, such as the resurrection of the dead at the end of time, to legal questions related to his advocating the abandonment of key observances of the Torah (21:21). (I do not know whether courts adjudicated cases of theological belief in resurrection, or how.) Before the proceedings get underway, Paul speaks publicly in Hebrews about how he arrived at his new beliefs (21:40). Trying to make sense of the issues involved, the Romans allow a council of inquiry to take place (22:30).

I have no idea whether any of this is historical or not, but it is certain Luke's readers accepted it; as such, it is plausible. A high court might have been convened to hear charges against a public preacher who ridiculed fulfilling the laws of the Torah. The charge of leading others astray was the approximate equivalent of treason. We suspect that the real charge against Paul was that he was encouraging Jews to abandon their ancestral rites. Paul discovers his interlocutors include both Sadducees and Pharisees (23:6). We gather from this that it was conceivable that a delegation of Pharisees and Sadducees might jointly investigate a matter of common interest, although I am skeptical as to whether Sadducees and Pharisees routinely sat on the high court together. It is not improbable, as in our Gospel story, that the two factions might have cooperated in trying to verify Jesus' claim that the end-time has arrived.

Paul then claims he was raised as a Pharisee in a family of Pharisees, and that he is on trial only because he had been given an angelic message that aroused hope that the dead would soon be resurrected (a sign of the end times). At this point the Pharisees, who not only believe in resurrection but in angels, side with Paul against the Sadducees; perhaps Paul had actually been given a sign. (At any rate the matter would not have been one for a tribunal to decide, since history will unfold one way or another, and no one other than a prophet could foretell which way that will be.) Paul thereby sets off a proverbial bar-room brawl, distracting attention away from himself and diverting it toward the most contentious issues dividing Sadducees and Pharisees (23:10). His trial has to be postponed when the huge commotion that breaks out turns violent. The Romans are aware the charge has to do with Paul's preaching about observance of Torah (23:29). Since he is a Roman citizen, Paul is brought before the proconsul

Felix. Paul insists that he observes the entire Torah and Prophets scrupulously and believes in the doctrine of resurrection as well (24:14–15).

The Book of Acts concludes, citing Isa 6:9–10, that the people's eyes, ears and hearts will not understand the will of God. This is the very passage cited in Matt 13:15. Acts interprets Isaiah's prophecy to mean that salvation of God will be sent to the Gentiles who, unlike the Jews, will listen (28:29). The Jews were unable to fathom the truth of the Gospel, while the Gentiles were very capable of discerning the divine plan, and having faith even without signs.

In chapters 16 and 17 of Matthew, we encounter what can be termed the “secrecy motif”: Jesus enjoins his disciples not to reveal his ambiguous messianic identity as the “son.” He also informs the disciples that he is to die. Scholars have long puzzled over these “secrecy” passages in the synoptic gospels and proposed various solutions. Since the Gospel of Mark was and is considered by most academics to be the foundational document of both Luke and Matthew, their discussions have focused on Mark. What they say about Mark, however, also holds true for Luke and Matthew.

I recently undertook a study of the “Letter of James,” a document I date to the first century.<sup>1</sup> While there seem to be connections to synoptic teachings, particularly to Matthew, I have been unable to discern within it a fully developed messianic Christology, although the term “Christ” itself confers a definitive messianic title. I infer that the most likely areas of controversy in the early Church concerned attitudes towards ritual laws and/or the divinity of Jesus. The debate over requiring hand purity before consuming bread in chapter 15, and the injunction to remain silent over the messianic “sonship” of Jesus in chapters 16 and 17, may shine a spotlight on later Christian controversies.

By the time of Matthew, Christians have abandoned both “*paradosis*” and, with Paul’s blessing, many of the ritual observances of the written Torah, although Christians here and there retained some practices. With Paul’s approval, they have adopted the view that Jesus is a divinity. Nevertheless, until Nicea in the early 4th century, we can still identify a wide range of attitudes concerning observances of Jewish law and regarding the nature of Jesus’ humanity or divinity.

As far as the claims of the earliest documents of the Church about the life of Jesus, I find some wisdom in the view of Wilhelm Wrede (1859–1906).<sup>2</sup> Wrede contends that the command to keep matters secret until Jesus’ death reveals a silence of the early sources concerning Jesus’ messiahship. The early Church

<sup>1</sup> Basser, “Introduction and Annotations to the Letter of James” in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (Levine and Brettler 2011), 427–435.

<sup>2</sup> Wilhelm Wrede, *The Messianic Secret* (1987).

had to account for this silence by inventing the “dogma of intentional secrecy.” The teaching of Jesus is shrouded by the astonishment of the crowds who do not understand anything he is talking about. Furthermore, the disciples do not really understand him either. The Baptism and Transfiguration indicate a hope and a promise of a redeemed future, but even here the message remains obscure. The promise of hope seems somehow bound up with intimations of dark violence. All of this is the invention of the later Church, which superimposed its theology of Christ onto the life of Jesus in the Gospels. No one, says Wrede, thought Jesus was the Messiah before the events surrounding his death.

I wonder whether any Jewish messianic movement (and there were several in the first century C.E.) could have been so invested in deifying a person unless its members were truly convinced its leader had been the Messiah. For some reason that we shall never know, the story developed that Jesus was even more than the Messiah, more than the Son of Man; he was not merely *a* son of God, he was *the* Son of God, who would come back in his divine role to redeem the world, transforming it into a New Kingdom. We must also take into account Gospel passages urging his followers to suffer abuses and persecutions for Jesus’ sake, and the reports of lashings that were administered to Paul in synagogues for his preaching concerning Jesus.

What message did the historical Jesus proclaim? Why was he executed? What did the Apostolic Church teach? What were the range of opinions concerning Jesus and his message in his lifetime? Shortly after his death? Fifty years after his death? What events precipitated Christians repudiating their Jewish roots and evolving into a Gentile movement? While I am not certain I have any definitive answers to these questions, my job is to write a commentary, leaving such historical puzzles to be solved by Paula Fredriksen and others who are better prepared for that undertaking.<sup>3</sup>

The text implies Jesus does not want anything to interfere with the execution of the Son of Man. This execution, and the resurrection which follows, distinguishes Jesus’ movement from all other messianic movements. The theological underpinnings of faith in the divine plan for his crucifixion and resurrection provide believers with a distinctively Christian doctrine of salvation. Whatever Jesus’ teaching of the Kingdom of Heaven might have involved, after his death the doctrine of salvation and faith in the risen Christ defined the core feature of the followers of Jesus. Had Peter—or anyone else—succeeded in thwarting Jesus’ death, the Gospel story would be pointless.

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<sup>3</sup> Paula Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ: the Origins of the New Testament Images of Jesus* (2000).

We now realize that Satan (in chap. 3) had tried to undermine the unfolding of the divine drama by having Jesus confirmed as the Son of God before his death. That scene presented the difficulty as to why Jesus resisted being confirmed in a role for which he was predestined. The reason is that death alone could confirm that role. Had Peter interfered, he would have been accomplishing Satan's task. Without the death and resurrection, messianic Davidic sonship would bring about a merely political kingdom, an era of temporal Jewish freedom from oppression, rather than usher in the Christian spiritual Kingdom. The Gospels understand that Jesus' needs not only to fulfill the Jewish messianic vision but to transcend it, and to transform it into the Gentile, Christian Son of God story.<sup>4</sup>

### Commentary

*Pharisees and Sadducees came testing him, and asked him to show them a sign from heaven. (v. 1)*

Asking for signs from God to prove one's *bona fides* as a prophet is a practice that is well attested in Jewish literature. Moses had to prove he was a divine messenger (Exod 4:1–9); the miraculous events of Moses' stick turning into a serpent, or his hand becoming leprous are too well known to require detailed exposition here. Moses' brother Aaron miraculously proves his divine election to the priesthood (Num 17:23), and the prophet Elijah elicits the sign of fire descending from the heavens (2 Kings 1:10–14). This theme reaches its penultimate in the Talmud (*b. B. Mesi'a* 59b), where Rabbi Eliezer demands a proof from heaven that his interpretation of a law is correct; various signs, including a voice from heaven, confirm that his view is correct. Nonetheless, the Babylonian Talmud seems to conclude that charismatic signs and heavenly voices have no place in the rabbinic decision-making process, which determines legal matters by majority vote. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus receives two signs from a heavenly voice confirming his status as beloved

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4 Adela Yarbro Collins and John Joseph Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God: Divine, Human, and Angelic Messianic Figures in Biblical and Related Literature* (2008). The book, through historical sources, demonstrates how Christians appropriated well-established concepts of kings as anointed messiahs and other special human agents speaking and acting with divine authority, and may themselves become angelic, to describe the status of Jesus. However, not long after the crucifixion they incorporated into these concepts Jesus' unique status as a divinity who is to be worshipped.

acting son: the Baptism (3:17) and the Transfiguration (17:5). Regarding signs of the coming of the messianic son of David, it is quite curious to read in *Tanh. Gen.* [ed. Buber], *Vayishlah* 8:

May our masters teach us: What sign did Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma give to his disciples? They had said to him, "When will the son of David come?" and he said, "Did I say to you that you should demand a sign?" They said, "No!" He then said, "This gate will be built up and will fall down, be built up and fall down, and no one will manage to rebuild it before the son of David comes." Our Sages requested of Rabbi Yosi, "We seek a sign from you (that you have spoken correctly)." He said, "May the cave of Pamyas change to blood!" And it changed exactly as he had said.

In Matt 16:13, Jesus and the disciples discuss messianic figures in this very location of Pamyas (see commentary to v. 13 below).

*He answered, "When it is evening, you say, 'It will be good weather, because the sky is fiery red.' In the morning, 'Stormy today, because the sky is fiery and ominous.' You know how to read the appearance of the sky, but you aren't able to read the signs of the times."* (vv. 2–3).

Examination of the available manuscripts of Matthew reveals that the earliest and best witnesses do not know of this passage. It appears to have been added sometime during the century after Matthew produced his Gospel. The answer to the Pharisees and Sadducees is given in v. 4. The unit seems to be an interpolation, since it is uniquely phrased in second person direct speech. Matthew 12: 38–40 provides the sequence we require here:

Then some of the Scribes and Pharisees answered him, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." He answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah the Prophet. For just as Jonah was in the stomach of the giant fish for three days and three nights, so too will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."

Direct parallels to rabbinic literature<sup>5</sup> are found in the texts of Thomas (Logion 1:2), and in Luke 12:54–56:

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<sup>5</sup> For texts describing wind direction, clouds etc. and their effects see Basser, *Midrashic Interpretations*, 69–75. The *Sifre* texts in the collection say western showers are beneficial while southerly winds are harmful in the sunny season.

He also said to the crowds, “When you see the cloud spring up in the west, right away you say, ‘A shower is coming,’ and it happens this way. When it is the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be parched heat,’ and it happens. Stage-actor, you know how to make sense of the appearance of the earth and the heaven; don’t you how to make sense of this period of time?”

Regardless of the source of this gloss, the rhetorical devices have literary merit. We begin with what people know—the weather—starting off with the good weather before mentioning the inclement. Small credit for what the authorities can do is contrasted with the more weighty and substantive things they cannot do. The effect is a swing from a specific positive (good) to a specific negative (stormy); a more general positive (read the impending weather) to a more encompassing general negative (cannot read the epochal upheavals).

From time immemorial, folk wisdom has discerned, in some form or other, “red sky at night—sailors’ delight; red sky at morning—sailors take warning.” A passage in the Talmud (*b. B. Batra* 84a) might be the remnant of such a tradition. A red sun (*šimša sumqati*) in the evening (*pania*) promises the beauty of the roses of *Gan Aden* (the Heavenly Kingdom), whose light is reflected by the sun. A red sun in the morning (*tzafra*) suggests ominous fiery flames thrusting from the Gates of Hell, their reflections caught by the sun.<sup>6</sup>

Jesus mocks the Scribes and Pharisees. He tells them their abilities are elementary. At best they are able to read nature, but they lack the deeper mystical knowledge required to recognize historical events. Only divine wisdom can discern such events perfectly. This chapter highlights binary oppositions, both political—Jewish authorities/Jesus, and spiritual—believers/non-believers. The glossator who inserted these verses added another duality: cosmic—day/night, stormy/fair; and historical—this world/the next. Taken together these dualities form the conflicts at the central core of the Gospel which, by its end, are finally resolved in a vision of a unified world, a resurrected Jesus and a Gentile Kingdom of the saved.

*“An evil and adulterous generation [cf. Deut 32:5] seeks a sign, but no sign will be given to it except Jonah’s sign.” He left them, and departed. (v. 4)*

According to *Sipre Deut.* 308, a perverse generation (Deut 32:5) is destined for destruction unless it repents. Matthew 12:40 elaborates, its editor explaining that Jesus meant he would be in the belly of the earth for 3 days and then

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<sup>6</sup> It is tempting to see the influence of Iranian dualism on the full formulation of this tradition: dawn/twilight; *Gan Aden*/Hell, East/West.

resurrected. The sign is the crucifixion and the resurrection. Here our text is cleaner and more succinct, omitting the glossed explanation of the cryptic reference to Jonah. One might speculate whether there may have originally been some other meaning to the allusion to Jonah. Since we have one that is ready-made, we may as well use it.

With this curt, cryptic and angry retort, Jesus leaves them unsatisfied, still not knowing if he really is a divine messenger or a charlatan. Jesus will not help them decide who he is. This confusion introduces the ensuing episodes in the chapter. The disciples demonstrate that they too have not been grasping the import of Jesus' teaching, much more than is the case with Jesus' opponents. This passage, like all Jesus/opponent confrontations, leaves its audience bewildered. Why should Jesus be so angry if he does not justify himself? Why would anyone accept claims such as his without some kind of validating evidence?

*His disciples reached the shore, and had forgotten to bring bread. (v. 5)*

In 15:39 Jesus got into a boat and came to Magadan, where Jesus met with the Sadducees and Pharisees. Now the disciples have caught up with him, but in their hurry they had brought no provisions. Jesus, who has left the crowd, is still annoyed with the delegation who had come to seek confirmation of the rumors they had heard—that he was the anointed one, Son of David.

*Jesus said to them, “Look out and shun the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees! (v. 6)*

While Jesus might have greeted them more warmly, he instead takes them aback with his warning about the deceptive lure of the two major factions of power in first century Judea and Galilee: Pharisees and Sadducees.

Yeast, in Talmudic literature, signifies the small amount of fermenting agent that inflates the volume of dough, making it appear much grander than it in fact is. Metaphorically, badly cultured yeast can signify the process by which an insidiously small defect can make us see ourselves and our surrounding in a distorted way. Unable to control the expansion of the defect, we end up acting in ways that are contrary to the will of God. Prayers are recorded in *b. Ber.* 17a and *y. Ber.* 4:2 asking God to help them overcome the “yeast in the dough” that prevents the worshippers from doing God's will. In Gospel usage, it is used to refer to the infectious spread amongst the populace of Pharisaic pretensions that mimic the will of God. Jesus is very wary of them and warns his disciples to avoid them.

We have previously noted (and will again) the warning about the “sting and bite of the Sages” attributed to Rabbi Eliezer, one of the illustrious teachers of the Yavnean period in the early second century, when hotly debated rabbinic teachings were being formulated and decided upon. *M. Abot* 2:15 reports powerful critiques in the name of this Rabbi Eliezer that resonate with Jesus’ vituperation in chapter 23. Both teachers recognize their undisputed authority.

*They were talking it over with one another: “It is because we did not bring bread.”* (v. 7)

The disciples have absolutely no idea why Jesus is talking about yeast. They decide he is castigating them for not having baked bread before they came. Taking him literally, they likely think Jesus wants them to purchase the provisions needed to bake bread. They do not understand why the yeast can’t come from shops owned by Pharisees or Sadducees.

*Jesus knew, and said, “Why do you talk over with one another, you of little faith, that you have no bread? Do you not know yet, or remember the five thousands’ five loaves, and how many baskets you took? Nor the four thousands’ seven loaves and how many large baskets you took?”* (vv. 8–10)

The disciples cannot make sense of what is bothering their teacher if it is not their lack of adequate provisions. Jesus is indeed upset, but not for the reason they think. If they are afraid he is angry because there is no bread, then miraculous feedings recorded in the previous chapters made no impression on them at all. Unlike the Gentile woman who had “great faith” in Jesus’ divine powers, they have to be categorized as *kotnei ‘emunah*, “those of little faith” (*b. Ber.* 24b, *b. Pesah*. 118b). In Matt 14:31 and elsewhere, Jesus also called his disciples “you of little faith.” But while the mass feeding scenes took place in a miraculous twilight zone, the present predicament is clearly situated in the here and now.

*“How can you not know that I did not speak about bread to you [in saying] ‘Shun the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees?’ Then they understood that he did not tell them to shun yeast for bread, but to shun the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.* (vv. 11–12)

He spells out for them he is talking about metaphoric yeast—the “snaked” words of the Pharisees that can lead the disciples astray. As I understand it, Jesus explains to them that in fact they do need to go and purchase yeast. Yet

when he said to beware the leaven of the Pharisees, he was not telling them to actually avoid their shops, but rather to avoid what was spiritually spoiled in their teachings. This interchange introduces the sarcastic pun that will dominate the rest of the gospel.

*Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, and asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” (v. 13)*

This verse introduces a completely new unit which we might entitle “discovering who is what.” The setting is an area known as *Banyas* or *Panyas* or *Pamyas* (the forests of the god Pan), a very picturesque and scenic region in the northernmost regions of the Galilee near the Hermon.<sup>7</sup> Unlike Herod’s Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast, Philip’s Caesarea was inland. The area was gifted to him at the end of Herod’s life, after which Philip became tetrarch of that region. While Jews lived there in small settlements, a sizable Syrian population also inhabited the region. By setting the messianic dialogue in this locale, the Gospel moves away from the regions densely populated by Jews, and edges toward Gentile areas.

This region is not far from the border of completely Gentile territory. Here the disciples discuss Jesus’ messianic identity and his commissioning of Peter to found and guide the Apostolic Church after Jesus’ death. There are several hints in the verse that make it near certain that it addresses situations likely to have been current in the days of Paul, when two issues were paramount in the early Church: policies and leadership. The Gospel preserves the pro-Peter and the anti-Peter, pro-Paul versions. Ultimately the pro-Paul faction will dominate.

There can be no doubt that the audience and disciples know that Jesus has long claimed to be the eschatological figure “Son of Man,” and has spoken of himself in that role. It would be well-understood that if someone says, in third person reference, “Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown” (Shakespeare’s *Henry the Fourth Part 2*, Act 3; scene l. 31), he means to refer to himself—I, the king, tell you it’s no picnic being the monarch. Jesus enters the subject of titles and identities while we still have in mind (from earlier chapters) various strangers and Gentiles who knew him as “Son of David.” “Son of David” is a title indicating Jesus’ divine election and, for the Gospels, his supernatural powers—very much like the title “Son of God.” “Messiah” is a long-used term encompassing the anointed Israelite king or priest and those persons anointed

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<sup>7</sup> For a view of the area in pictures and an excellent overview of its history, see John Wilson and Vassilios Tzaferis, “Banias Dig Reveals King’s Palace (But Which King?)” (1998), 54–61.

by being chosen to serve God's purposes in Israelite-Jewish history, but with no supernatural connotations.

Jesus opens the discussion by inquiring about popular conceptions of the identity of the expected "Son of Man," since by and large Jesus' claims have been discounted by the populace. It would seem "Son of Man" is a title describing Jesus' role in the preparation to enter the New Era. We will soon discover that the Son of Man is also a member of the heavenly retinue that will accompany the visible Glory, who will reward and punish both the living and the dead in the Day of the Lord.

Jesus begins by asking about a term that seems to have been the subject of much speculation in the first century, as it appears in the apocalyptic sections of the Book of Daniel (7:13–14). In effect he asks. "What have you heard on the street concerning who is meant by the term 'Son of Man'?" Extant non-Christian first century texts are largely silent on this term, as the question here indicates. Our knowledge of apocalyptic speculation in the first century is most likely incomplete. It is not at all clear that "Son of Man"—perhaps the figure dressed in white linen in Apocalypses—is a single figure rather than one of a group of saviors. Perhaps the final one will be a divine messenger, like Elijah, Jeremiah, etc., who was once very much human. We just do not know.

A final note must be included here about an issue concerning which some scholars have stumbled. There is absolutely no reason to think "Son of Man" is a circumlocution, in rabbinic sources, for "me." I know of no commentator who ever suggested it was and I know of no source where *bar naš* is used to talk about oneself. It is a not uncommon convention in the Babylonian Talmud for people to refer to themselves as "that man" but this has nothing to do with "Son of Man" terminology.<sup>8</sup>

Since, as we have noted, people reject his own claim to the title, Jesus asks his disciples to explain, "Who do people think this figure is?" The Gospel thus prepares the faithful Christian reader to understand its "Christology" motifs

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<sup>8</sup> See chapter 3 in Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah*. The sole passage in *y. Ber.* 5 that others might think suggests Hanina ben Dosa referred to himself in that way is not, to my mind, meant to be put into his mouth. That usage of *bar naš* (person) seems to have originated from a home-cure type entry from an Aramaic source (perhaps not even a Jewish one), placed by an editor into a Talmudic discussion talking about the rabbi miraculously surviving a deathly bite. Since the topic dealt with snake bites, the editor included the note concerning the prognosis of curing snake bites to a person (*bar naš* = member of humanity). The recommendation is to drink water, unless the snake had already poisoned it. The interpolated passage does not lend itself to being a comment by the rabbi, let alone one in reference to himself.

that must be used as keys to interpret events, particularly what might otherwise appear to be the utter failure of Jesus and his movement, culminating in his betrayal and a shameful death. These foundational passages became the bedrock of the Christ tradition of the early Church and, in some form or other, were likely among the most popular traditions of the Apostolic Fathers. Verse 28 was entirely mistaken in its forecast of the date of the arrival of the Kingdom, but nonetheless it was not edited out. The Gospel can still hope for the New Era. Barely a half century would have passed between the time of the recording of the Gospel and the events in chapter 16.

*They said, “Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”* (v. 14)

The eschatological roles of John the Baptist and Elijah were discussed earlier in chapter 3, and will be elaborated on in chapter 17. The vision of Jeremiah lamenting the Temple's desecration, in the role of an apocalyptic divine messenger who equipped Judas Maccabee for battle with an invincible golden sword, is preserved in 2 Macc. 15:14–16. The mention of Jeremiah in Maccabees and in Matthew might point to Jeremiah 1:9–12:<sup>9</sup>

Then the Lord reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, “Now, I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.” The word of the Lord came to me: “What do you see, Jeremiah?” “I see the branch of an almond tree,” I replied. The Lord said to me, “You have seen correctly, for I am watching to see that my word is fulfilled.”

The expectation of the coming of a divine prophet in the future is also stated in 1 Macc. 4:46, but the name of the prophet is not. The disciples' naming of candidates for the divine redeemer, God's messenger, strikes us as a short list of likely suspects.<sup>10</sup>

*He said to them, “And you, who do you say that I am?”* (v. 15)

<sup>9</sup> See Bruce T. Dahlberg, “The Typological Use of Jeremiah 1:4–19 in Matthew 16:13–23” (1975), 73–80.

<sup>10</sup> See Gerbern S. Oegema, *The Anointed and His People: Messianic Expectations from Maccabees to Bar Kochba* (1998).

Now that the disciples have imparted the general view of the “Son of Man” as being a figure from Israel’s past who had joined the heavenly angelic ranks, Jesus shoots out a startling question. The disciples must assume he wants to hear them say he is the “Son of Man.” Since that already is commonly acknowledged among them—although no one knows what this really implies—they remain silent, except for Peter.

*Simon Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”*  
(v. 16)

Peter responds with an identification, one that is not encompassed in the term “Son of David,” used on previous occasions. Jesus himself has never used this title. “Messiah, Son of the living God” refers to the redeemer of Israel who shares in God’s power on both spiritual and physical planes. This understanding was revealed earlier in the Gospel at the Baptism scene in 3:17, and will be confirmed in the Transfiguration scene in Matt 17:2. The congruence of Son of (the living) God and Messiah in the same person may not have been a universal understanding. Extant Jewish texts do not intimate that the Messiah will be a member of the angelic family, if that is what sonship is supposed to imply.

So the answer Peter gives is surprising; there is no basis at all for the identification. Jesus finds the answer as unexpected as the disciples so, and realizes that only God could have put those words into Peter’s mouth. Since the Holy Spirit, the agency of revelation, speaks through Peter, Jesus understands that Peter has been selected above the other disciples to champion his cause.

*Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon bar Yonah, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but your Heavenly Father.”* (v. 17)

“Blessed are you” is a *makarios* Greek formulation of the Hebrew *ashrei* (discussed in chapter 5). “Fortunate are you” implies that a priceless reward has been received: for example, “*Blessed are the poor of spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.*” (Matt 5:3) implies some special reward is promised to this extraordinary group. In the case of Peter, the reward is a heavenly secret that has been revealed to him. I am inclined to think here that *makarios* can also bear the sense of Hebrew *barukh*—one blessed by God. A close parallel is found in minor tractate *Kallah Rabbati* 2:2:

At that moment they said: “Blessed is the One who revealed his secret to Akiva ben Yosef.”

We can also note here that when a heavenly secret has been disclosed to a mortal, people praise both his name and his father's. The blessing, a formal declaration of one's status as one who is privy to divine mysteries, has meaning not only for the son but for the father as well. It is unnecessary here to draw upon the huge quantity of secondary literature discussing the name "bar Yonah." Simple understanding of the name suffices. We have no reason to doubt that Peter's full name is Šim'on bar (son of) Yonah (Jonah); no allusion to the prophet Jonah is intended.<sup>11</sup>

Further illustration of the Jewish background of this chapter of Matthew can be found in the expression "flesh and blood" (a common phrase for a mortal not known to me in Aramaic but widespread in Hebrew), ubiquitous in rabbinic literature to designate, as it does here, human activities in contrast to divine activities. That mystical secrets are "revealed from the heavens" is found in Midrash.<sup>12</sup> All in all, the sentiments and phrasing in this section, as they generally are throughout Matthew's Gospel, are entirely Jewish, even if attestations to them are found in Jewish compilations chronologically dating to much later times.

*And I say to you that you are Peter, a rock, and on this rock I will build my assembly, and the gates of Hades will not be stronger than it. I will give you keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, and whatever you tie up on the earth will be tied up in heaven, and whatever you untie on earth will be untied in heaven.*  
(vv. 18–19)

The expression "And I say" is generally reserved for pronouncements by the major authority on issues that are contentious. Uncommon in Talmudic literature, it is found almost exclusively in Mishnah and Tosefta in formulations of Rabbi Judah the Prince, head of the Jewish communities in Palestine and of the Academy of the Sages.<sup>13</sup>

As for the name Peter, I see no reason to think that Simon's name was not *Petros*.<sup>14</sup> Jews could have had multiple names; even one's name in Judea might have been different in the Galilee.<sup>15</sup> So Jesus says, "*Petros*, which I, Jesus

<sup>11</sup> Some commentators find here an allusion to the terror group of Zealots, known as *biryonim* (in Aramaic singular, *baryona*).

<sup>12</sup> *Sechel Tov* to Exod [ed. Buber], *Shemot*, 18.

<sup>13</sup> *M. 'Arakhin* (or 'Erkhan) 4:2; *t. Zeb.* 7:6; and many other places in Talmudic *baraitot*.

<sup>14</sup> See Markus Bockmuehl, "Simon Peter's Names in Jewish Sources" (2004), 58–80. He discusses some of the better known sources I mention, and has tracked the use of *Petros* and *Yonah* as Jewish names.

<sup>15</sup> See *b. Gittin* 34b.

interpret as *petra* (Greek loanword in Hebrew, Aramaic), a rock.” Eventually Jesus will declare that nothing will be stronger than this rock—the authority of Peter—which anchors the Church. Rabbi Meir is quoted as saying about the biblical Elimelekh, whose journeys led to the eventual birth of King David: “[A]nd the name of the man was *EliMelekh* (Ruth 1:2)” as if he had unwittingly proclaimed two words *eli*—“to me,” and *melekh*—“will come kingship!” (*Ruth Rab.* 2:5). Similarly, Jesus declares that Peter’s name is actually a sign of his future. The passage is brilliantly constructed and rests on a nimble Jewish mind that has provided the puzzle pieces for the Gospel to connect, constructing its own picture for its own purposes.

The midrash (preserved in *Yalkut Šim’oni* 766) interprets the reference in Num 29:3 to *rosh tzurim* as “from the first [available] rocks I chose him”:

The parable of a king who sought to build [a solid palace]: he kept digging deeper and deeper to lay foundations but as everywhere he dug there were watery quagmires, he dug elsewhere. He found *petra* [rockbed] beneath this other spot and declared, “I will build right here!” He laid the foundations and built it there.

In like fashion, when God wanted to begin the creation of the world, He contemplated and saw the unworthy generations that would spring up at first. When God foresaw Abraham arising in the future He said, “I have located My *petra* upon which to build and to lay the foundation of the world.” So He named Abraham ‘*Tzur’*” [=petra= rock].

Jesus sees within Peter’s name the unshakeable foundation of his church. A comparison might be made between the rock of Peter and the rock of Abraham. Just as Abraham [=Petra] is the one who spread the message monotheism to the world, so Peter [=Petra] will be the one to spread the word of Jesus’ messiahship to the world. Many have understood the rest of this passage to refer to Peter’s evangelical teachings.

The more creative rhetorical flourish comes from the realization of the word play in Hebrew etymology involving *tzur*. Not only do we find *tzur* as “rock, *tzor* also means “tie”<sup>16</sup> or “lock up”<sup>17</sup>. Together they produce an image of something both immovable and secured. Not only will Peter be the foundational bedrock for the church, he will also hold the keys that can lock up Hell or unlock Paradise. *Ruth Rab. Petichtot* (7) illustrates *tzor* as “bound” or “shut closed” together with the sense of *ahaz*, both having the same meaning:

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<sup>16</sup> Isa 8:6, Deut 14:25.

<sup>17</sup> Radak to Isa 8:16.

Ahaz plotted . . . if there are to be no disciples, there can be no sages. But to have no sages, there can be no synagogues and schools, and [all the better] if there are no synagogues and schools, in a manner of speaking, God will not have a dwelling place in the world. Behold I will shut closed (*aḥaz*) the synagogues and schools! This is what Isa 8:16 relates (creatively rendered): *Shut closed the teaching [places]! Seal up the Torah [scholars] with the disciples!*

Rabbi Ḥanina says: [W]hy was he called “Ahaz”? Because he shut closed (*aḥaz*) the synagogues and the schools.

On the one hand, Peter has become *tzur*—rock; *rock* becomes solid foundation. The meaning of *tzur* then shifts from rock to *tzor*—shut closed. “Shut closed” moves us to the image of “keys that open or lock doors.” The interpretive trigger for the passage lies in the recognition that the (possibly Aramaic) source used by Matthew must originally have referred to *tzur*—perhaps the very *tzurim* (plural) of Num 29:3. It is tempting, although admittedly speculative, to see some kind of midrashic connection operating here. *Tzur* as *petra* applies both to Abraham, upon whom the principle of monotheism was founded, and to Peter, upon whom the Church would be founded.

If Abraham was the rock of this world for the Rabbis, Peter is the both the foundation of the church and the key-holder of the *eschaton* for the evangelist. This insight gives us the textual tools we need to interpret the import of Matt 16:19, which concludes the passage:

I will give you keys of the heavenly kingdom, and whatever you tie up on the earth will be tied up in heaven, and whatever you untie on earth will be untied in heaven.

Let us consider further about what is tied up and untied on earth. I think “tie up” is best rendered “shut closed” and “untie” as “opened up.”

Many years ago I undertook a study of these lines,<sup>18</sup> looking at the tradition history of word pairs *deō/lyō* (tie-up/untie) in Greek with their equivalents *patah -'asar* in Hebrew. I mainly considered passages where the pairs were contrasted, as they are in the Gospel, paying less attention to usages where the one or the other appeared without its mate. I discounted the meanings of teaching, forbidding/permitting, swearing/dissolving promises, binding with

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<sup>18</sup> In “Derrett’s ‘Binding’ Reopened” (Basser 1985), I provided sufficient bibliographical data to survey the various scholarly positions on these verses, which to this day still have their proponents.

spells/removing spells; even if these Jewish usages could be made to fit the context, they do not consistently appear as the word pairs that render *deō / lyō* (tie-up/untie) and upon which I based my study. I also examined the interpretation of our Gospel passage in the *Didascalia Apostolorum* and in its alternative tradition, John 20:23.

I concluded that this verse conveys the idea that membership in good standing in the Church is tantamount to having the bonds of death opened up forever; whereas the loss of this status is tantamount to having the bonds of eternal death shut closed. Heaven has concurred to follow the dictates of the churches and the leadership of Peter. To me the passage means “death will be shut closed or opened by the authority of Peter and his Church to admit or refuse membership.”<sup>19</sup> This passage looks to be supportive of the Jewish Apostolic Church in Jerusalem. It was indeed this understanding of the authority of Peter, believed to have been embodied in the papacy, that gave medieval Popes their power over kings, whom they could threaten with excommunication and eternal damnation.

Matthew seems to have merged verses from a very pro-Peter source with a source that is either anti-Peter or neutral. We can see the effect of this pro-Peter source by comparing Matthew 16: 17–19 with Mark 8:29–33—which also has its place in Matthew’s account—where there is nothing complimentary to Peter at all:

He questioned them, “And you, who do you say that I am?” Peter answered and said to him, “You are the Messiah.” He rebuked them, so that no one would speak about him. He began to teach them that it was necessary for the Son of Man to suffer many things and to be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the Scribes, and to be killed, and after three days to rise. He made this speech boldly, and Peter, taking him aside, began to rebuke him. He turned around and, seeing his disciples, rebuked Peter and said, “Go behind me, Satan! You are not thinking the thoughts of God, but of human beings.”

Luke 9:20–22 has neither praise nor condemnation for Peter:

He said to them, “And you, who do you say that I am?” Peter answered, “God’s Messiah.” He rebuked them and commanded them not to tell this to anyone: The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by

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<sup>19</sup> See Kister, “Words and Formulae,” 123.

the elders and chief priests and Scribes, and be killed, and raised on the third day."

Jesus, having admitted he was the Messiah and praised Peter, now returns us to an anti-Peter narrative. Matthew's Gospel, unique in its presentation, maintains both views of Peter alongside one another in unresolved tension. This verse seems to be a later, reworked version of a statement preserved in a more pristine form in Matt 18:8, where there is no reference to Peter or to the keys to the Kingdom.

*Then he commanded the disciples never to say that he was the Messiah.*  
(v. 20)

We are now well within the received Gospel tradition represented by Mark, which has little sympathy for Peter. Why would Jesus adjure the disciples to hide who he is? In the introduction to this chapter I suggested that the Gospel writer has a vested interest in presenting Jesus as a Jewish son of David until the close of the Gospel. The Roman centurion in 27:54 represents the Gentile who sees in Jesus the true "Son of God" and bears witness to the resurrection of the dead at the time of the crucifixion.

*From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he would have to go to Jerusalem and to suffer many things at the hands of the elders and chief priests and Scribes and that he would be killed and be raised on the third day.* (v. 21)

This passage depicts what the climax of the Gospel will be, and outlines the ensuing events that leads to its conclusion. In foretelling his own death and resurrection, Jesus will reveal the outline for the culmination of the Gospel. We will comment on the various episodes alluded to here as we meet them in ensuing chapters.

*Taking him aside, Peter began to rebuke him: "Mercy to you, Lord! This will never happen to you!"* (v. 22)

At this point Peter rejects what Jesus has just said, and wants to counter his words. He attempts to nullify Jesus' dim forecast of his personal suffering. For Peter, a suffering Messiah seems an impossibility. What is given here as "mercy to you, Lord" is best understood as the expression "*has lekha*."

When God suggests to Abraham that He warrants rebuke for justifying His near destruction of a number of sinful generations, Abraham responds:

“Mercy to you (*has lekha*), Master of the Universe: You do not cross the line in meting out justice to every creature. (*Tanh. Gen.* [Buber], *Vayera*, 10)

Abraham declares that what God is saying in this midrash about possibly deserving censure cannot be taken seriously. Likewise we understand Peter to be asserting that what Jesus says about being put to death cannot be taken seriously. The expression “Mercy to you” has a technical application: it confirms what the listener truly believes to be the case, and usually is the case, so that the immediately foregoing dialogue should be reversed. Peter claims he truly knows that God will not allow any terrible trials and tribulations to happen to Jesus. “Peter began to rebuke” means he wanted to reverse Jesus narrative of impending trials and tribulations.

*He turned and said to Peter, “Go behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle to me, because you are not thinking of divine things, but of human.”* (v. 23)

Here we are presented with another binary pairing: divine things and human things.<sup>20</sup> *B. Ber.* 10a castigates people who spend too much time praying for material wants instead of studying Torah because they set aside eternal concerns for the sake of immediate matters. Similarly Jesus reprimands Peter, referring to him as Satan (although earlier he had said no one should call another vile names). Here is an angry Jesus.

It is puzzling how—and why—Matthew retains these dissonant views in his Gospel. Luke has omitted favorable and unfavorable references to Peter. Mark maintains this unfavorable reference. Matthew has split sources and now follows another source which is difficult to suppose it might ever have contained the praise given to Peter above.

If Peter finds the proposed biography of the Messiah difficult to fathom, he is soon put in his place. Jesus tells him to get back in line—the line of a follower and not a decision maker. Furthermore Jesus uses a Gospel expression that operates to shoo away demons and satans. So too Jewish evening prayers ask that “Satan be removed from before us and from behind us.” Nevertheless, in ordering Peter to follow behind, he lets us know that he has not been expelled

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<sup>20</sup> The expressions are contrasted in Talmudic literature, e.g., *b. Meg.* 6b.

from the group. Real satans were not welcome in Jesus' company, and Peter is indeed not Satan or a satan. But in attempting to thwart Jesus' suffering and death, the Gospel makes it clear he was inadvertently doing Satan's work.

*Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. (v. 24)*

Now Jesus defines what discipleship means. In Luke 9 and Mark 8 he addresses the crowd, but here in Matthew he directs the message to his own coterie of followers, specifically Peter. If you want to be in line behind Jesus and follow him, then you must conquer your self-interest and personal identity. Obey his instructions! These instructions will lead to neither comfort nor wealth. In Matt 10:38 we were told that anyone who does not take up his cross and follow cannot be a disciple. Commenting on that verse, I suggested the reader look at *Gen. Rab.* 56 to *Gen 22:6*: "Isaac carried his own sacrificial wood like the one who takes up his cross on his shoulder."<sup>21</sup> The origin of the expression comes from the gruesome procedures of Roman crucifixion, by means of which many Jews had been executed. They were forced to carry the instruments of their own death. The teachers of midrash saw in the account of "the binding of Isaac" as detailed in *Gen 22* the model for Jewish martyrdom.<sup>22</sup> Not necessarily referring to his own death on the cross, Jesus makes it plain that he requires such dedication and trust that one must be willing to suffer death and torture to be his follower. One should be prepared for martyrdom when joining the Church. This passage may have been composed at a time when Christians were being threatened, and evangelists felt compelled to warn new converts that they had to be sincere, since their lives would be tested on that issue. In the context of the narrative, it also means that following Jesus required one to relinquish personal attachments, hopes and dreams. This theme recurs in chapter 19 with the demand to give up one's possessions, and in chapter 8 with the demand to forego burying one's own father.

*For whoever wishes to save his life will destroy it, and whoever destroys his life on my account will find it. (v. 25)*

In my comments to Matt 10:39, I discussed the rabbinic device of rhetorical paradox: a thing and its opposite, and citing the near parallel in *b. Tamid* 32a.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *Midrash Sechel Tov* to *Gen 22:6* and *Pesiq. Rab.*, chap. 31.

<sup>22</sup> The "cross" likely refers to the crossbar the condemned person carried to the area which had fixed poles in the ground. These poles could be reused time after time.

The injunction to leave one's zone of comfort and follow Jesus is followed by enigmatic imperatives that seem to defy logic: "Make you fishermen of human beings" (4:19); "Let the dead bury their own dead" (8:22); "To save a life destroy it" (16:25). In asking Matthew<sup>23</sup> the tax collector (not to be confused with the Gospel author) to follow him (9:9–10) we immediately are told Jesus is befriending gluttons, drunks and low-lives. Followers of Jesus have to be prepared for an odyssey of riddles and reversals. Believers must venture beneath the surface of the text and the surface of history to discern the meaning of the events in the Gospel.

*What will it profit a person if he should gain the whole world but lose his life? What should a person give in exchange for his life? (v. 26)*

Matters of this world are of no consequence in the kingdom. Ecc 1:3 asks, "What does it profit a person in all the toil he labors under the sun?" The Rabbis interpreted "under the sun" as referring to worldly affairs, as opposed to divine matters. Rabbi Abba bar Kahana said: "Such a one [who labors in divine matters] achieves more than [one who gains] the whole world [toiling in mundane matters]" (*b. Šabb.* 30b).

*For the Son of Man is about to come in the glory of his Father with His angels, and then he will repay to each according to his deed. (v. 27)*

Daniel 7:13 refers to the coming of the Son of Man 'ím annanei shemaya, literally "with the clouds of Heaven." "Heaven" refers to God, as in the expression "Kingdom of Heaven." All major Jewish commentators understand "Son of Man" in Dan 7:13 to refer to the "Messiah". The commentary attributed to Saadya Gaon (but not his) understands that "with the clouds of Heaven" refers to angels. Since it is not respectful to speak of God directly acting in human ways, the later convention was to buffer such references by the term "glory"—what one sees is the "glory of God." The Rabbis spoke of "the clouds of the glory" and we will soon discuss some of their references. For Matthew's tradition we see a conflation of two understandings of "clouds of Heaven," a not uncommon occurrence in rabbinic tradition.

We note that the various targumic traditions (sometimes referred to as "Palestinian Targumim") split their interpretations of "my glory" (Exod 33:22). Some have "glory of my Shekhina" while others have "assemblies of angels". But, as I say, for Daniel's "clouds of Heaven" the Gospels conflate the two traditions

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<sup>23</sup> See Mark 2:14, where his name is given as Levi son of Alphaeus.

and give us “Glory of his Father” and also “His angels”.<sup>24</sup> In sum, Matthew’s “the Son of Man is coming in the glory of his Father with His angels”<sup>25</sup> suggests the expression “clouds of the Heaven” and refers to the clouds of God. *T. Soṭah* 4:2 tells us in the desert, when Moses was leading the Israelites to the promised land, there were seven clouds of the Glory, six surrounding the *Shekhina*, Glory of God.<sup>26</sup> In the Gospel, Daniel’s phrase is understood as a circumlocution. “Clouds of heaven” is updated with the requisite Gospel context while maintaining the current Jewish references to divine beings.<sup>27</sup> We seem to have a very early source witnessing the Christology of the early church. Jewish tradition to this day has no trouble seeing the figure in Daniel as “the Messiah.”

Jewish commentators understand Daniel to have depicted a scene of judgment. Rashi stresses that the point of Daniel 7:13 is that the Ancient of Days is judging all the nations of the world. For the Rabbis, in the World to Come, all would be recompensed justly. *Midr. Tanḥ. Gen.* [Buber] *Vayishlah* 30 assures us that Aquila, an early second century Greek version of which survived in Byzantine Synagogues until the 6th century, rendered “*Ani 'El Shaddai*” (Gen 35:11) as “Certain am I to pay each person according to his deeds.” *Midrash Aggadah* (ed. Buber) to Lev 11 gives us, “And he shall pay each and every one according to his deeds.” *Sipre Deut* 307 comments on Deut 32:4: “All his ways are justice”—He presides in judgment over each and every one and gives to each what he deserves. Jer 17:10 also notes God “gives everyone according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings.”

*Amen, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.* (v. 28)

The word *amen* introduces a statement of prophetic promise, a quasi-oath confirmation that affirms what he has just said about the Son of Man being about

<sup>24</sup> Conflation of variant meanings for a verse was seen in vol. 1. p. 154 in the Vulgates’ translation of Deut 18:13.

<sup>25</sup> We note another binary: son/father.

<sup>26</sup> The reading “clouds of the Glory” should be maintained as *Midrash Tannaim* Deut 34:12 has that reading explaining they were “clouds of the Glory,” for the *Shekhina* was above them. In this source “Glory” refers to “*Shekhina*” while the clouds seem to be an angelic army protecting Israel.

<sup>27</sup> In the mystical tradition the *kavod*, the *sheyah*, was seen as a divine manifestation that represented God but perhaps was not God but God’s spokes-angel. As well, “glory” was also taken as the heavenly retinue of angels.

to come.<sup>28</sup> We are apparently now told that this advent will happen within the lifetime of some in Jesus' immediate audience, supposedly the disciples. Yet this is not likely the case. Matthew's expression "some standing here" implies Jesus is addressing a crowd. Perhaps it comes from a different source than the sentence in which he only addresses the disciples.

The expression "taste death" is a common Talmudic form appearing some thirty times (e.g. *Gen. Rab.* 9:5). It is always phrased, as in Matthew, in the negative: "did not taste death". It generally refers to a few elite individuals of perfect piety. The chapter ends with a promise of the good news to come.

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28 Cf. John Strugnell, "'Amen, I Say Unto You' in the Sayings of Jesus and in Early Christian Literature" (1974), 177–182.

# Chapter 17

## Introduction

In chapter 15 we encountered the title “son of David,”<sup>1</sup> and in chapter 16 we noted the use of the cognomen “son of [the living] God.” In chapter 17, we encounter the designation “My Son.” Each requires some explanation. Gustaf Dalman’s work on the history of the use of the terms “son of David” and “son of God”<sup>2</sup> provides a useful starting point for a discussion of these terms.<sup>3</sup>

*Son of David:* Dalman draws our attention to the prophecy in 2 Sam 7:16 that David’s line would inherit eternal kingship. He points to other passages in the Bible and the Apocrypha that affirm this right of kingship to David’s descendants. He identifies Ps Sol. 17:23 as the earliest use of “son of David” as a messianic title; thereafter its messianic implications become commonplace in the literature of the Rabbis and the *targumim*.<sup>4</sup> Dalman, assuming the historicity of the scenes in the NT where Jesus is called “son of David,” claims this was a statement about his genealogy. According to Dalman, people knew Jesus to be from the house of David. Dalman also accepts the premise that Joseph, Mary’s husband, was, in actual fact, of Davidic descent.

What is troubling about Dalman’s claim is that if “son of David” was intended as a messianic term, why should its use have come as an unpleasant surprise in chapter 16, when Peter refers to something about Jesus’ ancestry about which Dalman claims no one has any doubts? On the other hand, if it is not a messianic designation, are we to think that, when people referred to Jesus as “son of David,” they also casually called anyone who could trace their lineage to the house of David as a “son of David”? There is no evidence for any such general usage.

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<sup>1</sup> “Son of David” in Jewish texts commonly refers to the redeeming Messiah, since he was said to be a direct descendant of King David. Was this also its usage in New Testament texts?

<sup>2</sup> Luke 3:38 calls Adam “son of God” likely because God fashioned him. More interesting is that Philo (*On the Cherubim*) refers to Isaac as born of Sarah (whose virginity God restored) and as the son of God. G. Strums, 2009: p. 83) notes no one to his knowledge has discussed the passages in relation to Jesus traditions.

<sup>3</sup> Gustaf Dalman and David Miller Kay, *The Words of Jesus Considered in the Light of Post-Biblical Jewish Writings and the Aramaic Language* (1902), 317–326.

<sup>4</sup> A thorough examination of the various “messianic” terms and their histories is found in M. De Jonge’s “The Earliest Christian use of *Christos*: Some Suggestions” (1986), 321–343. The thorough research uncovers much of the original understandings of Matthew’s terminology, allowing the reader to decipher the nuances of each term and discern why one word is used in a particular context rather than another.

Let us recall that David's wives bore him nineteen sons, according to 1 Chron 3, and an unrecorded number of daughters. He also had numerous concubines who must have produced numerous offspring sired by him. A thousand years later, the number of claimants to Davidic descent would have increased so exponentially as to render Davidic ancestry meaningless in the absence of aspirations to political leadership or assertion of a messianic claim. Since Matthew uses "son of David" in scenes of miraculous healing, we might think it has connotations of "miracle worker" with messianic overtones. But perhaps something else is meant too.

Davis and others show the therapeutic use of the Book of Psalms.<sup>5</sup> Even non-Jews used amulets with inscriptions from Psalms. Calling someone a "son of David" might plausibly connote the ability to perform miraculous cures. Since David was the author of Psalms, which believed to have had miraculous healing powers secretly embedded within them, calling Jesus "son of David" might be an appeal to him to use his Davidic powers to cure an ailing or possessed person.

There are also certain ironies in the use of these terms. "Son of David" can be understood by the reader as a messianic cognomen that transcends wonder working even while the characters using it in the Gospel remain oblivious to its deeper implications. "Son of God" is a messianic appellation that transcends more conventional references to sons of God, applied to angels or to the purely righteous.<sup>6</sup> It is a designation that will come to impute divine power to Jesus. He shares in the divine to the point of being divine. This is one secret that must not be revealed until the right time. It is this secret that Satan wanted to verify in chap. 3 and will only be confirmed by God at the proper time and place.

This brings us to consider the use of "My Son."<sup>7</sup> In this chapter, known as the "chapter of the transfiguration," Moses, Elijah and the Messiah meet on a mountain. Jesus undergoes a transformation, a transfiguration: His face, body and clothes radiate bright light. We look at an early interpretation of Psalm 43, deconstructed by *Midrash Shohar Tov* to tell a story about the tasks of Moses and Aaron, the first redeemers of Israel, being re-enacted by Elijah and Messiah, the final redeemers. The author of the Psalm worries that God may have rejected Israel. He importunes:

<sup>5</sup> See Eli Davis, "The Psalms in Hebrew Medical Amulets" (1992), 173–178; J.P.M. van der Ploeg, "Un Petit Rouleau de Psaumes Apocryphes (11QPsAp<sup>a</sup>)" (1971), 128ff.; and Dennis Duling, "The Therapeutic Son of David: An Element in Matthew's Christological Apologetic" (1978), 392–410.

<sup>6</sup> "Sharing in the Divine" (Basser 2002), 20–26.

<sup>7</sup> "The Jewish Roots of the Transfiguration" (Basser 1998), 30–36.

Send me Your light and Your truth, they will lead me. They will lead me to Your Holy Mountain and to Your tents (Ps 43:3).

Elijah is identified here as Truth (the one sent to Israel, citing Mal 3:23); the Messiah is Light (“My servant... My chosen one in whom I delight” [Isa 42:1], identified by the *Targum* as the Messiah).

Matthew does not mention Aaron anywhere in his Gospel. (The only Gospel that refers to Aaron—Luke in 1:5—does so only incidentally, in a genealogy.) Matthew does have Jesus’ brothers at the Transfiguration. That Matthew inexplicably refers to tents on the mountain is the tip off. There is no apparent way to account for this unless we accept that Psalm 43 is the source: they will bring me to your Holy Mountain and to your *tents*.

A later but related tradition occurs in *Tanh. Va'era* 8 (a near parallel of *Midrash Shohar Tov* on Psalm 21). This latter tradition refers to God sharing his “glory” with a select few including Moses, Elijah and Messiah.<sup>8</sup> These three share divine privileges that show divine majesty. Messiah is decked in royal garments and has the divine golden crown on his head. In 2Enoch 22:8–10, Enoch is clothed in “the garment of My glory” when he becomes a member of the heavenly celestials. So when the Messiah in the midrash is said to partake in the divine glory in respect to his clothing it can only mean he has become a member of the divine family. The people Jesus meets on the mountain were also noted to share in the divine Glory. When Peter wants to construct booths or tents on the mountain, it seems to reflect a Jewish understanding of the Glory. God speaks to Moses in Exodus 33:9 from a special cloud. *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* identifies it as the “cloud of the glory.” When targumic tradition (*Tg. Onq.* to Lev 23:43) speaks of the booths or shelters that Israelites were commanded to build in the seventh month, it relates these booths to the clouds of glory. These constructed booths were said to instantiate the protective aspect of the clouds of glory (*b. Sukkah* 11b) and indeed such a cloud passes over Jesus in the transfiguration scene. I have suggested that such sharing of the divine marks one as a “son of God”—one who has been invested with a special status of divine privilege.<sup>9</sup> The scene is rife with divine symbols that only become clear with reference to the rich sources of Talmud and Midrash.

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<sup>8</sup> See the material concerning heavenly transformation in Ross Shepard Kraemer, *When Asenath met Joseph: A Late Antiquity Tale of a Biblical Patriarch and His Egyptian Wife Reconsidered* (1998), chap. 5.

<sup>9</sup> “Notions of Glory and Sonship in Hebrew Scriptures and the Gospels” (Basser 1999) and “Sharing in the Divine” (Basser 2002).

The Gospel seems to have a specialized sense of “son” here, meaning “eternal and immortal.” In the end, the Gospels point to a divine mystery that is to remain a mystery in the first century (before some of those who actually saw Jesus will come to die): visible and tangible salvation through the belief in Jesus as the Son of God. Crucified and risen, The Son of Man will mete out eternal punishment to the wicked of the world, and eternal reward to the righteous who will dwell in the Kingdom. This mystery can only be understood by the initiate who believes. The strict terminologies, likely stemming from early Jewish traditions about Jesus, do not yet in themselves carry the weight they do by the time the Gospels are written. The writer and believer share the experience of the secret.

It is important to notice here that the crowds are more or less representative of the simple Jewish, peasant folk who see miracles, yet they seem to remain passive until the Crucifixion, when they will be condemned for their passivity for all time. In this chapter the crowds re-emerge to set the scene, watching the condemnation the disciples in which they somehow become implicated. The disciples fail to perform an exorcism that Jesus considers a minimal feat. Like the crowds, the disciples lack understanding and faith in matters they have witnessed on an almost daily basis. They seem nothing short of inept. When the ill-fated disciple Gehazi in 2 Kings 4:27–34 fails to resuscitate a child, his master, Elisha, does it himself, without condemning Gehazi. The contrast with Jesus’ disciples points out their pivotal and paradoxical roles in the Gospel’s narrative. Sometimes they represent the bulk of Israel, who lack faith in Jesus; other times they represent the emerging Church of faith, the founders of Jesus’ own assembly, based on the secrets Jesus himself revealed. These roles change in a flash from one verse to the next. In the end, the Gentiles will not waver, their faith will be steadfast and they will form Christ’s Church.

Faith is central to Jesus’ message in this Gospel. Clearly, it is a sense of confidence and trust. Yet, for Matthew, if not for the Gospels as a whole, faith is also key to experiencing the performance of miracles, a thoroughly human flex of spiritual muscle that transcends the laws of nature. In a way, this seems to fit *Mekhilta*’s notions of the power of faith (*Exod Beshalah*, parasha 4 and 6) as well as, to some extent, the daily recitations in the liturgy that reiterate that God took Israel out of Egypt to be Israel’s God (Num 15:37–41). The daily prayer service interprets this election as the foundation of truth and faith (stressed over and over and over). The liturgy instantiates this declaration of “patronage” in its affirmation that God redeemed Israel by splitting the sea to save the faithful Israelites from their Egyptian pursuers. However, it seems to me that, in general, the pan-Jewish attitude and Gospel approach to faith was that it

represented much more than a means of gaining access to miraculous rewards. Saul Lieberman wrote:

They (Jewish preachers) were conscious of the natural honesty (*pistis*) of the better Gentile and they extended this *pistis* to the larger and higher concept of faith. These conclusions are consistently confirmed by the attitude of the Rabbis towards the Gentiles and the semi-proselytes.<sup>10</sup>

The *half-sheqel* Temple tax has been the subject of a number of fine studies attempting to trace its history through biblical literature, Josephus, New Testament, and rabbinic literature.<sup>11</sup> All we need know for our purposes to explain Matthew is that LXX (Exod 30:15) and Philo (*Who is The Heir of Divine Things?* 186–189) know of a *half-didrachma* tax<sup>12</sup> in Alexandria, but in Babylonia, Philo notes, they paid a full *didrachma*. Josephus (*War* 7.318–20; 14:227 and 18:312) also records that the Babylonian Jews sent the tax, which he and our Gospel author known only as a full *didrachma* tax. In *Ant.* 3:194–5, Josephus calls it a tax based on one half of four Attic *drachmas*, which he knows to be the measure of a *sheqel*. He references the tax to the commandment of Moses. Philo, the Rabbis and Josephus do not relate the tax to a census, although Exodus 30 discusses taxation as a means of conducting a census. The Rabbis held everyone over the age of majority (13 years old) responsible for paying it, whereas the biblical verse stipulated that only those age twenty and above must do so.<sup>13</sup>

From Josephus (*War* 2:592) we learn one could easily convert Tyrian to Attic *drachmas* (apparently through a fixed formula of one to four) and vice versa. There is also research that indicates the Alexandrian *drachma* was twice the value of these other *drachmas*.<sup>14</sup> Thus the *half-sheqel* tax of a *didrachma* coin

<sup>10</sup> Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine*, 67.

<sup>11</sup> J. Liver, ‘The Half-Shekel Offering in Biblical and Post-Biblical Literature’ (1963), 19–44.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. *Special Laws* 1. 76–79. Philo mentions some further addition to the *drachma* tax and this accords with the *qalbon* surcharge mentioned in *m. Šeqal* 1:6.

<sup>13</sup> Further complicating matters, Josephus (*Ant.* 7:13:1), *b. Ber.* 62b and *b. Yoma* 22b claim that the sin in 2 Sam 24:1ff. occurred on account of David’s census, and no *half-sheqel* tax was given that year to protect the people.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Hussey, *An Essay on the Ancient Weights and Money, and the Roman and Greek Liquid Measures, with an Appendix on the Roman and Greek Foot* (1836), 36.

mentioned in Josephus and also Gospels was very close in value to the *half-sheqel drachma* mentioned in Alexandrian sources.<sup>15</sup>

Matthew, Josephus and Rabbis (*b. Bek.* 5a) the *sheqel* is assumed to be a constant four *drachmas* or four *dinars*) are all in accord that the Attic *didrachma* was the standard *half-sheqel* Temple tax in Roman times. In the first century, as Josephus claims, this corresponded in value with the Tyrian *didrachma* weight. The late Second Temple authorities used their own minted *half-sheqel* for those who came there physically; those communities who sent taxes *en masse* or who paid at booths in the various cities had their funds converted by the Temple changers. It seems the Qumran community paid the *half-sheqel* but legislated the tax had to be paid only once in a lifetime and not annually as the Pharisees legislated.<sup>16</sup>

Because Jesus is miraculously given the money, one might properly see that he did not pay it out of pocket but nevertheless fulfilled the requirement. So as not to arouse gossip which might accuse them of acting unlawfully, they go through the motions of paying the tax with funds with which God has already supplied them.

### Commentary

*After six days Jesus took along Peter and James and his brother John, and brought them up to a high mountain by themselves. (v. 1)*

Only a week passes between Peter's revelation of the sonship of Jesus and the cosmic investiture of Jesus as "son of the living God." Peter is present, since he was the one who appears to have received a prophetic insight as to Jesus' status. The two sons of Zebedee—James and John—are there as well. These three are the only disciples the Gospel specifically identifies as being present. The mention of six days invokes another scene on a mountain, the giving of the Law of the covenant to Moses in Exod 24:15–16.

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<sup>15</sup> *Tg. Ps-J.* to Exod 38:26: records one *drachma* for each person which is a *half sela* of the *holy sela* [*sela=sheqel*] that is to be given.

<sup>16</sup> The Dead Sea Scrolls, 4Q159: "...they gave every man a ransom for his soul: half [a *sheqel* for an offering to the Lord] only one [time] shall he give it all his days." This group seems to have avoided Temple services since they considered the administration corrupt and ill-informed.

When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it. And the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai. For six days the cloud covered the mountain, and on the seventh day the Lord called to Moses from within the cloud.

As I suggested in the introduction, just as Moses was paired with his brother when he received the call to be a redeemer, so two brothers are invited to witness the event. On this mountain, Jesus will join the ranks of Moses and Elijah and enjoy a commission as the chosen one, chosen to be the redeemer. God will address those present from a cloud, (in v. 5) just as at Mount Sinai.

*His form was changed before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his cloak became as white as light. (v. 2)*

Jesus is invested in his new divine body. Indeed Jesus has become luminous from direct contact with the divine. His clothes become illuminated from contact with him. The shining of his garments and his dazzling appearance set the stage for Jesus' resurrection as well.

In their commentaries on this verse, Lachs<sup>17</sup> and Strack/Billerbeck<sup>18</sup> and others have pointed out several references in Pseudepigraphic sources (some more pertinent than others) to similar transformations of humans who became angelic figures and to their clothing.<sup>19</sup> In the introduction to this chapter, I noted that midrashic sources speak of the Messiah being clothed in "God's majesty and glory" (Ps 21:6).

A few sources identify some interesting parallels which indicate that one's face shining like the light of the sun was widely understood as an idiom indicating direct revelation from God's glory. One whose face shone when he revealed divine secrets of the heavenly realm is recounted in *'Abot de R. Natan B chap. 13*. Rabbi Eliezer, privy to their source from his experiences in a higher realm, expounds divine secrets that had not been passed down from Moses:

His face shone like the light of the sun and rays emanated from him like the rays of Moses See Exod 34:35).<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Lachs, *Rabbinic Commentary*, 257–260.

<sup>18</sup> Strack and Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament*, 756–757.

<sup>19</sup> Among them 1Enoch 22:8, 38:4, 51:1–5, 62:15, 66:7, 104:2, 4Ezra 7:97 and 2Baruch 51:3, 5, 10; 41:3.

<sup>20</sup> The Septuagint renders this "The appearance of the skin of his face was charged with glory (*dedoxasta*) while God was speaking with him".

*Otzar Midrashim* mentions that Moses face shone from the radiance of the *Shekhina* with which he had conversed.<sup>21</sup> *Sipre Deut., piska 47* cites Judges 5:31, Song 6:10 and Dan 12:3 as illustrating faces shining like the radiance of the day, the sun. *Midrash Eccl. 1:7* refers to the faces of the righteous shining like the sun. Most illuminating is *Tanh. Num., Shelah 15*, discussing the attachment of *tzitzit* to the corners of one's garments (see Num 15:37–41). The word *tzitz* means *shining*, and the midrash understands the fringes that Israel is now commanded to wear as shining with the light of the divine.

*And look, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah conversing with him.*  
(v. 3)

According to a minority view in *Sipre Deut., piska 357* (to Deut 34:5), Moses did not actually die, but still stands firmly serving God on high. In similar fashion, Elijah is claimed to have not died (2Kings 2:1) but rather to have ascended alive into the heavens. I suspect the tradition noted here considers Moses to be in an angelic state: standing and serving (having once died, or not). Hence, the three immortals, Jesus, Moses and Elijah meet on the mountain. They are all “sons of God,” but only one is “my chosen son.” Jesus, having joined their ranks, will supersede the other two. He has been inoculated against final death and inducted into the divine assembly of redeemers.

*Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will make three tents, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”* (v. 4)

Peter realizes that more has yet to happen and, in apparent fulfillment of Psalm 43:3, begins to construct tents.<sup>22</sup> Psalm 43 refers to the salvation (*yeshua*) of my *face* and my God; the midrash to it (discussed above in my introductory comments) must have had special meaning for the early Christian community, since *Yeshua* was Jesus' original name.

<sup>21</sup> Judah David Eisenstein, *Otzar Midrashim* (1915), 356.

<sup>22</sup> The Pseudepigraphic work known as the *Second Epistle of Peter*, 1:17–21 informs us:

“For he received from God the Father honor and glory, when there was borne such a voice to him by the Majestic Glory, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased: and this voice we ourselves heard borne out of heaven, when we were with him in the holy mount. And we have the word of prophecy made more sure; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day-star arise in your hearts: knowing this first, that no prophecy of scripture is of private interpretation. For no prophecy ever came by the will of man: but men spoke from God, being moved by the Holy Spirit.”

*While he was speaking, look, a shining cloud overshadowed them, and look, a voice from the cloud: “This is My son, My beloved, in whom I am well pleased. Listen to him.” (v. 5)*

The baptism election is re-enacted, but now it is witnessed, bringing the narrative theme full circle and the Gospel to its turning point. Instead of the heavens opening and the spirit descending like a dove (3:16), a shining cloud—the cloud of the *Shekhina*—passes over (see my commentary above to 17:1). The divine command is issued that Jesus is to be obeyed. Authority has been given to him. During the theophany at the splitting of the Red Sea, the Israelites had declared: “This is my God, the God of my fathers and I will adore him.” (Exod 15:2). Now the voice from the cloud proclaims, “This is my son, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased. Listen to him.”

The *Targum to Isaiah 42:1*, which is the source of the declaration, relates: “This is my servant the Messiah, I draw him close, my chosen with whom I (Targum: *Memra*) am well pleased. I set my holy spirit upon him; he shall reveal laws to the nations.” Not only did it make sense for the spirit to descend to rest upon Jesus when this passage is understood in light of this targum, but the specific referent of the instruction to obey him becomes clear. Moreover, he is to reveal laws to “the nations”—the Gentiles.

*Hearing this, the disciples fell upon their faces and were greatly afraid. Jesus came and touched them: “Get up, and do not be afraid.” (vv. 6–7)*

“Do not be afraid” is a phrase from the Hebrew Bible (Exod 14:13 and 20:20) that recurs in the Gospels when the disciples witness terrifying breakthroughs into the divine realms. Fear is a natural response when supernatural portents occur as in the Book of Daniel:

And he came near where I stood; and when he came, I was afraid, and fell on my face; and he said unto me, Understand, son of man; for the vision is for the time of the end. Now as he was speaking with me, I was in a deep sleep on my face towards the ground: but he touched me, and set me upright. (Daniel 8:17–18).

*Raising their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus alone. (v. 8)*

On witnessing the miraculous transformation of Jesus, the disciples, Peter and James and his brother John, had looked away. Now they return their gaze to Jesus. There is no Elijah, no Moses, nothing at all his familiar figure. Everything

has reverted to normal, to now time, to the present historical dimension. They now are ready to descend from the mountain.

*Coming down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, “Tell what you have seen to no one until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.”* (v. 9)

Jesus commands the disciples who have witnessed his election not to mention it. As Son of Man he must be killed and then raised. Only then he will be revealed as the Messiah, the servant, the divine son. The insistence that the divine election of Jesus be kept secret seems to be in the voice of a later Gospel source, while the transfiguration scene itself appears to be a finely crafted early tradition, drawing on Jewish motifs of redemption and covenant. The eschatological motif of messianic sonship apparently entered Church doctrine after the time of Jesus, and its lateness is justified as fulfilling his command to keep it secret.

In what follows we are given the classical Christian messianic tradition concerning Jesus and Elijah.

*The disciples asked him, “Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?”* (v. 10)

Contradicting what Jesus is telling them, the disciples ask: If you are the Messiah does that mean the scribes were wrong to teach that Elijah had to come before you? How can you, Jesus, be the messiah—is not Elijah to come first? The reference to Elijah preceding the Messiah is really a roundabout way of questioning his messianic role.<sup>23</sup>

When the Rabbis say “Elijah comes only to solve issues of genealogical descent or status of pure or impure holy vessels or foods” they meant that Elijah’s coming must precede the Messiah so that the Temple systems will be able to function as required. Although the name Elijah does not appear in First Maccabees, we find the expression of a prophet “coming” to declare how a defiled altar is to be stored, “until a prophet should come to tell what to do with

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<sup>23</sup> Both Morris Faierstein, “Why Do the Scribes Say That Elijah Must Come First?” (1981) and Dale Allison, “Elijah Must Come First” (1984) refer to a *baraita* in *b. Erub.* 43a–b. Allison builds it as a witness to traditions where Elijah is the precursor of the Messiah. This is erroneous. The *baraita* mentions the Messiah, but not Elijah. It is only in later analysis of the *baraita* in the Amoraic Babylonian academies that we read of references to Elijah. That discussion assumed Elijah must precede Messiah; however, his name is not explicitly stated in the *b. Erub.* 43a–b baraita of the early teachers

them" (4:46).<sup>24</sup> Various verbs, including "come," are used of the Messiah but no other verb other than "come" describes the appearance of Elijah on the scene.

In *b. Pesah.* 13a, a second century *baraita* (2nd c) states that *telyot* (food-stuffs whose purity status cannot be determined) "should not be burned too early because Elijah might come and declare them pure." This explicit reference to Elijah coming to set things in order corresponds to teachings ("ein 'eliyahu ba el'e") in *t. Ed.* 3:4 and *m. Ed.* 8:7, "Elijah comes only . . .") where the conditions, circumstances and purpose of Elijah's coming are discussed. Elijah will come to deal with purity issues: food purities and family lineage purity. This teaching presupposes that the temple cult is to be revived when the Messiah's arrival is imminent.

There is reason to accept the widely attested tradition that Elijah will precede the Messiah. Allison is correct to point out the centrality of Mal 3:23–4 (or in some versions 4:5–6) to the notion.<sup>25</sup> That certain things are attested in the New Testament while only being recorded in later Jewish sources should be evidence that our suppositions of what is early and what late is defective. It is unlikely that messianic-Elijah speculation began in Judaism only in the Amoraic period: the Gospel must draw far-fetched parallels between John the Baptist and Elijah to show that Elijah did come.<sup>26</sup> The disciples did not understand that John was Elijah but they knew that scribes were expecting Elijah before the Messiah.

Messianic material from the *Tannaim* is very sparse, truncated and defiant of ready explanation. This may be for no reason other than everyone was familiar with these ideas and took them for granted. Nor is there any basis for believing that later materials had not been inherited from earlier times. The Rabbis did not transmit their traditions in a format convenient for modern historians. For the most part, the early *Amoraim* passed on to their students the clarifications of these teachings that they themselves had been taught or had developed. That Elijah comes first is common in *aggadic* sources:

May Elijah the prophet *come* . . . May King Messiah flourish. (*Sop.* 19:7)

<sup>24</sup> The verb used of the Messiah seems to be "arise": "The Jews and their priests have resolved that Simon should be their ruler and high priest forever, until a trustworthy prophet should arise" (1 Macc. 14:41). It is not clear whether the prophet who is "to come" (4:46) is the same figure.

<sup>25</sup> Allison, "Elijah Must Come First," 256–258.

<sup>26</sup> Compare 2 Kings 1:8 with Matt 3:4.

When the Holy Blessed One will redeem Israel, three days before Messiah comes, Elijah will come.... God will reveal his glory and kingdom to all. And it is Elijah who is to gather the scattered of Israel to return to the Holy Land. (*Pesiq. Rab.* 35, end)

If you will be scattered to the ends of the heavens from there the *Memra* of the Lord your God will gather you by the hands of Elijah the chief priest, and from there He will bring you close through the hands of King Messiah. (*Tg. Ps-Jon.* to Deut 30:4)

*He answered, "Elijah does come, and he is to put all things back in order."*  
(v. 11)

Jesus understands that the disciples have challenged him. He begins by allaying their doubts by affirming the tradition. Yes, the scribal claim is indeed accurate, and the reason for Elijah's coming is to prepare the way for the major Messianic event to unfold by baptizing and urging repentance.

*I say to you that Elijah has already come and they did not know him, but they did to him what they wished. So also the Son of Man is about to suffer at their hands.* (v. 12)

If Elijah had not yet come, Jesus' disciples have reason to doubt what he has said about his own messianic role. He therefore explains that Elijah had already come, but no one had known who he was.

The conventional conception was everyone was expecting Messiah and Elijah on the Passover, "Night of *Watching-Overs*, Exod 12:42 (*leil shimurim—plural*)" when incredible miracles of salvation would be granted to them. Midrash explains the point of the plural "*watching-overs*".

The "*Night of Watching-Overs*" refers to the granting of mighty acts of redemption to the righteous *on that night* like those done for Israel in Egypt, and he saved *on that night* Hezekiah, and he saved *on that night* Hannaniah and his comrades, and he saved *on that night* Daniel in the lion's den, and on that night Messiah and Elijah will be granted such miracles. (*Exod. Rab.*, Bo, 18:12)

The Gospel makes it clear that such expectations were misguided. Scripture and scribal interpretations were accurate, and the notion of Elijah preceding the Messiah was in itself a correct teaching. What is being prepared, however,

is not what the disciples could ever imagine: his horrific death. Neither a suffering Elijah, nor a suffering and dead Messiah fit in with popular conceptions of the Final Age, although there were antecedents for them, as in Isaiah chapters 52 and 53. The understanding that these messianic predictions were in the process of unfolding right now, albeit in unexpected ways, had eluded everyone except Jesus; now the disciples share the secret too.

*Then the disciples understood that he spoke to them about John the Baptist.*  
(v. 13)

John the Baptist was understood to be Elijah, who, in suffering royal execution, prepared the ground for Jesus to suffer and die. In Jewish literature, Elijah takes on various identities in which no one recognizes him. *Midrash Esth Rab.* explains (10:9) that Elijah disguised himself as Harvona, Esther's protector, and therefore Harvona should be called by the epithet reserved for Elijah, "he is renowned for doing good" (*zakhur latov*). Kris Linbeck, in her exhaustive study of the figure of Elijah in rabbinic literature writes:

Here, as in most other stories of Elijah's appearance in disguise, Elijah's true identity is unknown to most of those present and perhaps to all. He functions covertly, outside of normal perception and social constructs. For those who do not know, he appears as a pauper, a prostitute, a bear, an anonymous witness, a Roman official. For those who know, the transmitters and audience of these stories, he functions as a potent sign and symbol of God's merciful actions, which change reality powerfully, invisibly, and unforeseen.<sup>27</sup>

The remainder of this chapter presents us with a wandering Jesus, whose disciples who have little faith and cannot perform miracles. Although they now know Jesus must suffer, the disciples do not understand why. In short, Matthew's art pushes back the Transfiguration. It has become invisible in the twinkling of an eye, eluding the focus of the narrative. The continuation of the Gospel sets us down with the disciples in their restless wanderings and pessimistic uncertainties.

*When they come to the crowd, a person approached him, kneeling before him.* (v. 14)

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<sup>27</sup> Kristen H. Lindbeck, *Elijah and the Rabbis: Story and Theology* (2010), 116.

The scene reminds us of the Canaanite woman pleading for her child in chapter 15, who also knelt. It is difficult to know who this unidentified person is—Jew or Gentile, male or female—but the narrative nonetheless continues in repetitive cycles while the story plods towards its climax.

*Lord, have mercy on my son, because he has seizures with the moon [selēniazetai] and suffers terribly, for he often falls into the fire and into the water. (v. 15)*

Similar to the scene in chap. 15, the person has a disorder characteristic of epileptic fits, and cannot control his movements. These fits of *selēniazetai* occur in conjunction with certain phases of the moon, which is why they are associated with lunacy, i.e., moonstruck bouts of demonic delusions. Extant Jewish sources give us no precise information about this particular condition. Evidence of demonology in ancient Jewish Palestine is quite limited because the *Yerushalmi* has little interest in the subject. Demonology in Jewish Babylonia was of great interest to the editors of the *Bavli*, however. In his interpretation of *b. Pes.* 11a, Samuel ben Meir, who credits his knowledge of Talmudic demonology to a chain of teachers going back to Rabbenu Gershom, explains that someone who sleeps under the moon will be possessed by demons.

The classic work most relevant to the sense of this passage is Marten Stol's *Epilepsy in Babylonia*.<sup>28</sup> Stol points out that Matthew 17:15 alludes to a Hellenistic notion that demons can cause illness during the time of the month when the moon is invisible, between old moon and the new moon. Demonic possession was believed to cause epileptic fits that recur during that period. The child's being prone to dangerous falls motivates the parent to beseech Jesus for help.

*"I have brought him to your disciples, but they were not able to cure him." Jesus answered him: "Faithless and twisted generation! How much longer will I be with you? How much longer will I endure you? Bring him here to me." (vv. 16–17)*

In these scenes, Jesus is the pious, wrathful, impatient, tyrannical and sarcastic boss. These words, even if directly spoken to the parent, are directed at the disciples, and are a prophetic declaration. *Sipre Deut.* 307 also struggles with a

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28 Marten Stol, *Epilepsy in Babylonia* (1993), 121–124.

crooked and twisted generation (Deut 32:5) and threatens the faithless generation with extinction.<sup>29</sup>

Nevertheless, Jesus, the exasperated exorcist, takes on the job himself, and asks to have the child brought before him.

*Jesus rebuked him, and the demon came out of him, and the child was cured from that very second. (v. 18)*

The language here, *the demon came out*, is in the technical language of exorcisms. *B. Me'ilah* reports the scene of a Palestinian rabbi exorcizing a (friendly) demon from the Caesar's daughter:

Ben Temalion, come out of her! Ben Temalion, come out of her! And it came out of her. (*b. Me'ilah* 17b)

The phrase “from that very second” in the Greek is actually “from that very hour!” This is a literal rendering of *me-hahi sha'ah* which signifies “from that very instant.”

*“The disciples came to Jesus and said privately, ‘Why were we not able to cast him out?’ He said to them, ‘Because of the scarcity of your faith. Amen. I say to you, if you had faith in the amount of a mustard seed, you would ask this mountain, ‘Move there from here,’ and it would move. Nothing would be impossible for you to do.” (vv. 19–20)*

Apparently the disciples had used the correct words and the proper formula in their attempt to expel the demon, but to no avail. Jesus explains that such matters have to do with one’s true confidence in their own and in their teacher’s ability, not to mention the faith of the patient’s family. The image of the voice of authority moving mountains is portrayed in a saying in *b. B. Bat.* 3a (apparently a common saying): If the Sovereign (literally “the kingdom”) says “I can move away this mountain!” the mountain moves away.

Even a tiny degree of faith can “move mountains.” In the next paragraph we look at the usage of “faith” (Greek: *pistis*) in the Gospel. The upshot is that the disciples, synecdochically representing the Jews in general, lack even a modicum of faith.

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<sup>29</sup> See Basser. *Midrashic Interpretations*, 109. Note S. Lieberman’s (1942) reference to *Pseudo-Diogenian* 6:92 on the futility of deriving good from bad.

*But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting.* (v. 21)

This verse is lacking in some of the best textual witnesses to Matthew, but is attested to in other manuscripts and translations. Strack and Billerbeck include the verse as original and cite parallels in rabbinic literature (*b. Meg.* 51b; *b. Ta'an.* 22b; *y. Ber.* 4:1). It seems to have been first added by scribes as marginal gloss from Mark 9:29, and then found its way into some Matthean texts. “Fasting” itself may not have even been in the original Mark 9:29, and might have been added later by scribes. Many scholars and modern translations omit the verse altogether from Matthew’s Gospel.

*When they were gathering in Galilee Jesus said to them, “The Son of Man is about to be handed over into peoples’ hands. And they will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised.” They were greatly pained.* (vv. 22–23)

There are variant readings of v. 22, with “gathering” (*sustrepho*) in some manuscripts, “abiding” (*anastrepho*) in others. On the basis of rare usages (Acts 5:22), some interpret the sense of the participle to be “returning” or ‘traveling’.<sup>30</sup> It matters little to the exegete. What does matter is that it is in some ill-defined, nondescript place that Jesus discloses the final act of the secret of cosmic sacred history. History is about to end by a divine act of deliverance on the cosmic level and an act of treachery on the human level.

The Greek term *paradidosthai* (to be handed over) is used in LXX (e.g. Jer 21:10; 34:2), when God delivers the city of Jerusalem into human hands to be destroyed.<sup>31</sup> The Aramaic rendition of this verb—*masar beyad* (deliver into the hand of)—often connotes betrayal. A traitor (*moser*) is said in *b. Roš Haš.* 17a to be consigned to Gehenna. Whoever the Gospel genius was who crafted this verse introduced purposeful ambiguity, allowing one reader to infer that the agent of betrayal is Judas, while another reader will understand the divine puppeteer to be the actual one who accomplishes the “handing over”. The intentional ambiguity of actors and objects is evident. The next verse refers first to the treacherous who will kill him, then to God.

1 Cor 15:4 suggests that the third day, in references to resurrection, were interpreted by the churches to fulfill earlier prophecies. For example, one finds in Hos 6:2b: “On the third day he shall raise us up that we may live before him.” When Jesus was reportedly crucified as a common criminal and seemed

<sup>30</sup> See Gerhard Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (1977).

<sup>31</sup> See William G. Thompson, *Matthew’s Advice to a Divided Community: Mt 17, 22–18, 35* (1970).

powerless to save himself, the Jesus movement had to justify its position that Jesus was the divine son. The Gospel transforms the challenges to the emerging faith into the strengths of the doctrines we now call Christology. Accordingly, Jesus had prepared the disciples for their role in the nascent Church: to preach that Jesus' death and resurrection was what God had planned all along, and must remain the crucial birth-pang of the Messianic Kingdom (cf. *b. Sanh.* 98a).

*"When they arrived in Capernaum those who took the two-drachma coins came to Peter and said, "Does your teacher not pay the two-drachma tax?"*  
(v. 24)

As the disciples arrive back in a populated area, the normality of their lives resumes. As they come to Capernaum, that is *Kefar Nahum* (= the village of consolation), the Temple collectors questioned Peter, the apparent leader of the disciples, about a customary Temple tax. Various issues concerning the tax amount have been mentioned in the introduction to this chapter. The Rabbis have much to say about this tax. *M. Šeqal.* 4:1–4 mentions how the money was used for sacrifices and other needs of the Temple. *T. Šeqal.* 1 explicates the tax on the basis of Exod 30. *M. Šeqal.* 1 mentions that collection tables were set up throughout the country on certain dates. One could pay twice if a previous year had been missed and we see the tax was not by strict assessment but freely given by the people (*m. Šeqal.* 6:5). The amount of the tax here (in the flat-rate of a double *drachma*) is that which is noted by Josephus and the Rabbis. I take the position that in recognizing variations in the designations of local currencies and customs a formula of accommodation was worked out for foreign exchange. The amounts mentioned in the Gospel accord with evidence from the books of Josephus and rabbinic literature.

The collectors seem surprised that Jesus has not yet approached them. Their manner seems to anticipate his payment, and the mode of questioning conveys expectation rather than confrontation. The Gospel's author utilizes this scene to demonstrate Jesus' attitude towards the Temple establishment and the institutions that define membership in the covenant. Another point of interest here is that we also suspect he does not have any spare money of his own to pay the amount of the tax, small as it may be. His response moves us forward to his death, and the opening of the Kingdom for his followers.

*He said, "Yes." Jesus reached the house before he did, and said, "What do you think, Simon? From whom do the world's kings take a duty or a tax, from their children or from the others?" He said, "From the others." Jesus said to*

*him, “Then the children are free. But so that we do not offend them, go to the sea and cast a hook; take the first fish that comes up, and when you open its mouth you will find a coin [stater]. Take that and give it to them for me and you.” (vv. 25–27)*

Peter does not doubt that he and Jesus will pay the tax; they are Jews and will meet their communal obligations. But the story continues with an unexpected dialogue that is the point of this well-crafted episode. Jesus, who had gone to their lodgings while Peter engaged in discussion with the collectors, knows that Peter has been approached about the tax payments. He begins the conversation by asking Peter whether he thinks that he and Jesus, who are sons of the kingdom, *viz.* sons of God, are obligated to pay the tax.

The dialogue is reminiscent of an innovative Talmudic interpretation of Isa 61:8, “for I, the Lord, love justice; I hate robbery *be'ovlah/be'olah*.” If the word is read *be'ovlah* it means “through a moral defect”; if it is understood as *be'olah* it means “through the burnt offering.” Both are homiletically problematic. In *b. Sukkah* 30a Rabbi Yoḥanan relates an interpretation taught in the name of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai that is predicated on the understanding “through the burnt offering”, which it then uses in support of the alternate interpretation, to make the case that avoiding taxes is “a moral defect”. God shows us how much he hates theft by asking those who serve him (Israel) to offer daily, communal burnt offerings to him. The rabbi says the verse makes sense if God is thought of as a king who asks his servants to pay the royal tax for him. While the king will simply be giving the tax to the coffers with one hand and receiving it back with the other, he knows he is making a point. People will realize that if the king feels obligated to pay taxes, even though he could claim he should be exempt because the taxes are meant for his use, laws are laws, which even he must obey. Everyone will see from the example he sets that the king hates theft and moral iniquity. Likewise, God, who owns all animals, commands his servants to give God’s own property to the Temple altar. In commanding that sacrifices be brought, God shows he disapproves of his subjects cheating, stealing, and evading their financial responsibilities. Although God is obviously exempt from giving to his own altar, he does so nonetheless so that no one feels entitled to steal anything.

Jesus suggests he is of the king’s (*i.e.* God’s) family and should therefore be considered exempt from the Temple tax. However, so as not to cause others to stumble if they follow his example, Jesus will pay it. But he will pay it in such a way that it will not actually cost him anything. Jesus tells Peter that the first fish he catches will have a coin in its mouth. The value of that coin—a *stater*—is

the precise sum that he and Peter owe the tax collectors.<sup>32</sup> The tax that Jesus is exempt from is paid nonetheless by means of a “natural miracle”<sup>33</sup>—“natural” insofar as a coin is sometimes found in fish, a “miracle” because the coin is exactly the amount needed.

The story shows that Jesus conforms to Jewish practices, and he has taken great care not to offend. He is not rejected because of his nonconformity or due to any offense he has given by disparaging Jewish traditions and practices. It also illustrates that Jesus and his followers have a privileged status in the divine economy which is about to take hold but has not been realized. The Gospels portray various levels of reality. On the one hand Jesus operates in the natural world to all appearances; on the other he is part of the supernal world. When he pays a tax he is given the money from another dimension. The ambiguity as to whether he owes the tax or he does not owe it (depending on the realm from which Jesus is viewed) is ambiguously resolved by the coin found in the fish. On the one hand Jesus does pay the tax; on the other hand the fish pays it. In having Jesus both pay the tax but not spend any money to do it, the Gospel writer maintains the liminal status of the Son of Man, in transition between two worlds and simultaneously operating in two modes of existence.

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<sup>32</sup> The *stater* equals 4 drachmas or one Temple *sheqel*. Since each one is required to pay half a *sheqel*, the coin will precisely cover the amount for two people.

<sup>33</sup> *B. Šabb.* 11ga tells how a man called Joseph found a fortune in pearls in fish and in so doing fulfilled the prophecy of a fortune teller.

# Chapter 18

## Introduction

I tend to think the law and theology embedded in the Gospels developed slowly. First, a set of legal and theological teachings intended for a specific group of Jews, which mandated a higher standard of observance than that set by popularly observed oral law, began to emerge during the lifetime of Jesus. Such behaviors had been practiced in earlier periods by individuals, to be sure, but there were no extraordinary demands placed upon the masses to adopt these supererogatory habits.

A heightened expectation of messianic salvation filled the air as well, signaling God's imminent redemption of Israel from oppression. This set the stage for various first century Jewish reformers and revolutionaries who gathered groups of sympathizers about them. The Gospels include such teachings; whether a conglomeration of many teachers or just one I do not know. They were centered about the person of Jesus, although it is arguable that some of these may have been John the Baptist's teachings and, if his, perhaps those of others too.<sup>1</sup>

Teachers within the Jesus movement elaborated and clarified these classical teachings in the subsequent period, interjecting new concepts and developing previous eschatological ideas, placing them in story-like narratives in which Jesus taught, preached and healed. Missionaries began to spread these demanding doctrines, both legal and Christological.<sup>2</sup> In the third stage, as membership in the Church became less and less Jewish, the Gospels were edited to accommodate and even celebrate Gentiles. The heightened demands intended for Jewish members of the movement were relaxed, but not eliminated altogether. Eventually various versions of these teachings were collected, sorted, and set down in Greek, constantly edited by teachers and scribes who worked and reworked texts, producing distinct Gospels and occasionally confusing some words in the course of their copying. These unknown editorial processes tend to tease and confuse scholars who try to make sense of any particular Gospel as though it were of a single authorship, rather than textured and layered. Since they represent distinct lines of transmission, we cannot compare one version to another in order to ascertain which is the most correct. Nevertheless, we

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<sup>1</sup> See Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*.

<sup>2</sup> That is to say that in this stage Jesus had requirements that raised the floor above the *status quo*.

can correct errors in individual readings by referencing other versions where a passage is shared.

Scholars try to further shed light on materials by isolating original gospel material and attributing variants to specific emendations that a final gospel writer wanted to make normative. Since it is likely that all gospel writers were heirs to a host of materials, written and oral, embellished and raw, it is precarious to speculate on what they did or did not know, what they changed or did not change, what they originally wrote and what later scribes copied or miscopied. Whenever I (Basser) write the words “Jesus says,” what I mean is “according to this Gospel, Jesus says,” making no claim (as some have thought) that I am quoting Jesus’ spoken words verbatim. Remnants of various editorial and scribal stages of transmission of each of the Gospel’s traditions have their threads woven into the tapestry of the present texts.

At the end of the process of Gospel formation, as the Churches became predominantly non-Jewish, Jews in general, Pharisees in particular, and even Sadducees were thrust into evil shadows. Stories of Jesus’ debates with different Jews were subtly revamped so as to make them confrontational in the extreme. References to Torah study and the Temple service were marginalized, and hints of the divinity of Jesus were increasingly emphasized.

Chapter 18, in the main, seems to be a product of the second stage. Matthew’s source preserves the fixed expression “Gentiles and tax collectors” to refer (as in chap. 5) to those whose way of life was viewed as so degenerate that they had to be shunned. (These disreputable collectors of Roman taxes, who extorted money and expropriated land from local farmers, are not to be confused or conflated with the pious collectors of the Temple tax in chapter 17.) Most if not all Jews would have regarded anyone having any societal dealings with such reprobates as running the risk of imitating their ways. Various economic, residential, social, and legal safeguards were erected by the Pharisees to serve as barriers between these pariahs and faithful Jews.

The author of Matthew 18 records what must have been known to be authentic Jesus teachings, but reconstructs them in such a way as to imply that their intended audience had been antagonistic to faith in or worship of Jesus. One may suspect that in their most pristine form—before the later editors had manipulated their messages—these teachings expressed neither anger nor threats against non-members of the Jesus movements. In this chapter, however, sin has been redefined as undermining the faith in Jesus of his trusting peasant class followers, as well as challenging the notion of the divine authority granted to the leaders of the Jesus community. The cryptic saying “What is bound on earth is bound in heaven” had been developed in chapter 16 in order to privilege Peter. In chapter 18, however, it suggests that the Christian community’s leaders can put opponents or sinners under a ban of ostracism.

These communal authorities also have the authority to forgive sins. This is reminiscent of Matt 9:6 “But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.”

### Commentary

*At that hour the disciples came to him, and said, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” (v. 1)*

The phrase “at that hour” offers an aura of continuity to the narrative. Nevertheless, the reader cannot be certain whether the disciples are asking what nation is greatest, what personality trait renders someone the greatest, or what relationship with Jesus would make one the greatest. Most likely the disciples were asking Jesus to declare themselves to be the greatest. From this perspective, we are best advised to connect the question to Matt 17:18, which also includes the phrase “at that hour” in recounting an episode of Jesus successfully casting a demon out of a child. The disciples had been helpless, lacking the great gift of power over demons enjoyed by those who heal in Jesus’ name. The disciples may be hoping to save face now by being identified as among those who will be ranked in the first tier of the Kingdom.

Instead Jesus subtly rebukes them. They need to learn humility. Their smug pretensions to sharing Jesus’ elevated status and powers cannot vouchsafe them any divine prerogatives. Even posing the question might suffice to disqualify the disciples from the exalted stature they seek. The manner of their questioning and Jesus’ unexpected answer in this passage are typical of the rabbinic style of surprise teaching.

*Calling for a little child, he stood him in their midst. (v. 2)*

Rather than simply addressing the disciples’ query as to who is the greatest with words, Jesus chooses a young child through whom to convey his reply, attracting public attention. But his reply is opaque. As readers we may suspect that it is not intended to be taken literally.

Demonstrative declaration was customary in performative discourse at various times and places. According to *b. B. Qam.* 17a, eulogies could entail placing a Torah scroll on a coffin and declaring: “This one fulfilled all that which is written there.” *B. Git.* 68b reports that when the prince of demons had an audience with King Solomon to teach him humility, he took a reed, measured four cubits, and threw it in front of the king, saying, “See now, when you die you will have no more than four cubits (of grave-site) in this world”. Prophets

frequently taught their messages by actively dramatizing them. Consider 1 Sam 15:27–28:

And as Samuel turned about to go away, he laid hold upon the edge of his cloak, and it tore. And Samuel said to him, ‘The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day, and has given it to a neighbor of yours that is better than you.

Jesus will echo these words in Matt 21:43 when he declares who is deserving of God's kingdom and who is not:

This is why I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation that produces its fruits.

Jesus' choice of a child through whom to deliver his demonstrative declaration most likely was meant to didactically illustrate a humble person. An often cited tradition (e.g. *b. Pes.* 50a) relates that in the World to Come, the world of truth, “the highest will be lowest and the lowest highest”. Indeed, Job 5:11 remarks that the lowest will be made the highest. Children will not necessarily be “best” in the kingdom but rather symbolize those who are small in their own eyes, innocent, and simple of faith; it is they who will be first.

This, I submit, was the original sense of this passage. Jesus does not speak of literal children but of becoming “like small children” in order to become endowed with great powers. The disciples may wonder whether Jesus speaks of the humble who realize they are only tots in their understanding of divine matters. He will clarify exactly what he means.

*He said, “Amen, I say to you, unless you turn around and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”* (v. 3)

Let us look carefully at the expression “*Amen* [i.e. truly], *I say*.<sup>3</sup> Matthew preserves the Hebrew “*amen*.<sup>3</sup> “Truly, I say” is a quasi-oath that emphatically reinforces a teaching. Editors inserted the phrase to draw attention to the veracity of certain ancient teachings. In this way it approximates the rabbinic introduction “In truth they said” that highlights ancient legislation that requires attention (*b. B. Meši'a* 60a).<sup>3</sup> While it seems that there were only a handful of such sayings from very early apostolic tradition, I have observed that Luke

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<sup>3</sup> *M.Kil.* 2:2; *m. Ter.* 2:1; *m. Šabb.* 1:3 and 10:4; *m. Naz.* 7:3 and close to 30 other places in rabbinic literature.

overlaps with Mark and Matthew in usage of the Hebrew “amen” expression. Mark and Matthew overlap with one another four times besides the three cases of overlap with Luke. There are 18 cases where Matthew has no overlap in employing this phrase.

However, it does happen that instances of “Truly, I say” occur in one Gospel whereas others have the same teaching without the “truly” phrase. Luke 4:24 states “And he said, “Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his own country.”

In this last case, it is clear that sometimes a statement can have “truly, I say to you” affixed while the same statement can appear without it. A fascinating example is that of John 13:16, “Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him”; its parallel is Matt 10:24 “A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master.”

We find parallels sayings where Luke’s “truly” is dropped: Mark 6:4 gives us “And Jesus said to them, ‘A prophet is not without honor, except in his own home-town’” and Matthew 13:57 says, “But Jesus said to them, ‘A prophet is not without honor except in his own home-town and his own family...’” According to John 4:44: “For Jesus himself testified that a prophet has no honor in his own country” and, finally, Thomas *logion* 31 gives us: “Jesus said, “No prophet is accepted in his own village; no physician heals those who know him.”

We can see that only a handful of statements employing this “truly” phrase are shared traditions in the synoptic corpus. This variation likely indicates that through the years this “Jesus construction” was appended to various assertions as the transmitters saw fit. I suggest that it might have been a marker used by repeaters and scribes to designate very ancient materials. Some of them are shared and the uniqueness of the usage suggests it might have had its origins in the language of the real Jesus.

In this particular quasi oath (introduced by “Amen”), Jesus declares that adults must become “like children”—a lesson that may or may not be completely metaphoric: one should become like a child, small and humble. But we are left wondering whether or not he means to say that all little children will be admitted into the Kingdom with no further requirement. In Matt 19:13–14 the disciples keep real children away from Jesus, and Matthew discloses between the lines the disciples assumed he was speaking in imagery that was symbolic and suggestive.

The disciples must have correctly inferred that the idiom “turn around” implies “changing”—relinquishing one’s haughty opinions gleaned from false teachings and erroneous beliefs, which make one misguidedly certain of what is credible, plausible and worthy. Rabbi Meir likewise counseled his students to

be humble before all people (*m. Abot* 4:10). This Gospel chapter is permeated by Hebrew idiom and suffused with the rhetoric, if not the actual import, of *m. Abot*, especially the references to extreme humility in *Abot* 4:4: “Rabbi Levitas of Yavneh would say: Be exceedingly humble, for the expectation of mortals is worms. Jesus’ answer in v. 4 undoubtedly disappoints the disciples, informing them that it is the most lowly who is the greatest.

As we noted, Jesus dramatizes his answer by randomly choosing a child, in plain view of the crowd, to synecdochically represent the best of the archetypical residents of the Kingdom:

*Whoever lowers himself like this little child, that one is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. (v. 4)*

When 1 Sam. 17:14 referred to David as “*ha-qatan*” (the youngest child), *b. Meg.* 11a revocalized this as “*hiqtin*” (literally, made himself small like a child). He was this way his whole life, deferring in his years of childhood (*qatnuto*) to those (Torah scholars) greater than he; lowering himself in his years of kingship (*malkhuto*) before those wiser than he. This elision of *qatan* from its sense of “child” to that of “humble man” nicely illustrates what lies behind the Gospel rhetoric here.

Now we can comprehend the meaning of this passage, apart from later interpretations of it. Jesus declares who it is that is most esteemed in the eyes of the divine, while rebuking the disciples for posing a self-serving question. Jesus plays with the Hebrew word for “great” which is *gadol*, which also means “adult.” By bringing forward a child, he cleverly asserts that the “*gadol*” must be “*qatan*,” the latter denoting a child but also connoting “a humble person.”

We should also appreciate that Jesus’ lesson here is parabolic, with a hidden meaning imbuing its simplicity. “Like this child” might ostensibly refer to that very child he had brought forward. Alternatively, it might be better understood to mean “a typical child” as in midrash, where, for example, “like a typical vulture” is phrased “like this vulture” in *t. Hag.* 2:6, describing a mystery.

Jesus veils his rebuke of the disciples who, being sophisticated adults, doubted and lacked faith, and therefore were incapable of casting out a demon. They did not have the required humility to share in divine powers. Only those who are humble and abnegate themselves by accepting Jesus’ authority without question will be endowed with great gifts, as v. 5 will suggest. The Gospel’s ambiguity, I suggest, is intentional, although Matthew may not have fully appreciated the nuance in his sources. He nevertheless does know that Jesus considers great stature as most becoming to one who would make himself small and lowly. Numbers 12:3 (“the man Moses was exceedingly

humble (*anav*), more than any person on the face of the earth") illustrates how the greatest can be the smallest.

This brings us back to Jesus' earlier remark, "Blessed are the poor of spirit (*anvei ruah*) for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven." (5:3). Talmudic Rabbis articulated similar perspectives. In *m. Abot* 4:1 we find a series of statements in Hebrew that set the standards for greatness with respect to certain specific traits. For the sake of brevity I have removed the proof-texts:

Ben Zoma says: "Who is the wisest? The one who learns from every person. Who is the strongest? The one who subdues his negative inclination. Who is the richest? The one who appreciates what he has been allotted. Who is most honored? The one who gives honor to others."

A variant of this tradition is found in *b. Tamid* 32a which adds an Aramaic conundrum: "What should a man do that he may live?—Kill himself!" The shocking and counter-intuitive answer elicits reflection and appreciation for the lesson being taught. That the Gospels preserve this form shows us the affinity between the Gospel teachings and Jewish rhetorical modalities.

*And whoever receives one such little child through my name receives me.*  
(v. 5)

"Through (*epi*) my name" is best explained as a truncated form of "through (*epi*) faith in my name (as in Acts 3:16)" The next verse explicitly defines what Jesus means by "little ones"—those who are faithful followers of Jesus. So the point, thus far, is not really about a little child but about honoring "one such little child"—the metaphoric sense of "child" being paramount here—who represents Jesus' ideals. To honor such a person is to honor one who emulates Jesus' teachings, and, by extension, to truly honor Jesus. The structure reminds one of *y. Erub.* 5:1: "Whoever receives the presence of his teacher [is as if he]<sup>4</sup> receives the face of the *Shekhina* (Divine Presence)." The obverse also applies:

*Whoever would offend one of these little ones who trust in me, it would be better for him to hang a donkey's millstone around his neck and be drowned in the depths of the sea.* (v. 6)

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<sup>4</sup> I have bracketed the words "as if he" in accordance with the arguments of Harry Fox in "As If With a Finger: A History of an Anti-Anthropomorphic Figure" (1980), 278–291, who sees the expression as a later scribal convention to address issues of anthropomorphism.

The Gospel harshly criticizes those who do not treat the humble and faithful followers of Jesus properly. Matthew 10:42 states, “And whoever gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he shall not lose his reward.” The little one is a disciple. As for seeing “little ones” as adults we can point to “Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.”

In the original context “little ones” was probably understood to be those who are of humble disposition. Chapter 19 will give a whole new sense to “little ones.” A literal reading might understand it to mean prepubescents. But more is going on here. If Matthew inherits such material that originally had referred to “making oneself small and child-like” he will offer a new insight in Matthew 19:13–14. In a brilliant literary move, Matthew will later recast the surface, patent sense of these passages, copying this pericope from his sources, then reworking it. In this latter passage, he extols children, who, like eunuchs, are without sexual desire and who do not reproduce. When the disciples disregard the literal sense of the message in chapter 19: 13–14, Jesus will rebuke them for not taking him at his word. In that passage in Matt 19, Jesus extols becoming a eunuch for the sake of heaven, a message he intends to be taken literally, as I will show in my commentary on chapter 19. Immediately afterward he repeats the injunction to cherish children—they cannot procreate and are functionally eunuchs.

Here the focus is on Jesus’ submissive followers rather than on actual children. The literary evidence favors the metaphoric sense as being the original. This very statement of making oneself “child-like” is found Mark 10:15 and Luke 18:17. We speak of a type of person, not a chronological age. But in Matthew and Mark the saying has to be interpreted in light of Jesus’ act of blessing that follows it: “And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed immediately them.” Children are more than a mere figure of speech—they are understood to be the ones with natural merit. The quasi-oath “truly, I say to you” is found in all three Gospels in connection with “little ones” metaphor.<sup>5</sup> But Mark 10:16, Luke 18:17 and Matthew 19:15 all recognize that metaphors only work if the compared object is recognized and the basis for comparison is understood.

Anyone who would find cause to undermine or uproot the trust of the followers of Jesus will be subject to such horrific divine punishment that it would be preferable for them to suffer the lesser ordeal of drowning. According to Matthew 18:6, “Whoever would offend one of these little ones who trust in me, it would be better for him to hang a donkey’s millstone around his neck and

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5 See the analysis of “truly, I say to you” parallels in the introduction to this chapter.

be drowned in the depths of the sea." At this point we can note a distinction in the wording of the early Gospel versions. Luke 17:2 declares that "it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. In Luke's rendition, the stone is to be tied around the neck of offender cast into the sea, presumably by others, although not explicitly to the depths, Matthew's version, *ina kremasthē...per ton traxēlon autou*, speaks of a makeshift suspension of a heavy donkey-stone, all the better to drag the body down without hope of recovery.

The donkey's millstone refers to the heavy grinding apparatus pulled by an animal, as opposed to a lighter one manipulated by a human hand (*t. Kelim [B. Meši'a] 2:14*). The idea of a millstone hanging on someone's neck later became a common metaphor for burdensome, mundane responsibilities that hinder personal progress or limit independence. *B. Qidd.* 29b claims that marriage is "a millstone around one's neck" which encroaches upon the long hours required for study of Torah. The weight of the stone became proverbial. The hyperbolic attachment of suicidal advice to the avoidance of grave sins was a rhetorical device to highlight the seriousness of ethical matters not explicitly taught in Scriptures. "It would be better for one to throw himself into a fiery furnace and not publicly embarrass another" (*b. Ber.* 43b and many other places in Talmudic literature). In Matthew, the intention is to highlight gravity of offending followers of Jesus and undermining their faith by prescribing an exaggerated, self-inflicted alternative.<sup>6</sup>

Luke recommends others throw him into the sea and that a millstone (likely a small one) should be "*wrapped* around his neck (*perikeitai peri ton traxēlon autou*)". The millstone is carefully placed around the neck, worn like a large medal, rather than serving as a weight. What is the point here of others positioning a light stone around his neck when he is cast into the sea? A story is told in *b. Yoma* 86b, with significant variants found in *Sipre Deut.*, *piska* 26, and *Sipre Num.*, *piska* 137:

A woman who ate the forbidden unripe figs (newly produced) of the sabbatical year made request from the court. "Please publicize the reason for my flogging (so no one will confuse my light sin with another's grave sexual transgressions)." So unripe figs of the sabbatical year were brought and were *hung* on her neck. It was proclaimed by a herald: for the sin of eating unripe sabbatical produce she is being flogged.

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6 *B. Gitt* 57b tells a story about Jewish children who threw themselves into the sea to avoid be taken to the brothels of Rome.

Bearing this symbolism in mind we can further speculate about the Gospel accounts. The wording in Luke refines the meaning of “hanging a millstone around the neck.” A symbolic indication of the perpetrator’s intended crime should be hung about his neck: “I deserve what is happening to me, I was going to hang a millstone upon a follower to prevent him from having trust and faith in Jesus.” The millstone conveys the reason for the punishment. The passage makes it clear that this is not something that is actually going to happen, however much one might come to wish it had. Nevertheless, if the divine court could indeed issue and inflict preventative judgments, then a nefarious plotter might be prevented from acting against the faithful. Jesus imagines how the heavenly court might execute preemptive sentences prior to the actual commission of a crime. Compared to the torments that would await the perpetrators after the fact, preventative judgments would be both merciful and preferable. Perhaps Matthew’s source was based on such understandings as well.

*Woe to the world for these offenses. It is inevitable that the offenses come, but woe to the person through whom the offenses come. (v. 7)*

Structurally the passage begins by proclaiming “a universal woe” to the world followed by an interesting analysis of the lament. That there will be offenders (of whatever the offense) has been assured into human events; yet even so, whoever commits an offense will be sorely punished.

Woe to him who chooses that role. *B. B. Bat.* 16b has a similar structure and remarks:

It is impossible for the world to be both without perfume blenders and without [malodorous] tanners. Fortunate is the one whose craft is a perfume blender and woe to the one whose craft is a tanner!

One can, within limitations, choose one’s profession but the distribution of occupations will predictably incorporate both those who are happy and those who are miserable with their craft. Likewise, although it is evident that no society will ever be completely free of law-breakers, nonetheless any individual who breaks the law should foresee being prosecuted. Jesus says it is inevitable that some will lack faith, but woe to anyone who does, and must suffer the consequences.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> In the Middle Ages, Moses Nachmanides (Ramban) in his *Commentary on the Torah* (Gen 15:14) was bewildered by Moses Maimonides having written in his *Mishneh Torah* (end of ch. 6 Laws of Teshuva) that there was a serious theological problem in Genesis 15:14. God

*If your hand or your foot offends you, cut it off and throw it from you. It would have been better for you to enter [the next] life crippled or lame,—than with two hands or feet only to be thrown into the eternal fire. If your eye offends you, pluck it out and throw it from you. It would be better for you to enter [eternal] life one-eyed—than with two eyes only to be thrown in the Gehenna of fire. (vv. 8–9)*

In the introduction to this chapter, I outlined the full exegetical thrust of this passage, based on the *lex talionis* involving principle limbs (Exod 21:22–25; Lev 24:19–21; Deut 19:16–21). With this in mind, it is noteworthy that the Gospel begins its discussion of various types of stumbling of the soul, brought about by the various limbs and organs of the body. Lack of control over one's actions brings about a rupture in the human-divine relationship. In such cases there can be no compromise; quick action is needed to sever the offending part from the body. In the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:29–30), Jesus had advocated the forfeiture of a roving eye or offending hand in order to preempt a lapse into sexual sin:

And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

In 18:8, Jesus recommends the amputation of appendages if they lead oneself or others astray in matters of faith:

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seems to decree that the descendants of Abraham will be persecuted in a foreign land for 400 years; after which God will free them and punish their persecutors. The obvious problem is the punishment of their persecutors. If God has decreed they would be persecuted, how can any nation suffer punishment, in all fairness, for fulfilling what God had ordained as necessary? According to Maimonides, God had told Abraham what was inevitable without forcing any specific individual to harm Israelites. Whosoever might choose not to persecute them was free to act accordingly. Maimonides' words confused Ramban, who failed to grasp any distinction between inevitability of persecution and Maimonides' claim that no one was forced to act against his/her own will as persecutor. In modern terms, that mystery resembles that of the statistician who can predict ahead of various national holidays how many traffic fatalities are likely to occur, but cannot foresee who they will be or the time and place the accidents that cause them will occur. The Rabbis had inherited set rhetorical formulas for declaring these paradoxes and the formula is very close to the one cited in the Gospel. It is inevitable that people will offend but it is not ordained who will offend.

If your hand or your foot offends you, cut it off and throw it from you. It would have been better for you to enter [the next] life crippled or lame,—than with two hands or feet [only] to be thrown into the eternal fire.

I would make the case that the truncated Gospel version used by Matthew 5 was taken from a Gospel passage recording a series of statements, similar to our Matthew 18:6–11. Obviously the point of speaking about the right-hand is that, in general, no one can function without using this dominant appendage; even so one is told to sever it if it leads to sin. But what does the form of the saying tell us about the culture that phrases matters in this way? Are we dealing with hyperbole or a statement intended to be taken literally? In order to understand these Gospel passages that discuss the amputation of one's limbs to prevent even greater misfortune, some familiarity with their background and the cultural concepts that infuse these passages is necessary.

The Gospel discussions revolve around Jewish legal categories. Blinding the eyes, cutting off hands, breaking legs—the phrases recur over and over in Talmudic literature (e.g. *m. B. Qam.* 8:1, *Lev. Rab.* 3:4). In *Gen. Rab.* 11:7 the Rabbis related a debate between a Christian sage and a rabbi.<sup>8</sup> That midrash, in my view, interprets the Gospel references to “blinding eyes, cutting off hands and breaking legs” as exaggerated but nonetheless practical advice, like cutting one’s hair locks. The point is that these body parts facilitate sexual encounters in certain ways, as does the eroticism of hair. (I have already discussed the rabbinic expressions concerning cutting hands off as an overstated metaphor above in 5:29–30.)

One who would deprive another of his share in the Kingdom by preventing him from following Jesus is conceptually a “pursuer” (*rodef*). A pursuer is one who threatens another’s life and will stop at nothing in stalking his prey. A bystander must intervene and take action against the perpetrator in order to prevent harm to the victim. In his commentary to Genesis 32:11, Rabbi Eliyahu Mizrahi explains (citing *b. Sanh.* 72a–b and *Sipre Deut piska* 293, Deut 20:12):

Whoever pursues another to kill him is not to be killed at first by onlookers. The menace should be subdued by injuring his limbs such as chopping off his hand or his foot. If such is not feasible then one can stop the pursuer by taking his life even though he has not killed anyone.

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<sup>8</sup> “The Meaning of ‘Shtuth’” (Basser 1985), 148–151; “Word Studies in Rabbinic Hebrew” (Basser 1987), 67–78.

If a person can be prevented from sinning by severing one of his appendages, then that appendage should be amputated. But if that will not suffice, one must take his life.

Luke (17:2 ff.) prefers to talk about saving oneself through amputation before proceeding to discuss killing oneself, while Matthew reverses the order of presentation. When one is faced with a killer who can be assumed to be armed and dangerous *b. Sanh.* 72a rules one treat him as a criminal who had already committed murder. Rava proclaims that anyone who breaks in surreptitiously is prepared to confront and kill whoever would prevent him from accomplishing his raid. He concedes that the Torah commands in this case—"If one comes to kill you—preempt and kill him." It seems most likely that this is the mindset within which the Gospel's Jesus directs his audience. Anyone would place obstacles in the way of his followers' complete faith should by his own accord "take his own life."

To further appreciate these passages we should consider some midrashim interpreting various verses in the Book of Jeremiah:

Rabbi Eleazar found encouragement in Jer 31:10 "Hear the word of the Lord, O nations; proclaim it in distant coastlands, He who scattered Israel will gather them and will watch over his flock like a shepherd." Rabbi Yohanan cited Jer 31:11, "For the Lord will ransom Jacob and redeem him. "Because of a hand" (*miyad*) he was stronger than they." As they walked he bent over and saw fingers of a hand and cut legs cast out on the road. He picked them up, caressed them, kissed them and put them in his cloak. He said to his students, "My sons, did I not always say to you—concerning Jer 13:16, "Give glory to the Lord your God; before one (the enemy) would bring the darkness, before your feet would stumble on the darkening hills.—You hope for light, but he will turn it to thick darkness and change it to deep gloom". My advice is to act before he (the enemy) makes the words of Torah dark and words of prophecy dark (i.e., makes us sin against God).

This passage from *Pesiq. Rab Kahana* (ed. Mandelbaum, sec. 13, Jeremiah) seems truncated. I believe its continuation is preserved—with perceptive glosses, which I set in parentheses—in *Otzar ha-Midrashim* (ed. Eisenstein: *Eser Galuiot* p. 439).

When the idolaters entered Jerusalem they took the Levites, the descendants of Moses, captive. They bound their hands behind them. When they reached the rivers of Babylon their captors freed their hands. They

told them to play their harps just as they had played it to their God in the Temple. “Quickly”/“Because of a hand” the Levites managed to control themselves and stick their fingers into their mouth to cut them off with their teeth. They showed their fingers to their captors (and so could not play that music for the idolaters that they had played for God in the Temple). . . . [Then a cloud came and carried them across the Sambatyon River where they, their children, and their flocks remain in simple purity to this day].

I wonder whether the story went on to mention the severing of legs, as in the *Pesiqta de Rav Kahana* excerpt. At any rate, the idea of pre-emptive severing of limbs to avoid sin, both as a literal construct and as a figurative construct, is rooted in Jewish traditions. The Christian view seems to have taken the passages as literal notions and as punishments.

Consider the following account in *Sefer Or Zarua*, vol. 2, “Laws of Rosh Hashanah,” 276. Its author remarks that he found a chronicle in the handwriting of Rabbi Ephraim of Buna which he proceeds to copy *verbatim*. The problematic details of the account have resulted in it being termed a “legend.” According to the legend, the chronicle goes on to say how the Bishop of Mainz had constantly badgered Rabbi Amnon of Magenza (i.e. Mainz) to convert to Christianity. When the rabbi asked for three days to decide what his reply would be, he sorely regretted it. He did not show up on the appointed day and the bishop had him brought before him. To assuage the anger of the bishop Rabbi Amnon requested his tongue be cut out for even suggesting he would frame an answer but the priest refused. He said that suggestion was entirely proper. Instead he ordered:

The legs which did not come here on the appointed day I shall chop off. I will likewise torture other parts of the body as well. So his antagonist commanded that the rabbi’s finger joints on his hands be cut off with his legs—joint by joint.

I cannot account for the details of the story without thinking the author of the story thought the bishop believed he was acting benevolently to save the rabbi from eternal torment. The story’s motivation was likely, “If your hand or your foot offends you, cut it off and throw it from you. It would have been better for you to enter [the next] life crippled or lame,—than with two hands or feet only to be thrown into the eternal fire.”

I suggested in Chapter 5 that the point of the eye or the hand offending or causing stumbling referred to sexual lusts. I further opined, concurring with

D. Allison, that when Jesus speaks of either removing the eye or cutting off the hand, he is speaking rhetorically.<sup>9</sup> Minor tractate *Kallah Rabbati* 2.5 mentions three types of sinful hands it would be better to cut off: the hand that sins through the penis; the hand that (habitually has dangerous material on it that) causes blindness; and the hand that commits murder. The graphic hyperbole is intended to highlight the severity of these crimes. The gravity of the sin and its consequences are embossed indelibly in the conscience. But, as I suggested in the introduction to this chapter, some might choose to take the rebukes literally.

We will find the passage in *b. Nidah* 13b to be relevant here.

The teacher of the traditions from the school of Rabbi Yishmael taught: *You shall not commit adultery* (Exod 20:12) means there shall be nothing adulterously [like masturbation] sinful in your comportment.—whether with hand or foot.—It was asked if the rabbinic dictum to chop off the hand that touched the male member was meant literally to instruct courts in this regard or just meant as a threat, a kind of curse to dissuade people.

In its discussion of this passage the Talmud interprets *t. Nidah* 2:8 to mean that Rabbi Tarfon taught that even were there a thorn in the penis one should not remove it by touching it. True, infections could set in and his penis (lit. *stomach*—which is a euphemism) could rupture—but Rabbi Tarfon taught—“Better his penis rupture than he descend to the pit of destruction (Hell).”

This phrase is very close to the Gospel rhetoric of what one is advised to do rather than burn in Hell. The Talmud seems to suggest that the teaching of cutting off one's hand which brings one to sin is meant literally but perhaps this is not what is meant. The similarity of the Hebrew words for thorn (*qotz*) and for “chop off” (*qotzetz*) might be the basis of this passage. In this case, the point would not be taken literally but understood as hyperbolic rhetoric supported by the creative use of homophony.

*See that you do not despise one of these little ones. I tell you that their angels in heaven regularly see my heavenly father's face. (v. 10)*

While classical Freudian psychology has given the name subconscious or unconscious to the deeper levels of perceptiveness that govern behavior, levels

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<sup>9</sup> Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 175–81, lists several parallels to the cutting off of limbs in order to save one from sexual lusts.

that escape our immediate cognition,<sup>10</sup> the Persians developed the notion of the *farvashi*. The *farvashi* was conceptualized as a heavenly double of each earthly person that encapsulated every facet of the individual—a higher manifestation of the person. The supernal guardian angel controls much of our behavior without us being aware of it. Hence people are moved to evasive action when dangers strike, although the actions seem instinctive or automatic. The common term for this angel in Hebrew is *sar*, a term that occurs over and over again rabbinic literature, as in *sar shel Eisav* (the guardian-angel of Esau), *sar shel Yam*, and *sar shel olam*. Each nation also has a guardian angel. In the Babylonian Talmud, the word *mazal* (astral fate, constellation) is borrowed for this usage as well, as in *b. Meg.* 3a:

*Daniel was the only one who saw the vision; the men with me did not see it, but such terror overwhelmed them that they fled and hid themselves. (Dan 10:7):... [A]nd given that the men did not see the vision, why then were they terrified? Although they did not see it, their mazals saw it.*

Rashi remarks that the *mazal* refers to the *sar* [angel] of each person in heaven. This is what Jesus means by saying that the *sarim* of the pure simple folk, the so-called *am ha'aretz haglili*, see God's face. Their angels are the *Yashar*: a class of beings said in Psalm 11:7 to see His face. As such they enjoy divine protection, not only the protection of their guardian-angel. This idea will be dramatically portrayed in the next verse by recourse to a story about a lost sheep.

*For the Son of Man is come to save that which was lost. (v. 11)*

This verse, which does not appear in some manuscripts, seems to have been added from Luke 19:10 ["For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost"].<sup>11</sup> But some scribe must have realized that Matthew had reported earlier (15:24) that Jesus said he had come to save the lost sheep of Israel and inserted the gloss.

*What does it seem to you? If a certain person had a hundred sheep and one wandered away from them, would not that person leave the ninety-nine on*

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<sup>10</sup> *B. B.Qam.* 2b draws our attention to the idea that only humans have such guardian angel awareness while animals do not.

<sup>11</sup> In the Critical Text published in the 27th edition of the Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament, it is noted to be absent from the major witnesses to Matthew.

*the mountains and go and search for the one that wandered? If he finds it, amen, I say to you: he rejoices in it more than for the ninety-nine who never wandered. Thus it is not the will before your father who is in the heavens that a single one of these little ones should be lost. (vv. 12–14)*

References to lost sheep are very common in Jewish law and literature. Consider the following verse, Exod 22:8–9. “In all cases of illegal possession for an ox, a donkey, *a sheep*, a garment, or any lost object about which somebody says,—This is mine—both parties are to bring their cases before *elohim*.” *Elohim* can mean God or judges. The discussion concerns misappropriated objects and in the end God judges the matter. The verse is dissected and explained through the aid of other verses in *Midrash Tanh. Lev., Aharei Mot* s. 8 [ed. Buber s. 12]:

*For a sheep*—these are Israel, as it is said Jer 50:17: *Israel* is a scattered *sheep*. . . . *For any lost object*—it refers to those mentioned by Jer 50:6: *Lost sheep* were my people.

One of the most charming stories is the one concerning Moses tending *the* sheep of Yitro his father-in-law as told in *Exod. Rab. Parashat Shemot* 2:2:

And indeed Moses was tested solely by “sheep.” Our Rabbis related that when Moses was tending the sheep of Jethro in the desert a lamb ran away from him. Moses ran after it until it got to a shady area. When it got to the shady area there chanced to be there a pool of water and the lamb stooped to drink. When Moses caught up to it he said to it, “I did not know that you were running because of thirst. You must be weary.” He carried it in his arms and brought it back. God said: you have such mercy to tend the sheep of humans, by your life you shall tend the sheep of Israel. So Exodus 3:1 wrote “And Moses tended sheep of Jethro his father-in-law and guided the sheep...”

One final story from *Lev. Rab., Parashat Vayikra*, 4, will suffice to illustrate the popularity of the image of lost sheep for Jewish preachers, not least because Jeremiah was fond of the image:

Hizkiah taught: “*Israel* is a scattered sheep.” (Jer 50:17). *Israel* is compared to a sheep, just as a tender sheep when struck on its head or in any limb—all its limbs feel the injury; so too *Israel*, when any one of them sins—then all of them feel the injury.

The Gospel teaching is within the finest tradition of Jewish preaching in a pastoral society. The language of the teaching is replete with Jewish idioms. The convention was to speak of royalty in such removed and deferential terms so as to depict God, like a king, always at a distance.<sup>12</sup> Nothing is given or asked to God, only “set before him”, he never thinks but ideas go into his thought, he never delights or favors but his will/desire comes before him with satisfaction. Thus *Tg. Onq.* to Gen 4:4 relates that Abel offered his choicest sheep and their fat so there was good will from before God [ra'awa min qadam YY] toward Abel and to his sacrifices. So when we read “*Thus it is not the will before your father*” we realize God is displeased if one of the little ones is lost to him. Let us look at a close parallel from *Midrash Psalms* [ed. Buber] 25:13:

He said: *May it be the will from before our father who is in the heavens* [*yehi ratzon milifnei avinu she-bashamayim*] that the eyes of Joseph be restored . . . and they were restored.

*Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* provides close structural parallels to the Gospel verse:

Num 22:13: and Balaam arose in the morning and said to the nobles of Moab, “Go to your land for *there is no will from before Adonai* [*leith ra'awa min qadam Yod Yod*] to allow me to go with you.”

Deut 28:32: Your sons and your daughters are handed to a foreign nation and your eyes long for them all day but there is not in your hands sufficient good deeds that your hands may be strengthened in prayer *before Adonai your Father who is in the heavens* [*qadam Yod Yod avukhon dive-shamaya*] that He may redeem you.

The Greek of Matthew gives us “*houtōs ouk estin thelēma emprosthen tou patros humōn tou en ouranois*” which reverts perfectly into Aramaic “*hen leith rāawa qadam avukhon di-veshamaya*.” The point is that God would not be pleased with the loss of a single simple soul from his flock.

Can there be the slightest doubt that the Gospel preserves a sermon based on a Semitic original from the earliest layers of the Jewish apostolic teachings? The Greek makes sense only in terms of its Hebrew/Aramaic idiom.

*If your brother causes you to sin, go, challenge him between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother back. (v. 15)*

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<sup>12</sup> See Dan 2:15; 2:18.

The Gospel rephrases a common biblical teaching: Lev 19:17—"You shall not hate your brother in your heart; rebuke—you shall rebuke your neighbor and not bear sin on his account." The Gospel speaks about offenses that are an affront to the human-human (between you and your brother) relationship. In this case, infinite patience is required, although at the end one may bring the offending party before a tribunal for judgment that could result in ostracizing the guilty party. The Rabbis also demand unrelenting rebuke for sins against God and gentleness in reproving an interpersonal affront. There are many such discussions of this verse in the Talmud. Here is one example from *b. Arakhin* 16b:

From where do we know that if one sees his neighbor doing something wrong he is obligated to rebuke him? As it is said in Lev 19:17, *Rebuke—you shall rebuke*. Now if he rebukes him and the rebuke is not accepted, from where do I know he must repeatedly rebuke him? Scripture adds "you shall rebuke." (The double usage was taken to mean rebuke repeatedly until there is acquiescence.) I might think even to the extent of embarrassing him—Scripture says "that you not bear sin on his account."

This last line sounds very much like the Qumran legislation. One must rebuke gently so as to not bear sin. On the other hand, some missing words in 1QS columns v–vi have led scholars to believe that the act of rebuking must be carried out swiftly, so as not give the sinner a chance to bear his sin without repenting. The rebuke is proffered without malice or animosity, as the Torah commands, an indication that the point is similar to that made by the Rabbis. The Qumran text mirrors the points in Lev 19:17.

The link in the Gospel between lost sheep and proper rebuke is not haphazard. According to Deut 22:1:

You shall not see the ox of thy brother or his sheep driven away, and hide yourself from them; bring back, you will bring them back to your brother.

The Rabbis stress that the Torah's wording demands the return of lost sheep to their owner, regardless of the effort required. We now compare this verse to Lev 19:17:

You shall not hate your brother in your heart; rebuke—you shall rebuke your neighbor and not bear sin on his account.

The Rabbis derived from the structural parallels that effective rebuke must be conveyed, no matter the extent of the trouble needed to do so. In each case the wording is doubled: “Bring back, you will bring them back,” “rebuke, you will rebuke.” *B. B. Meši'a* 31a reflects upon the Torah’s phrasing that requires subsequent returning if the sheep run away again together with the phrasing that requires repeated rebuke (if there is backsliding):

A Rabbi said to Rava: If the animal that was returned repeatedly ran away from its owner I should think one need return it once [“bring back”] and then only a second time [“you will bring them back”]! He said to him, *bring it back* by itself means at least 100 times. .... A rabbi said to Rava I should think if the rebuke was ineffective the first time [“rebuke”] one needs only to rebuke a second time [“you will rebuke”]! He said to him “rebuke” by itself means at least 100 times (until he listens).

Rava does not consider the doubling of Hebrew verbs in Lev 19:17 (viz. “rebuke/you will rebuke”) need dictate a two rebuke time limit to the amount of effort required to achieve the Torah’s goal. It is enough that God commands through the use of the imperative form (even if the verb were said only once) and no one can ever limit any effort as long as the goal of the commandment remains unfulfilled. Similarly the Gospel puts no limit on the need to rebuke and “77” or “7 times 70” fold is simply indicative of an unlimited requirement until the job is done.

The Gospel chapter has moved from condemning the incomplete faith of the disciples to condemning all those who do not honor the humble, simple followers of Jesus, and then to those who are misled by teachers and leaders into sin. The stones placed by false teachers in the path of children are “stumbling blocks” (*skandala*). LXX renders Ps 119:165: “Great peace have they that love thy law: and there is no stumbling-block (LXX: *skandalon*) to them.” If your brother causes you to sin, go, challenge him; it is between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother back. But if not, put him out of the mainstream.

*But if he does not listen, take one or two with you, so that every word is acknowledged by the mouth of two or three witnesses.<sup>13</sup> And if he does not pay attention to them, speak to the assembly. If anyone does not pay*

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<sup>13</sup> Deut 19:15 cf. Jn. 8:17; 2 Cor 13:1... every sin which he commits will be placed by the mouths of two witnesses and by the mouths of three witnesses.

*attention to the assembly let him be to you just like a Gentile and a tax collector. (vv. 16–17)*

The phrase “take one or two *with you*” is not clear in the Greek, where *meta* is rendered as “with you.” Others prefer to construe this as “one or two *more*” or “*yet*.” George Howard records a Hebrew text of this verse in his edition with the letters *ayin daleth*.<sup>14</sup> When vocalized as “‘ed ‘ehad ḥō šenayim” we get “one witness or two,” which alludes to Deut 19:15, cited by Matthew immediately afterwards. However, if these two Hebrew letters are vocalized as “‘od” rather than “‘ed,” we get what is literally in the Greek “*yet* one or two” (and so we do not construe it as meaning “with you”). Howard’s conjecture is based on a medieval Hebrew Matthew text, which in fact has “‘ed ‘ehad”: one witness [or two].<sup>15</sup> This teaching has a near parallel in the Dead Sea Scrolls which mentions taking witnesses and rebuking an unrepentant comrade, then appearing before a communal tribunal of some sort. Perhaps our Matthew verse was taken from a manual similar to the *Manual of Discipline* (1QS v.24–VI.2) which resonates with the verse at hand:

When one rebukes his neighbor it is to be with truth, humility, and loving-kindness towards the man [*vacat . . .*]. He must not speak to him with anger, with complaint, with recrimination [*vacat . . .*], with meanness of spirit. He is not to hate him [] in his heart. For on that day [*vacat . . .*] he is to rebuke him it must be done that he not bear sin on his account (by showing hatred). Indeed, he is not to bring any complaint [of being wronged] before the *Rabbim* without exercising “due rebukes *before witnesses*.<sup>16</sup>

*Rabbim* might refer to a duly selected group, but it is probably best taken as the membership at large. The Qumran law code stipulates the decision to punish a grievance must be carried out calmly, collectedly and collectively.

The Gospel refers to *ekklesia* (general LXX translation of *qahal*) here to refer to the final process of arbitration. In Talmudic jurisprudence the operative bodies necessary to bring about legal realities of consequence are witnesses, courts and communities at large.<sup>17</sup> In the Gospel’s case of confrontational

<sup>14</sup> George Howard, *Hebrew Gospel of Matthew* (1995).

<sup>15</sup> G. Howard, “The Textual Nature of an Old Hebrew Version of Matthew” (1986), 60.

<sup>16</sup> Moses Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, “*De’ot*” 8:6 uses almost identical language to what we have in 1QS—there can be absolutely no hatred or embarrassment in the rebuke.

<sup>17</sup> See commentary of Rashbam to *b.B. Batra* 143b s.v. “*ve’im amru gedolim liqtanim . . .*”

disputes, it might be practical to understand that a designated legal body acts on the notice of the whole community to decide if a confirmed sociopath should or should not be expelled from it. Perhaps the sense of such terms as *rabbim*, *ekklesia*, and *qahal* who are called upon to render a verdict should be understood as public bodies or publicly designated bodies. The witnesses apply social pressure by declaring they will bring the matter to the people at large, who may then pronounce harsh punitive default measures if no resolutions appear imminent.

By saying those who ignore rebuke shall become like Gentiles and tax collectors, the Gospel points to those who are at the very fringe of Jewish society. Jewish society took pains to keep the Gentile worshipper of idols far enough removed that their mores and lifestyle would not influence the simple Jewish peasants. They were shunned commercially and socially as much as possible. Even worse was the low esteem in which the tax collector, who bought a license from the Roman administration to extort taxes through violent means from poor Jewish farmers, was held.<sup>18</sup> The same anti-tax collector and anti-Gentile rhetoric informs Matt 5:46 and Matt 6:7. Note here how Jesus is reported as saying: If anyone does not pay attention to the assembly let him be to you just like a Gentile and a tax collector. This is the opposite sentiment of that expressed in Lev 19:34: But the stranger that dwells with you shall be to you just like one born among you. The one excludes and the other includes through the same point. These people are to be treated as categories that represent a social change from their previous status (the one negatively and the other positively).

The point is that one can be treated as an outsider or as an insider dependent on the extent and degree of adherence to the standards of the community. So we find Matthew's Jesus, as did Qumranites, excluding the unrepentant sinner. On the other hand, it has been claimed that Jesus offended the Jews by embracing these outcasts, as we read in Matt 9:11 and Matt 11:19. There may be no acceptable way to reconcile these passages and I am left considering there having been divergent traditions on this matter. However, I do not think Matthew was so sloppy to allow such sloth to stand and I prefer to see that him as consistent. His point is that Jesus espoused Jewish values but the Jews refused his rebuke and teachings, whereas the Gentiles were open to accepting Jesus and his associates. Thus, the Gospel is peppered with increasingly pro-Gentile, anti-Jewish sentiments until, at the conclusion, Matthew and his fellow Christians believe Jesus died for them alone. The Jews have been replaced.

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<sup>18</sup> These tax collectors forced others to pay more than they were required according to their assessment. See *b. Sanh.* 25b.

While this seems to be Matthew's reading of his sources, I would argue that the pro-Jewish material stems from the teachings of the early Jewish churches, and the later, more negative material from Gentile preachers after the two communities have gone on separate paths. We will see the matter unfold in greater clarity as we approach the end of the Gospel.

*Amen, I say to you, whatever you tie up on earth will be tied up in heaven, and whatever you untie on earth will be untied in heaven. (v. 18)*

From v. 16 onward, the responsibility of excising one who sows doubt shifts to the community, which can bar him from life eternal. The sense of "amen" here is a quasi-oath, affirming the veracity of the declaration. (God would harshly punish anyone daring to make such an oath about an assertion which is not true.) Earlier, discussing Matt 16:18–19, I pointed out Matthew's reworking of the pristine statement found here in chapter 18. In chapter 16 there is no reference to Peter, to the Church of Christ, to keys or anything more than the claim regarding the authorized legal "assembly" than "that God stands in the communal court ('adat 'el)" (Ps 82:1). God ratifies their decisions as to who is to be a member in good standing of the community and who will be reduced to the status of Gentile and tax-collector.

How did Jews reduce the status of those who offended the community? *B. Hullin* 132b mentions priestly butchers who did not remove priestly gifts for others from their own portions. They were been placed under the "Ban (*shamta*) of the God of Israel" and remained socially ostracized for 22 years.

*Again, Amen, I say to you, if two of you on earth agree about anything that you ask, it will made to happen for you by my father in the heavens. Where two or three gather for my name, I am there in their midst. (vv. 19–20)*

Recent commentaries to Matthew draw our attention to some structural parallels of the Gospel with rabbinic texts which state that when a certain number of people (i.e., 10, 5, 3, 2, and 1) are gathered, God is with them (e.g. *m. Abot* 3; *Abot R. Nat.* A 8; *Mek. R. Yish. Yitro, Bahodesh* 2 to Exod 20:24). Keeping these parallels in mind, we can gain a more precise understanding of the Gospel text before us.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Derrett, "Where Two or Three are Gathered in my Name...: A Sad Misunderstanding" (1979), 83, stresses the antiquity of this Gospel verse, dating it to a time before the Church had Gentiles in it and renders the context as judicial. He would translate even more closely in accord with the exegesis of Mal 3:6 than I, although he seems unaware of the

We begin our analysis of this text with a discussion of Malachi 3:16.

Then those who *revered* the Lord spoke<sup>20</sup> one to the other. The Lord attended and listened, and a book of remembrance was written before<sup>21</sup> Him of those who revered the Lord and esteemed His name.

Now let us consider, “*if two of you on earth ‘agree about’ anything that you ask, it will make to happen for you by my Father in the heavens.*” I would argue that Mal 3:16 is the source of this idea. The verse was taken to refer to two who decide to decree a matter on earth; God listens and acts in accordance with what they have decided. The word “agree” in the Gospel means they arrived at a decision of what needs to be done, and seems to be an interpretation of the grammatical form of the word *nidbaru* in Malachi. The Rabbis give us this exegesis in *Abot R. Nat.* A, 8:

*Two who sit and decide Torah matters, their entitlement is accepted on High*, as it is said: “Then those who revered the Lord spoke one to the other. The Lord attended and listened to them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the Lord and esteemed his name.” [Now what defines] “those who *revered* the Lord”? [It was taught] “those who *revered* the Lord” refers to those who enact a decree declaring, “Let us go and untie those who are bound and redeem those who are captive.” Without delay God sets up matters, in accord with their judgments, to proceed to successful conclusions.

The upshot is that Mal 3:16 is understood to mean that God pays attention and obeys the earthly decrees pronounced by God-fearing people, which are thereby “accepted on High.” “He fulfills the word of his servant and the counsel of his messengers he brings about—they say to Jerusalem, ‘you will be resettled’ and to the cities of Judah ‘you will be rebuilt’—and its ruins I will establish.” (Isa 44:26). God listens to his loved ones who desire national restoration.

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passages I cite further. He renders it: “Again I tell you that if two individuals (literally, two of you [Christians]) arrive at an accord on earth concerning any (literally, any and every) claim that they may be pursuing, it shall be allowed, ratified (literally it shall succeed, ‘come off’) on the part of my heavenly Father. For where there are two or three convened in my name, there I am amongst them.”

<sup>20</sup> The use of the grammatical *nif'al* here carries with it the sense of mutual conversation and also reaching a firm conclusion.

<sup>21</sup> The circumlocution “before him” likely means God did it himself.

The prayer book contains a prayer of redemption just before the *Amidah* which describes God as “taking out the tied up and redeeming the humble,” a juxtaposition that occurs nowhere else but in this particular prayer and in the exposition of Mal 3:16.

Essentially, *Abot R. Nat.* claims that God responds to the consensus of the righteous and will redeem his people. It may even be that the Gospel statement originally envisioned the power of the few who meet for the sake of God to be a catalyst for redemption, rather than an instrument for personal gain. It is noteworthy that this very verse in Malachi is explained in *Abot R. Nat.* A, 2:34 to express an idea that the Gospel also records. The point of the Gospel is to close the earlier statement that the *Ekklesia* acts with divine sanction to demote wayward members of the group. In *Abot R. Nat.* A, 2:34 we find:

Rabbi Halafta of Sepphoris said: Every group of *two or three* sitting in the market, who discuss between them words of the Torah the divine *Shekhina* comes to them, as it is said, “Then those who revered the Lord were led (gathered, convened—Heb. *nidbaru*), one with the other. The Lord attended and listened to them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who revered the Lord and esteemed his name.” (Mal 3:16).

We compare this to: *Where two or three gather for my name, I am there in their midst.* (v. 20). The Greek *sunegēmenoī* means “gather” and literally denotes “being led together.” In rabbinic parlance, although not widely attested to, *nidbaru*—a word form we took earlier to mean “speaking together with certainty”—is now given another meaning. In *b. B. Batra* 168a we have the expression *nidbar behadei* referring to a legal procedure. Rashbam, in his commentary to the Talmudic passage, tells us the word *nidbar* refers to “another being led together with him.” Hence it is likely that Rabbi Halafta understands that those who revered the Lord were guided by God, an Other Being who attended to them by inspiring them in their studies. Mal 3:16 refers to them as esteeming “his name.”

How does this all fit together? What is the clinching piece of Jewish tradition that directs our understanding to appreciate how the Gospel is directed along a theme of God’s involvement in the community—an involvement that dictates that those who disparage the community be seen as Gentiles and tax-collectors? We see it here:

Every gathering (*kenessia*) which is for the name of heaven is destined to endure while every gathering which is not for the name of heaven is not destined to endure. (*m. Abot* 4:12).

The usual translation of Matthew here suggests “in (*eis*) my name”. However, the resulting ambiguity leads me to translate *eis* with the sense of “for,” a not uncommon translation. Also, in the Hebrew text “name of heaven” is usually understood as “for the sake of heaven,” and perhaps that is what Matthew means also “for the sake of my name.” Still, I would suggest that “name” is a buffer word distancing God from the speaker, a commonplace convention in the Temple according to *m. Yoma* 3:8; “blessed be the name of the glory of his kingdom” is still recited today as part of the *Shema* liturgy. These buffering circumlocutions (name, glory, and kingdom) simply refer to “God”. Thus the *kenessia* gathers for godly activities: prayer, study, charity—as opposed to meeting for self-gratifying reasons. It is possible that this statement was also taught within the context of Mal 3:16, i.e. that those who revere God and esteem his name. The summation is given by Malbim in his commentary to Ps 34:4:

And His providence is spread over all His creations and especially over those who revere the Lord and those who esteem His name (Mal 3:16) for He is attached to them at all times. And this is clearly so, for He listens to the prayer of the righteous and delivers them from every catastrophe.

It would seem that the Gospel is not referring to Jesus when it says “I am in their midst” but, rather, citing a phrase as if spoken by God. Although it is possible that “I” could refer to Jesus, nothing in the chapter proper dwells on Jesus as divine. A relationship with God accorded earlier to the Son of Man or to Peter is bestowed here upon plain folk. I am hesitant to find an exception when it is unnecessary to do so. The point is that when the designated judges of the assembly agree on a matter, God will be bound by their decision and honor it. The materials in other chapters that stress the divinity of Jesus using the wording of these verses must come from another stratum of Jesus tradition.

*Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, how often should a brother sin against me and I forgive him, as many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I do not tell you as many as seven times but as many as seventy-seven (seventy-fold seven) times.” (vv. 21–22)*

The context of this dialogue seems to be based on a teaching Peter had heard. Perhaps something like: The Day of Atonement atones for “sins between man and God” while “sins between man and his neighbor” the Day of Atonement does not atone for until he receives forgiveness from his neighbor (*m. Yoma* 8:9). The Mishnah says nothing more. Peter now asks: What if my brother does not want to forgive me—how much do I need to bother over it? *B. Yoma* 46b records some suggestions to this very question. One answer is surprising in that it suggests eventually the sinner should make his sin public. Rashi explains the rationale: When he divulges it to the *rabbim* they will put pressure on the injured party to forgive. Here the *rabbim* seems to be simply the public at large, applying social pressure to get the desired results. Other sages suggested definite time limits.

So Peter rightfully asks and suggests a number of times that seems reasonable to him. Seven is usually used to connote a significant quantity which lends itself to further multiplication. For instance, the statement that “a court which executes once in 7 years is known as reckless, Rabbi Eliezer ben Azariah said once in 70 years (*m. Mak.* 1:10)” illustrates the way the number 7 is given as generous and then bumped up by another multiple of seven. Consider *Tg. Ps-J.* to Gen 4:24—“Seeing that Cain intentionally sinned and then repented, such that his punishment was delayed 7 generations; all the more Lemech his grandson who did not sin intentionally, should have his punishment delayed 77 generations.” The bump up in these numbers (found in the Hebrew text of Genesis) goes from 7 to 77 (or in LXX from 7 to *hebdomtēkontakis hepta*). Now *hebdomtēkontakis hepta* is exactly what Jesus is reported as saying here. The meaning of this phrase is ambiguous and might be taken as 70 times 7 or 70 plus 7.<sup>22</sup> But the matter does not stop there—the one who does not forgive will be punished. His sins will not be forgiven. The following parable has a severe message which fits well with the report of Rabbi Samuel’s advice *y. Yoma* 8:9 (start):

<sup>22</sup> I asked the eminent New Testament scholar, Dale Allison, to shed more light on this phrase and he kindly replied: “Well, that’s a tough one. The meaning of the LXX is unclear, but why not then assume the translator intended to say what the Hebrew says, namely, 77? I don’t recall what I said in my commentary, but I remember that the majority of patristic writers (including Origen and Augustine) think it’s 77, not 490. Maybe that should be given some weight. Also, it looks like *kai* is missing after numbers from twenty to ninety in the NT; that is, Luke 10.1 is lit. seventy two, not seventy *kai* two; cf. Lk 10.17; Acts 7.14; 27.37; John 6:19. So 77 might after all be the best guess. But it’s still a guess. And in any case, the sense is: don’t count, just forgive. So it makes little difference. You might if you can get it have a look at E.J. Goodspeed, *Problems of NT Translation*, 1945, pages. 29ff.”

One who sinned against his neighbor must tell him, “I have acted disgustingly to you.” If he agrees to forgive him all is well. But if not then he should bring others and ask for forgiveness before them. His has thus fulfilled “He will declare to his friends, ‘I sinned and twisted the truth, but it was not worth it.’” (Job 33:27). If he does so (no matter the outcome) then Scripture says of him “He delivered himself from going into the pit, and his life shall see the light.” (Job 33:28).

Jesus would add after trying countless times (77 or perhaps even 490 tries, depending on how *hebdomtēkontakis hepta* is understood) there should be a final public act to exert collective pressure. If there is still no forgiveness forthcoming, not only is the petitioner free of his sin, the stubborn injured party will suffer and himself descend into the pit for refusing to forgive.

*On account of this the kingdom of heaven is compared to person who is a king, who wished to check on his accounts with his slaves. When he began to check, one person was brought to him owing ten thousand talents. As he did not have the money to pay, the lord ordered him to be sold, along with his wife and children, and everything he had, and to be repaid. The slave [hearing the punishment], falling and worshiping him, said, “Be patient with me and I will repay you everything.” The lord of that slave had compassion for him, released him [from the punishment of the impending sale], and forgave the debt for him. That slave left and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii, and he seized him and choked him, saying “Pay me what you owe!” His fellow slave fell down and begged him, “Be patient with me, and I will repay you.” But he did not wish to; he came and threw him into prison until he repaid what he owed. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly pained, and they came and made clear to their lord everything that had happened. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, “Wicked slave! I forgave you the entire obligation, when you begged me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?” Angry, his lord handed him over to the torturers, until he repaid everything he owed. So also my heavenly father will do to you, unless each of you forgives his brother from your hearts. (vv. 23–35)*

This parable is thoroughly Jewish in its formulation and message, although it speaks of a Roman master. It tells the story of a greedy slave who forced his benevolent master to take back earlier boons, concluding with a warning about how such greed will be dealt with in the passage to the Next World.

*Angry, his lord handed him over to the torturers, until he repaid everything he owed. So also my heavenly father will do to you, unless each of you forgives his brother from your hearts. (vv. 34–35)*

The story is framed in the slave culture of ancient Rome. There is nothing at all Christological in this parable, and it fits within the genre of rabbinic metaphor that compares God to a king who takes back something he had previously granted. Minor tractate *Semachot of Rabbi Hyya* 3:3 records an analogous parable of a king who built a magnificent palace:

He hired man-servants and maidservants and provided them with silver and gold [as a loan?] to conduct business transactions. He ordered them, saying, “Take care not to steal, thieve, or rob from each other.” When the king went on a distant journey the servants began to steal, thieve and rob from each other. Eventually the king returned from his distant journey. He discovered all their possessions squirreled away inside their places while they went around naked outside. The king removed all the stolen properties from them.

So are the wicked in This World—they steal, thieve and rob from each other. When they die there is nothing to accompany them to the next world, for indeed they depart naked of commandments and good-deeds. Scripture says, “Do not be anxious when a man grows rich, when the material wealth of his house increases; for he will take nothing with him when he dies, his material wealth will not descend with him.”  
(Ps 49:16–17)

The exhortations closing most Jesus parables are noticeably different from those found in rabbinic literature in at least one way. The rabbinic lesson is often impersonal and targets the wicked. The Jesus lesson is personal and aimed directly at his audience, although sometimes it is directed towards the whole community, including the preacher. Let us look at an instructive sermon based on lessons derived from Scriptural stories where rebuke renders the offenders defenseless. A well-known midrash tells us that in Scriptural examples the normal response to rebuke in the here and now is speechless dismay. How much more so will there be terror on God’s judgment day (also called the day of rebuke)—terror for all of us.

*Woe to us from the Day of Judgment and woe to us from the day of rebuke (Gen. Rab. Vayigash 93:10; Tanh. [Buber], Shoftim 7).*

A comparison with the rabbinic parable will reveal the three-fold structure of these parables. 1) We have a king who is kind to his slaves providing a free grant of money. 2) The slaves act badly. 3) The king takes back his grant. The parable is followed by a statement of lesson.

For Matthew, the quality of mercy is not strained. If you are shown mercy you must show mercy or the mercy will be revoked in the Next World. Jewish tradition makes the same point. Consider *b. Ta'an.* 25b:

It once happened in a time of drought that Rabbi Eliezer prayed for the congregation and said 24 blessings without any result. After him Rabbi Akiva prayed: "Our father, our king, we have no king but you. Our Father, our king—for your sake, show mercy to us." Rain fell. The Rabbis began to murmur about Rabbi Eliezer. A heavenly voice came out and said, "Not because he is greater than the other but because he forgoes what is owed him and the other does not forego."

According to the Rabbis, if you abuse what God has given you to spend on good deeds by depriving others, you will be deprived in the Next World.

The commentaries to Matthew 18, especially Strack and Billerbeck, correctly show that the words of the parable derive from Semitic originals: the parable character is likened to a human king (*domeh lemelekh basar vedam*),<sup>23</sup> who choked him for payment (*honeq*)<sup>24</sup> and so on. There is no reason to think the text speaks of specifically Jewish kings, slaves, families etc., as the parables generally draw on archetypal images from daily life. Kings are Roman emperors or governors, slaves are non-Jews. The monetary units are hyperbolic—a myriad of gold talents was probably more than any amount ever minted—intended to convey immeasurable “tons of money.” The exaggeration is not gratuitous, as it demonstrates the largesse and magnanimity of the lord who would forgive such a loan, as well as the miserliness of the servant who would not forgive a loan of a few hundred silver coins and ended up paying everything and suffering horrible tortures at the same time. Commentators understand the

<sup>23</sup> *T. Sotah* 7:3 and a hundred other places. The expression “flesh and blood” is an idiom well attested in Hebrew but not frequent in Aramaic which suggests a Hebrew original rather than an Aramaic one.

<sup>24</sup> *M. B. Batra* 10:8 shows a dispute over what happens if someone sees a man grab his debtor and choke him and this someone tells him to let go: One Tanna says he did not really obligate himself to pay the other's debt when he spoke while another Tanna says he did obligate himself. No one knows if the *Mishnah* is speaking of actual choking or figurative “squeezing” for money.

point of the parable to be Jesus letting his listeners know if they do not forgive one another's sins (or monetary debts) against them and insist on harboring grudges, they will suffer horrible tortures until payment is exacted "from their hide."

We should also consider the more positive rabbinic take on such parables, which lack the anger expressed by Jesus parable. Consider *b. Roš Haš.* 17b:

I will give you a parable. To what can we compare the situation—to a man who lent another one *maneh* (*mina*) and fixed the time for repayment "before the king" and swore to him to repay "by the life of the king." When he [the borrower] did not pay the loan back at the required time he went to beg forgiveness from the king. The king said to him, "Your dishonoring me is pardoned for you; now beg the lender for his forgiveness."

This rabbinic lending story is the counterpoint of the Jesus parable. Jesus' story is concerned with the lender, Rabbis with the borrower. Typical of Jesus' parables and pithy retorts are their irony, bite and sting. Rabbinic teachings, while sometimes caustic, are often not.

Both stories agree that asking God to forgive requires asking others for forgiveness too. The difference is this: Jesus' message is that God treats us as we treat others and the rabbinic one is that we should treat humans with no less consideration than we treat God.

# Chapter 19

## Introduction

In this chapter, Matthew explicates both the nearly impossible demands Jesus makes on his followers, and the promise of unlimited reward for those who could meet those demands. Among these are the prohibition of divorce for any reason and the recommendation of celibacy.

The historian can be more certain about Jesus' position concerning divorce than almost any other teaching attributed to him. Paul (1 Cor 7:10–11) and the synoptics (Matt 5:32, 19:9; Mark 10:11; Luke 16:18) all agree that Jesus counseled his followers not to divorce. A red herring distracts most scholars from his position: the qualifying words in Matthew "except for the reason of infidelity."<sup>1</sup> There are no grounds for suspecting that any Jewish teacher would oppose divorce under these circumstances, explicitly or not. Infidelity, in first century sources, was not even a widely held requirement for divorce. Philo remarks that a man can divorce his wife for any reason, and that she may then remarry anyone but her first husband (*Special Laws* 3.30). Josephus cites the Law of Moses to the same effect (*Ant.* 4:253, cf. 16:198, *Vita* 426), as does Jesus both in Matthew and Mark, speaking of the Pharisaic rules operative in his day.

Philo, Josephus, Mark, Luke and Paul say nothing about infidelity being grounds for divorce because there is no need to state the obvious, since divorce is permitted for far more trivial causes. Matthew, in speaking of an ideal law not generally operative, specifically mentions divorce only for infidelity because of the greater care he took, conscientiously adding himself it or perhaps relying on better sourced traditions. We should not jump to conclusions about the other Gospel authors simply because they remain silent concerning infidelity. It is far from certain that Matthew differs with Mark on the issue. In the commentary to this chapter I shall argue the case even more stridently.

On the surface, it appears that Jesus objects to divorce because he opposes remarriage after divorce. It is not clear whether the case was indeed made by the historical Jesus himself or by another pious teacher of the first century and attributed to him. The Jesus character of the Gospels considers the remarriage of spouses divorced according to Mosaic Law to be a form of "permitted" adultery in God's eyes, but adultery nonetheless. Indeed, the Gospel preaches

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<sup>1</sup> "Adultery" has always been a translation option for *porneia* but "infidelity" [a moral sin as well as physical sin] is more appropriate here, especially in light of the claim that marriage was ordained by Heaven.

that marriage itself is a trap into which the unwary can fall, setting off an unanticipated chain of events: marriage can lead to divorce, which might result in remarriage, and culminate in adultery. But this reading seems to me to be a tangential teaching, apart from the primary stricture against divorce itself. Of course, once you instruct men not to divorce, it follows that their wives cannot remarry. But we learn from Paul that this ancillary tradition was taught in order to cover cases where Jesus' words were ignored and people did in fact divorce, in which case they are bidden not to remarry. I find that discussion interesting but secondary to the main concerns here.

Josephus (*Ant. 4:253*), in conformity with accepted Jewish practice, stresses that, without a divorce document in writing, the wife cannot remarry. There would be no need to talk about the possible remarriage of a previously married woman if her husband obeyed Jesus and did not divorce her. The Gospels remain silent as to whether or not an adulteress can remarry. Even Matthew, who mentions the “putting away” of an adulteress, avoids discussing the possibility of her remarriage. Overall, therefore, it seems evident that the question of remarriage is not the primary point of the passages we have here. A tradition is clearly present, although never defended or elaborated, that was worried about remarriage after divorce. The essence of the argument, however, is the rejection for the truly pious of the Mosaic legislation allowing divorce because it contradicts the divine will expressed at creation—prior to Adam’s expulsion from the Garden—that the marital model be one of eternal togetherness.

If I had to take an educated guess concerning the authentic Jesus teaching in the Gospel, it would be that the historical Jesus really did ask people not to divorce. There is no biblical sin in not divorcing (although all Jews expected that one would divorce a wanton woman).<sup>2</sup> Jesus taught what other Rabbis did: that God hates the man who divorces his wife and therefore “Do not divorce the first wife of your youth.”<sup>3</sup> He, however, in some sense rejects the

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<sup>2</sup> See Shamma Friedman, “Sorting Out the Wages of Adultery: Execution, Ordeal or Divorce,” in *Shoshannat Yaakov* (Secunda and Fine 2012), 101–04.

<sup>3</sup> *B.Git.* 9ob discusses such behaviors as bathing in the same place as the men:

“Such a one it is a religious duty to divorce, as it says, ‘because he has found some unseemly thing in her . . . and he sends her out of his house and she goes and becomes another man’s wife.’ (Deut 24:1–2) The text calls him ‘another’, implying that he is not the fellow of the first; the one expelled a bad woman from his house, and the other took a bad woman into his house. If the second deserves better he will also send her away, as it says, ‘and the latter husband hates her’ (Deut 24:2) and if not she will bury him, as it says, ‘or if the latter husband die’; (Deut 24:2) he deserves to die since the one expelled a wicked woman from his house and the other took her into his house. ‘For a hateful one put away’ (Mal 2:16)—R. Judah said: [This means that] if you hate her you should put her away. R. Yohanan says:

validity of divorce in his generation even though Jesus freely admits that Moses had given procedural instructions for divorce. We therefore want to know why, if Moses permitted divorce, Jesus does not allow it. And here we find a most remarkable explanation, so remarkable that I am inclined to see within it the genuine teaching of an historical Jesus.

*The Pharisees also came to him, testing him, and saying to him, Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause? And he answered and said to them: Have you not read (i.e., in Scripture) “that He who made [him] [yet] from the beginning male and female He had made them”? [Gen 1:27]<sup>4</sup> and said: Therefore, shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they—two—shall become one flesh [Gen 2:24]. In this way, they are no more two, but one flesh. What God has joined together let not man put asunder.<sup>5</sup> (Matt 19: 3–6)*

If Jesus had wanted to say at the outset that God had decreed marriage to be inviolable, why does he dwell on the story of God creating humans as male and

It means, he that sends his wife away is hated.... Rabbi Eleazar said: If a man divorces his first wife, even the altar sheds tears, as it says, ‘And this further you do, you cover the altar of the Lord with tears, with weeping and with sighing, insomuch that he regards not the offering any more, neither receives it with good will at your hand. Yet you say, wherefore? Because the Lord has been witness between you and the wife of your youth, against whom you have dealt treacherously, though she is your companion and the wife of thy covenant.’” (Mal 2:13–14.)

- 4 This is not meant to be a literal citation of Gen 1:27 but likely a Pharisaic explanation of the verse. There is an apparent contradiction in the verse's wording—"He created *him*" followed immediately by "he created *them*". Is it him (one) or them (two)? The answer is to read the verse properly "He created him out of an earlier creation—i.e. "male and female he made them". So this is what Jesus quotes (the passage is truncated and cites the bottom line) from a paraphrase of the verse known from a Pharisaic midrash. When did this second creation of joint "him" occur—when God said a man should "cleave to his wife and the two shall become one." (Gen 2:24)
- 5 MT has "and they shall become one flesh". The Gospel exegesis turns on the LXX, Sam. *Tg. Neofiti* and *Tg. Ps-J.* textual readings of Gen 2:24): "They *two* shall become *one* flesh". The end of Matthew's words (what God has joined together) is a precise understanding of the rendering of *Tg. Ps-J.* to Gen 2:24 which says "a man shall leave his father and his mother and *be joined together with his wife* (*vayithaber*)". The sequence of joining with his wife so the two become one flesh has a poetic touch to it which is used to good advantage in the Jesus homily. What is clearly the activity of the male (leaving home and joining to his wife) resulting in a single union is noted to be a divine command, *prescriptive*, rather than a common social custom, *descriptive*.

female (Gen 1:27)? He might have more succinctly and elegantly gone straight to the verse that states God ordained a man to be joined to his wife as one flesh (Gen 2:24), and that no one may separate them. However, if we look closely at the New Testament passage we will see a homily on the biblical story about the two sexes: namely, that through marriage two become *one* unit which is indissoluble. Jesus asks his audience to fulfill the divine will by resisting the rupture of divorce. Here are the details.

Jewish homilies are usually constructed around some textual oddity in the Hebrew Bible and this passage is no exception. The singular/plural (him/them) difficulty with Genesis 1:27 is well known and obvious to any close reader. We have to be alert and notice that the Greek of Matthew has dropped some words and has readjusted *hoti/ho poiēsas* (var. *ho ktisias*) *ap arxēs*... to read something like “Have you not read (i.e., in Scripture) that “he who made [we need emend to complete the sentence with a singular “*him*” as found in Scripture Gen 1:27a]—from the beginning male and female he had made *them*? ” (Gen 1:27). At first glance, the verse seems to contradict itself. (Gospel copyists apparently dropped the singular word “*him*” to avoid the blatant contradiction.). In Genesis “So God created *him*” (Gen 1:27a) is followed immediately afterwards by “male and female he made *them*” (Gen 1:27b). Jesus points out that there is indeed at first glance a blatant contradiction within these few words. Did God create *him* or *them*? Was the first human created singular or did he create several beings? (The King James Version preserves the contradiction while more modern translations tend to fudge it.) Jesus resolves the inner tension within the verse by explaining that the creation of the “male and female” in Scripture is followed by the injunction to cleave to one another, becoming one flesh (“*him*”). The key to unraveling the singular and plural confusion is the marital union, which transforms the plural “*them*” into a collective, and gender neutral “*him*,” which is singular. Hence, Jesus preaches, there is no contradiction in Scripture, which remains inerrant.

On the other hand, one can detect in rabbinic sources an alternate and opposite interpretation. Two different accounts of creation are at issue in Genesis: one in which the original singular Adam was androgynous, comprised of both male and female parts, and a second in which woman is separated out from man’s bone and flesh and formed into a distinct being. According to this rabbinic understanding the one became two, whereas for Jesus, the two became one.

Jesus utilizes an exegetical rule that “two statements look contrary until we find a third that resolves them” (*Mek. R. Yish.*, *Bo pisha 4*, and *Sipre Num., piska 58*). Yes, He created one; yes He created two, but another verse explains that there is no contradiction: at first there were two, and then God ordered

them to become one. The command that “one man and one woman be joined”—a man leaves his parents and cleaves to his wife (Gen 2:24)—was given to creation as no lesser an imperative than “Let there be light!” (Gen 1:3). So it is indeed true that “He made [a singular] him.” It is likewise true that “male and female He made them” in Gen 1:27. These seemingly contradictory assertions can be true simultaneously because marriage transforms the two into one in Gen 2:24. The homily concludes that God ordained marriage to be part of the natural order of creation—let no one undermine it. Therefore no man should divorce his wife—*quid est demonstratum*.

Now what makes this exegesis more effective than it might have been is that all the verses of the Jewish Bible that Matthew ascribes to Jesus are noted to be God’s very words as a structural reading of Genesis 2 will show. The thought of 2:18 “And the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him” is completed by 2:24 “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.” Five verses describe the delineation of woman from man which story severs the words of God so that the drama shows us Adam’s reaction to having a helpmate. What is important here is Jesus’ notice that God has ordained marriage; God and not Moses. This divine legislation is contrasted to Moses’ legislation sanctioning divorce. God’s words ought to be placed first as they are the ideal and Moses’ words are merely an accommodation albeit God consents to this decree.

As noted above, a Talmudic passage holds that the scriptural problem of creation of one versus creation of two (Gen 1:27) necessitates two accounts of creation. Identifying these dual creation stories requires some speculation. Jesus’ proposed resolution appears to have eluded the Rabbis, or seemed to be so at odds with biblical divorce legislation as not to have been an interpretive option.

We find in certain Babylonian Talmudic passages (*b. Ket.* 8a, *b. Ber.* 61a, *b. Eruv.* 18a) a vague teaching concerning God’s creation of humankind which aims to harmonize the tension between the creation of the primal human as one gender versus two genders inherent in Gen 1:27: At the beginning God created (them male and female) with the intention they be two but in the end indeed he (Adam) was only created to be one.<sup>6</sup> Rabbis would explain the need for duplicate blessings within the Jewish wedding ritual as Adam’s having been created as a hybrid male-female that God later separated into two (even if

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6 The words “with the intention they be” likely should be bracketed since they seem to be have been influenced in a very early stage of transmission by another ancient text, poorly preserved in *Midrash Aggadah* [Buber] Gen 1:1 and alluded to in *Gen. Rabbah* 12:15: “At the beginning God created [the world] with the intention it be by the power of justice.”

the ideal was one).<sup>7</sup> They drew upon the notion of two processes of formation. Clearly, the Pharisees were aware of the textual contradiction within Gen 1:27, and understood it to entail both a prior and a subsequent creation. Later teachers used or reworked these earlier materials for their own purposes. Jesus utilizes the same difficulty of *him/them* in support of his contention that the possibility of divorce was absent from the original divine plan when he decreed one man and one woman join together.

This brings us to Jesus' teaching of celibacy. On the one hand, the Matthean narrative portrays marriage as a slippery slope. While divinely ordained by God for mankind in the created world, marriage can lead to divorce, and ultimately, if remarriage after divorce occurs, to "adultery," according to Jesus' own definition. For those living on the cusp between the twilight of Mosaic legislation and the dawn of the new Kingdom, Jesus' radical recommendation of celibacy is presented as a safeguard which, if ignored, can lead to the dire consequence of adultery, according to Jesus' definition which will be operative in the coming Kingdom.

On the other hand, celibacy could also be viewed by Jesus as a positive model of spiritual existence, and the religious ideal for those able to control their passions. Even though abstaining from marriage may be the most desirable choice for those living in anticipation of "the Kingdom," Jesus may realize the demands of celibacy would not be accepted by the masses, and therefore limits his teaching of the ideal of celibacy to a select group of followers in a private setting.

### Commentary

*When Jesus finished these words, he left the Galilee and came to the region of Judea-across-the-Jordan (v. 1)*

The last eight words of v. 1, *eis ta horia tēs ioudaias "peran" tou iordanou*, refer to a region that is part of Transjordan, a literal translation of the Hebrew "ever" *ha-yarden*. The Roman administration had carved out a separate province in the Jordan Valley that they called "*Perea*". Herod Antipas, the tetrarch who succeeded his father, Herod, ruled this area (together with Galilee) and called it "Judea across the Jordan". The clear implication here is that Jesus followed the normal travel routes for Jews that bypassed the largely non-Jewish populations of "Samaria and Gentile territories" between Judea proper and the Galilee. When he arrived in the Jewish area across the Jordan he found an audience in the densely Jewish populated province.

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<sup>7</sup> The major evidence for the wording of our Talmudic texts derives from a tradition recited variously as that of Abbahu or Judah who lived centuries after the New Testament authors.

*Many crowds followed him and he healed them there. (v. 2)*

This is a stock scene occasioned by shifts in location where Jesus goes about his workaday trades: preaching and healing. As the crowds coalesce around Jesus, the stage is set for the Pharisees to challenge his controversial teachings.

*Pharisees came testing him: “Is it permitted for a person to divorce his wife for any cause?” (v. 3)<sup>8</sup>*

While the Gospel writer creates a moment of tension by implying that the Pharisees want to trap Jesus into showing his ignorance, there is nothing in the exchanges that indicates anything other than an interesting scholarly dialogue. The only contentiousness comes in Mark 10:5 and Matt 19:8, where Jesus excludes himself from those having the character defects that Mosaic divorce legislation addresses by its permissiveness. He accuses the Pharisees of having those weaknesses, and so of course they will miss the whole point unless he spells it out for them (which Matthew proceeds to do in vv. 4–6). Divorce legislation is found in Deut 24:1–4. The Book of Deut is noted by the Talmud to be Moses’ own words. The book begins with the report, “These be the words which Moses spoke to all Israel. . . .” So Jesus compares the accommodations of Moses for the Israelites with the ideals of God set forth at Creation.

The Pharisees (as the Gospels sees them) define the grounds for divorce in such a way that takes for granted that the response to sexual misbehavior must be formal dissolution of a union that no longer endures but allow the parties to remarry. So they ask Jesus what his attitude is toward divorce for more mundane reasons that Moses permitted but did not necessarily advocate. His answer is about run-of-the-mill divorces: they transgress the commandment inherent in God’s creation of human sexual unions in Genesis.

The Pharisees know that Jesus did not esteem the view of biblical legislation that once a divorce was concluded for reasons other than *porneia* (unfaithfulness) it was valid and allowed the people to marry others.<sup>9</sup> Two Jewish sources of the first century agree that Mosaic legislation permitted—but did not insist

8 The force of Greek *pasan* here is to say—“for any reason whatsoever.”

9 However, rabbis argued about the advisable grounds to initiate a divorce. The School of Shammai thought one was best advised to stay in a marriage unless the wife was unfaithful, the School of Hillel and other Rabbis saw no ill in leaving for almost any reason (*m. Git. 9:10*). But no rabbi would contest the validity of a properly issued divorce for any or no reason. The assumption, both for Jesus and the Rabbis, seems to be that we speak of monogamous marriages. Jesus was known to have taught that such was the ideal.

upon—divorce when there was any type of grievance. Philo (*Special Laws* 3.30) cites Moses as saying:

A woman having been divorced from her husband *under any pretense* whatever, and having married another, having again [been divorced or] become a widow, whether her second husband is alive or dead, still she must not return to her former husband, *but may be united to any man in the world* rather than to him, having violated her former ties which she forgot, and having chosen new allurements in the place of the old ones.

Josephus skillfully interweaves into his history the standard text of the Jewish divorce document in his day (which has largely remained the same in ours) into *Ant.* 4:253. Deut 24:1–4 is given in italics. The Septuagint is not much different from the Masoretic text (MT). I also compare with them citations from the *Masada Get* (MG).<sup>10</sup> Josephus seems to reflect this document's provisions in his paraphrase of the biblical verses dealing with divorce.

If one desires to be separated from the (MT: *it will be if she does not find favor in his eyes*) woman who dwells with him (MT: *when a man has taken a woman and cohabits with her*) “for whatever cause,” (MT: *on reason that he found in her annoyance<sup>11</sup> of some type*) and there are many such occurrences among people, let him confirm through writing (MT: *and he will give a bill of separation into her hand*) {MG: *this is given to you from me, a writ of divorce*}, that he will not have any further connection with her (MT: *and he sends her from his house*) {MG: *yea a document of departure*}. With this, his wife is empowered to go to dwell with another man (MT: *and leaves his house and goes to marry another man*) {MG: *with this you are empowered by your own volition to go and be the wife of any Jewish man that you desire*}. For prior to this [giving] she is in no way to be permitted [being married] (MG: *who was my wife prior to this [giving]*).<sup>12</sup> But

<sup>10</sup> See Pierre Benoit, Josef Milik and Roland de Vaux, *Les Grottes de Murabba'at* (1961) 2, 104–109. The document seems to be the last days of Masada (72 CE). See pp. 104–9. I use the Aramaic text of p. Mur 19 as printed in Tal Ilan, “On a Newly Published Divorce Bill from the Judaean Desert 135 C.E.” (1996), 198–199.

<sup>11</sup> Alternate possibility: promiscuous behavior of some kind (see *y. Git.* 9:10).

<sup>12</sup> That the writing and giving of the divorce document is to effect a compete break is signaled by the notice in the *get* that up to this moment she was my wife and at this moment of giving she is permitted to marry any one of her choosing. Josephus indicates the moment of divorce by stating what was prior and what is now and his language mirrors that of the standard instrument of divorce, the *get*.

if she is maltreated by this one also (*MT: and if this last one hate her and write her a document and send her from his house*) or upon the death of this one, (*MT: or if he died*) if the first one wants to remarry her she is in no way to be permitted to return to him. (*MT: then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again*).

Josephus seems to assert in *Ant.* 15:259 that “For it is (only) the man who is permitted by us to do this (i.e. dissolve a marriage), and not even a divorced woman, may marry again on her own initiative unless her former husband consents.” So read Markus and Wikgren in the Loeb edition. But this need for consent upon her remarriage contradicts what Josephus says above, “With this (document), his wife is empowered to go to dwell with another man.” Whiston gives *Ant.* xv, vii. 10 as “With us it is lawful for the husband to do so (i.e. dissolve a marriage), but a wife, if she departs from her husband, cannot marry another, unless her former husband put her away.” In checking the dictionaries if the text reads “*efientos*” the possible implication is the husband desires her to marry and so consents to another but if it reads “*afipientos*” the point is likely that he sends or puts her away through legal mechanisms. The two readings are almost synonymous but do carry somewhat different outcomes for our text and given the number of versions that agree with Whiston and also the fact that it corresponds to what we know of Jewish law and Scripture and Josephus himself it is best to accept it as accurate. Josephus criticizes Salome for initiating a divorce and points out that this is contrary to Jewish law. Only if she has received a document can she remarry as he pointed out elsewhere.

Josephus says he divorced his own wife because he was displeased with her behavior (*Vita* 426–7).<sup>13</sup> The upshot is that accepted practice and interpretation of Mosaic law permitted divorce “for any reason.” Matthew knows this.

*It was also said, whoever divorces his wife, let him give her an apostatcion (i.e., a certificate of divorce).*<sup>14</sup> (Matt 5:31)

Many commentators have erroneously inferred that the issue of divorce for adultery seems to be an issue for Matthew alone, and that he altered the reading here by tacking those words on to the existing tradition witnessed by Mark

<sup>13</sup> See also *Ben Sira* 25:29 (cf. *b. Yebam.* 63b).

<sup>14</sup> This is a shortened form of *biblion apostacion grapsai* (Mark 10:4). The terms for the divorce document in Greek and Jewish languages contain the idea of document of separation like the *sefer keritut* in Deut 24:1–2.

and Luke.<sup>15</sup> Mark 10:2 is missing the words “for any reason” and also “except for sexual immorality”:

Let us examine the flow of the dialogue:

And Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”

There is no mention here of any grounds for divorce. Jesus’ response comes in Mark 10:11:

And he said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery against her.”

Matt 19:9 qualifies or clarifies (we do not know which) this idea in the Gospel traditions:

And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.<sup>16</sup>

Many modern commentators assume that the words “except for sexual immorality” were appended by Matthew onto a pre-existent Jesus tradition, that his text has been doctored, and that originally divorce *per se* was a real issue with no qualifying exception whatsoever. So these commentators claim Matthew alone makes an exception in regarding divorce as a righteous action in the case of sexual immorality. He thereby qualifies the original tradition. On the other hand, we find in Matt 1:19 “[A]nd her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.” Are the words *except for sexual immorality* original to Gospel tradition or not?

In other words, Matthew sees the issue at dispute as being between advocates of divorce *for any reason* (the Pharisees) versus those who justify it solely in the case of *sexual immorality* (Jesus). It would seem Matthew is unaware of a need to justify the exception and it likely was part of his Gospel tradition.

<sup>15</sup> Paul records Jesus was opposed to divorce. 1 Cor 7.10–11: “To the married I give charge, not I but the Lord, that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, let her remain single or else be reconciled to her husband)—and that the husband should not divorce his wife.” Luke 16:18 maintains “Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”

<sup>16</sup> See my commentary above to Matthew 5:32.

The only question to which Matthew provides an answer is: if Moses permitted divorce how is it that he, Jesus, forbids it? That is the issue at hand and not his teaching on adultery as an exception to his rule.

It could be suggested that Jesus' position is not at all radical. Why can Jesus not teach that men should not divorce a wife unless she has been unfaithful? There is nothing forbidding divorce anywhere in the Torah or oral tradition. What is radical is Jesus' teaching that normal divorce, even if for an illegitimate reason, will not effect a separation allowing remarriage. No known Jew ever taught such a thing. But I do not wish to dwell on a myriad of commentaries but rather to offer my own perspective. The Gospels are best understood to mean that Pharisees came to test Jesus with the question, "Is it permitted for a person to divorce his wife (as Deuteronomy allows)? Divorce is understood to be "a formal procedure" in which the wife is presented with a document permitting her to remarry, as stated in Deut 24:2 as read by Josephus' and Philo's rendition (all above). The view of Jewish rabbinic tradition is found in *m. Git.* which 9:1 begins "Whoever divorces his wife . . ." and then in *mishnah 3:*

The essence of the *get* (divorce document) is the [Hebrew] declaration, "behold you are permitted to any man". Rabbi Yehudah says [in Aramaic]—"By this document given to you from me; namely, a writing of *teiruchin*, and an instrument of *shevuqin*<sup>17</sup> and a document of *peturin*, you are able to be married to any man you wish."

The central *raison d'être* of the document is to enable the wife's remarriage. Josephus (*Ant.* 4:252) stressed this in summing up the effect of the divorce: "For without this [giving of the document] she was not permitted [to marry another]." Thus I suggest we ignore the New Testament commentators who have been misled by the weight of Talmudic exegesis debating grounds for divorce, and think the issues are the same for the Gospels: any old excuse versus adultery. This is not the case.

When Matthew says Pharisees came testing Jesus, asking "Is it permitted for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?", he realizes their question is whether, in Jesus' view, divorce is allowed, period. For all Pharisees if not all Jews, the point of the divorce is to enable the wife's remarriage, if her husband is dissatisfied with her. "For any cause" refers to "optional" divorce for any reason other than her sexual immorality." In this case divorce would be required, even

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<sup>17</sup> For the antiquity of the terminology here see Shamma Friedman, "The Jewish Bill of Divorce—From Masada Onwards," in *Halakhah in the Light of Epigraphy* (Baumgarten 2011), 175–154.

by Jesus.<sup>18</sup> Matthew's reading might be best seen as the authentic version that fills in the other accounts, rather than disputing them.

*He replied, "Have you not read that He who created [him] from the beginning made them male and female?"<sup>19</sup> And it said, "On this account a person will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will be one flesh"<sup>20</sup> So that they are no longer two, but one flesh. What God joined together, let no person separate. (vv. 4–6)*

According to Jesus, Deut 24 describes divorce procedure but does not justify it. Instead it represents a concession after the fact, undermining what God himself had intended marriage to be. When He created the sexes and ordained their permanent union, He defined marriage as eternal and not to be dissolved. Jesus infers from the Torah, especially the LXX (also Samaritan and Palestinian Targums) that *two* who become one (MT leaves the word "two" implied) is a positive command to the natural order. The positive command has a negative corollary (the Rabbis called this *lav haba min ha'aseh*), namely, "let no person separate."

While the Rabbis regarded marital rules laid out in Genesis as affirming both marriage and adultery laws as binding on all humanity (*b. Sanh.* 58a), they did not use them to override Mosaic divorce legislation. Jesus might have agreed, but in his generation, he seems to have preached permanent marriage as the normative human condition before the serpent's interference brought about the fall of humanity, and he therefore would impose it, if he could, as a higher standard to be adhered to on the brink of humanity's return to Eden in the final generation.

*They said to him, "Then why did Moses command to give her a writ of divorce and to put her away?" (v. 7)*

18 *M. Ketub.* 3:5 remarks that we are commanded to have suitable wives and no one should stay married to someone who is sexually frivolous (not adulterous—better manuscripts read *zima* while printed texts have *ervah*) or not suitable to join the Jewish nation. *Y. Git.* 9:10 noted the wording of Deut 24:1–2 suggested that even where divorce was required due to unfaithful behavior (*ervah*) in a first marriage, the force of "and she marry another man" was to underscore that the divorce document permitted her to remarry a second husband.

19 LXX Gen 1:27. Cf. Mark 10:6: "God . . . made them male and female."

20 LXX Gen 2:24 Cf. Mark 10:7; 1 Cor 6:16; Eph. 5:31: "On this account a person will leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife and the two will be one flesh."

If divorce is against God's design for creation, the Pharisees ask, why did Moses include the explicit provision for divorce in the Torah? Matthew accepts the widely held opinion that Mosaic law states that if a man finds something about his wife that he does not like and he decides to be rid of her, he can write his wife *biblion apostasiou kai dōsei eis tas xeiras autēs kai exapostelei autēn*—“a writ of divorce, and give it into her hand and send her away (from his house)” (LXX Deut 24:1). Matt 19:7 paraphrases this as *dounai biblion apostasiou kai apolusai autēn*: “give a writ of divorce and send her away.” If marriage was intended by God to be a permanent union between a man and a woman, why would the Torah provide detailed instructions that are to be followed if and when the husband chooses to dissolve it? The question is a fair one. Nevertheless, the crowd of listeners seems prepared to accept Jesus' teaching concerning the eternity of the bond of marriage, if the challenge of the apparent permissiveness of Mosaic divorce law can be met.

This form of debate that ensues in the Gospel—a biblical verse requiring a specific response when that response seems contrary to a general principal—was very popular among rabbinic sages: “You argue there can be no x—but, on the other hand, maybe there can be, for Scripture says x?” Retort: “x is to be explained away in some fashion.” In the Babylonian Talmudic era, we find some seventy cases of contradictory points that need to be harmonized “[A]nd yet it is written”—e.g. *b. Ber. 6b. T. Shebu'ot 3:8* provides an example of this debate format:

“[A]nd he was a witness” (Lev 5:1)

[Teacher] “This verse refers to 2 witnesses [not one].”

[Student] “Only on your authority the verse refers to two witnesses, but then why not take it literally as one witness?”

[Teacher] “The Torah has already said: ‘One witness shall not establish anything’ (Deut 19:15), meaning (and we can explain away the ostensible meaning of Scripture) when the Torah just says ‘witness,’ it always refers to a group of two [and not one] unless the Torah states explicitly ‘one.’”

Similarly the Gospel will resolve the apparent contradiction between Genesis's depiction of marriage as indissoluble and Deuteronomy's assertion that a marital relationship can be terminated by a writ of divorce. Like Josephus,<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> See Feldman's *Josephus's Interpretation of the Bible* (1999), 39, which discusses my article, “*Josephus as Exegete*” in which I argue that for Josephus, Moses was an active participant in the formulation of the Law and not merely a copyist (pp. 25–26). Feldman cites

Jesus here considers Moses as the author of this Deuteronomic legislation, as there is nothing in the biblical texts indicating the legislation is given by God. According to Jesus, permission to divorce is merely a concession to human weakness:

*He said to them, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because of your stubbornness, but from the beginning it was not like this.”* (v. 8)

Jesus explains that Moses had only reluctantly allowed divorce, realizing people had stubborn, undisciplined hearts, unwilling to bend to the Divine demand of enduring marital commitment once physical attraction had ceased. This concession was intended to regulate human sexual urges that fell far short of the ideal. The Torah of Moses prescribed rules when it could not proscribe reality. Analogous reasoning is found in the Talmudic justification (*b. Qidd.* 21b) of Moses' permitting Israeliite soldiers to live with women captured in war (Deut 21:10–11): it is permitted as a concession to the *yetzer hara*, the lustful urges of the heart. The maxim covering such cases of concession was “Better to eat the meat of a dying animal which you permit to be slaughtered than to have them eat the meat of a dying animal of which you prohibit the slaughter.” If you do not find a way to permit people to do certain things legally, they will do them illegally.<sup>22</sup> The New Testament generally ascribes everything in the Jewish Bible to Moses which is not explicitly noted to have been said by God. This was also the view of Josephus.

In this passage we meet the counterpart to Matt 5:31–32—yes, Moses permitted something because the flesh is weak, but at the time of creation, man was not weak. Jesus argues for the need in the last generation before the *Eschaton* to return to the Edenic condition when, according to his reading, divorce did not exist. In the earlier teaching in Matthew 5:31–32, remarriage of either the husband or the wife after divorce is condemned as equally adulterous.<sup>23</sup>

additional evidence that backs up my claim. Deut as a whole is ascribed to Moses. The Gospel's contrast between God's commandments and Moses' legislation does not mean the latter must not be followed. It does mean that a scrupulous person will, in the first instance, heed God's original word. No Jew doubts that God legislated every law in the Torah, according to Josephus (*Apion* 1, 42).

<sup>22</sup> Widely cited by early scholars. See response in *Afarqasta de-Ania*, vol. 3; *Yoreh Deah*, 191.

<sup>23</sup> Most likely, the Damascus Document (CD 4.20–21) does not proscribe divorce as do Matt 9:6 and Mark 10:9. CD 4.20–21 states: In “sexual immorality” (we include) taking two wives in their lives, while the foundation of creation is Male and female he created them (Gen 1:27). The issue in the Damascus Document text is not divorce, although it is possible, albeit not very likely, that it could involve remarriage, and so might relate to

*But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of her sexually immoral behavior, causes her to commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery himself.*

In this passage the man is author of the woman's sin. We have to assume that the point is she commits "adultery," as does her husband when she remarries since, according to Torah law, she is free to do so; the choice of whether or not to marry again is hers. Matthew begs us to make sense of his cryptic words. What can "adultery" mean here, if anything actual, and what legal responsibility does the divorcing husband bear in Jesus' view? For Jesus the Mosaically permitted "adultery" of remarriage is "adultery" nonetheless. The man who causes this sin will be judged by God, rendering verdicts justly and admitting to His kingdom only those who are free of sin and have not caused others to stumble. Hence the Torah's injunction, "*And when she is departed out of his house, she may go and be another man's wife*" (Deut 24:2), is a concession to the sinful heart of the divorcer, who denies the relationship of the married couple as God originally designed it to be. The generation standing on the threshold of the Kingdom ought to eschew such sinful concessions.

*But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife except on the grounds of sexual immorality and then marries another commits adultery. (v. 9)*

We might conjecture that since divorce is the sole prerogative of the male according to Jewish law, the onus is upon the husband to prevent the sin of divorce. The woman has no primary responsibility, which is why Matthew 19 pays no attention to the wife's role in divorce, unless she has been unfaithful. The sin of divorce is a man's problem.

We need to assume here a dichotomy between Mosaic legislation based on mediating and balancing divine ideals and pragmatic human realities, and Jesus' insistence that divine ideals are embedded in a truly absolute law applicable in the uppermost regions of God's domain where there can be no compromise. This view resembles the heavenly absolute Torah of the early Kabbalists, as posited in Ramban's commentary to the Torah and *Sefer Hasidim*. The heavenly law has not been filtered to address human social circumstances, since it represents the divine mysteries.

For Jesus, refraining from divorce is not simply a matter of legality. It is a matter of spiritual readiness for the Kingdom. The absolute "adultery" at

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Matt 5:32. Most competent scholars today, however, see the sole referent to be polygamy, and irrelevant to the issue of remarriage.

issue for Jesus cannot be adjudicated through human courts, which are programmed to follow a code of revealed law that has been adjusted to accommodate human foibles—permitting divorce and even sanctioning remarriage. We need to read between the lines. The blueprint for marriage was set forth in God's ideal plan, before woman was pronounced subservient to man at the “judgment in Eden” and therefore in need of a husband.<sup>24</sup> The ideal arrangement precedes human sin and predates the Mosaic Torah, and so preempts the universal decree sentencing all human beings to death. The heavenly law restores the world to the Edenic state of being that existed prior to human sin and mortality.

Perhaps beyond the threshold of the idyllic future Kingdom, where there is neither sin nor death, there will likewise be no need to procreate. But this Genesis interpretation in Matt 19 encounters problems as it moves from anti-divorce teachings supported by Gen 2:24 (divorce not being in the original ideal marriage plan) to teachings advocating celibacy, which contradict Gen 2:24, overlooking or ignoring that man and woman were commanded to be “one flesh” while still in Eden. Without marriage, as divinely ordained in Gen 2:24, people would live in opposition to their created nature in Eden. According to Matthew, saintly people should endeavor to do just that on earth; a truly holy person needs to heed God's absolute will for those above nature, capable of resisting the baser part of human drives.

This passage is not entirely independent of the substance and structure of Chapter 5, where the form of “adultery” that is still considered permissible while not yet on the cusp of the Kingdom, now needs to be outlawed, in order to accord with a higher standard of *mishnat hasidut*—a stricter law code than that taught to the masses. I do not think there needs to be any tension between the teachings on divorce in Matt 19 and those in Matt 5. Both sources look at the institution of divorce as leading to evil consequences, since subsequent remarriage may become desirable for social, economic and carnal reasons. Matthew has done well to hold this teaching to the end of his discussion of divorce.

We consider *b. Soṭah* 19b:

Biblical verses never begin with discussions of after the fact accommodations.

Rashi explains:

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<sup>24</sup> Gen 3:16: “Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.”

Normally Scriptures do not begin by addressing cases of non-conformance to the law but begin with the proper sequence to be followed. Only afterwards might Scripture add things to enable some kinds of extraordinary exegesis to find remedies for infractions after the fact.

Matthew also follows this progression. In Mark 10:3–10, Jesus teaches his view of adultery only to his disciples, in the privacy of a house.

*His disciples said to him, “If this is the situation of a person with his wife, it is not useful to marry!”* (v. 10)

How this follows from all that has preceded it is quite baffling. Jesus has just extolled marriage as being a prime directive at the time of Creation. There is no shortage of Jewish texts that address the duty of procreation and marriage (e.g. *m. Yebam.* 6:6). This radical Jesus teaching discouraging marriage seems to belong to a critique of marriage that has been bridged into a secondary motif about divorce and remarriage. Since Paul understands the link between marriage and divorce, and regards celibacy as the most certain means of avoiding divorce, the reports of Jesus having taught this must have begun quite early. The exegetical juxtaposition of Gen 2:24 concerning marriage as a divine command and part of the order of nature with the statements condemning marriage seem too awkward for the quick minded Matthew. Matthew is the only Gospel writer to address the issue. Perhaps the other Gospels might have been too embarrassed to record these matters. The logic seems to be that if marriage leads to divorce, and divorce to remarriage (adultery), then it may be best not to marry at all.

It is true that some Sages considered marriage to be a burden that interfered with devotion to Torah. Consider the model of the celibate scholar Shimon ben Azzai who, according to Talmudic accounts (*b. Yebam.* 63b and *t. Yebam.* 8:7), refused to marry for spiritual reasons. He is quoted as saying, “What can I do? My soul thirsts for Torah” (*b. Yebam.* 63b). His devotion to God’s Torah precluded a marital relationship, although he recommended it for others of a different temperament. It is also true that the Rabbis saw Moses’ need to be ritually pure as necessitating his separation from his wife. Sexual activity causes a temporary state of ritual impurity, and Moses had to remain ritually pure at all times so as to be able to communicate directly with God. *Tanh. Exod Tzav* 13 discusses how male Israelites did not go near a woman for three days prior to the theophany at Sinai. However, no Jewish text views celibacy as a means of avoiding divorce. And indeed, if marriage is ordained by the natural order, how can Jesus advocate against it?

To find this line of reasoning in Matthew's account, one would need to separate Matthew's instrumental view of the prohibition of divorce as guarding against remarriage and adultery from the view of celibacy as enabling an elevated state of spirituality. The verse "*If this is the situation of a person with his wife, it is not useful to marry!*" might argue against the approach that celibacy is of value in its own right in Matthew. However, the following verse suggests another possibility.

*He said to them, "Not everyone accepts this message, but those to whom it is given."* (v. 11)

During the persecutions of Hadrian, the Romans were determined to diminish, if not totally annihilate, the seed of Abraham. Jewish scribes determined that the Jewish legal system should have demanded that Jewish men and women abstain from marrying, but did not. As recalled by Rabbi Yishmael (*t. Soṭah*, end of chapter 15), the Rabbis at that time considered publicly calling for celibacy in order to avoid the suicidal and "martyrrous" consequences to which marriage could lead during these persecutions. Saul Lieberman, in his *Tosefta Kifshuta* commentary to *t. Soṭah* 15, thinks this passage seems obscure to us because the details were painfully well known to the intended audience of these teachings, without need for further elaboration or clarification. Nevertheless, because the Rabbis, realizing that human nature was such that the ruling would not, indeed could not, have been accepted by the masses, it remained a "silent-ruling."

While celibacy remained an option open to perceptive people who might voluntarily choose to desist from marriage on their own, it was preferable to leave people to their own devices in dealing with the consequences to which marriage might lead (i.e. suicide and martyrdom) rather than invite the flagrant contravention of a high court ruling of the Sanhedrin, had the ban on marriage actually been promulgated.<sup>25</sup> The exact circumstances under which this curious Talmudic discussion took place, and even the textual readings themselves, are matters for speculation, but there is one conclusion that is agreed upon with certainty in all references to this discussion:<sup>26</sup> if people were unable to observe a law that, in effect, barred them from marital activity, they would give it no heed. Understanding this, the sense of the Sages was that it

<sup>25</sup> See end of *b. B. Bat.* 60b.

<sup>26</sup> See the discussion of *t. Soṭah* 15 in S. Lieberman *Tosefta Kifshuta* v. 8, *Soṭah*, (1973), 772 and note his Talmudic sources and further reflections of scholars.

was preferable to remain silent on an issue rather than have large numbers of people ignoring and flagrantly transgressing a decree.

One possible way of understanding Jesus' words here is that marriage is forbidden only for those able to withstand the pressure of sexuality. Consequently, due to pragmatic considerations, no public teaching or decree, intended to be binding upon all Jews, would ensue that mandated celibacy. Jesus therefore teaches celibacy only in a private setting, and only to special people who, like his disciples, are capable of accepting a higher standard as binding upon themselves. Ideally this standard should be normative for everyone, but is not imposed on those who cannot and would not accept it. Why publicly decree something large numbers will be forced to abrogate? Marriage is a practical institution, even if it falls short of the ideal spiritual state. So Jesus' teaching of celibacy remains a matter of *mishnat hasidut*, imposed only upon a small group of the pious who can abide by it. In a similarly protective fashion, Matthew frames Jesus' teaching of celibacy as a safeguard against adultery (i.e. in God's eyes) resulting from divorce, which in turn is a consequence of allowing marriage. In the end, however, Jesus' opposition to marriage remains a "silent ruling" because most of his followers would not be able to endure celibacy.

On the other hand, it could be argued that Jesus' recommendation to forgo marriage does not stem from his teaching on divorce, but rather derives from his teaching that forgoing marriage is a means of achieving a closer link to God. Marriage is the realistic and the acceptable norm for the masses. The negative consequences of divorce, *viz.* remarriage and adultery (as defined by Jesus), are not really the reason for this teaching, but rather some higher positive call for the select few to achieve higher levels of closeness to God. The connection of celibacy to marriage and divorce discussions may be only a rhetorical ploy in the Gospel, which is never intended to be the real rationale for eschewing marriage. The motivation for celibacy lies in the spiritual vision of the nature of the Kingdom for Jesus' followers.

*There are eunuchs who were born this way from their mothers' womb, there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by human beings, and there are eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. Let whoever is able to receive this receive it. (v. 12)*

There are two possible interpretations of the phrase "making themselves eunuchs": figurative and literal. While some commentators insist on the former, I argue that Jesus is not only referring to celibacy here, but to actual castration through genital mutilation. Here is my thinking as I look at Jewish sources. In the literal sense we find that it violates no prohibition if *one makes*

*oneself into*<sup>27</sup> an ascetic (*yahid*) through excessive fasting and deprivations—except if it is for the purpose of garnering praise and admiration, in which case it would be entirely forbidden. Hence we see that “make oneself into” is an expression meaning “act the role of” in a very literal sense. So then in actuality the person who “makes himself” never was a “*yahid*,” which requires an official appointment, but he physically undertakes the literal deprivations associated with that role. On the other hand we do find castration used in the literal sense. An example from a medieval work, *Sefer ha-Hinukh*, is most instructive:

One is enjoined not to create any disturbance in the reproductive organs in any way, as happens when kings castrate males to guard their harems. The lower classes [of Gentiles] find this an attractive way to frequent the king’s table and to become *financially improved*. But we, being a holy people, our view is that anyone made a eunuch by human agency is disqualified from forming any union with a Jewish woman by dwelling together with her in a matrimonial household. We are to hold ourselves very far from such despicable people. In respect to the above considerations, the Torah distinguishes between those who are genetically disturbed through human agency and those who were formed so through heavenly agency. (*Mitzvah* 579, discussion of Deut 23:2)<sup>28</sup>

Here “making himself a eunuch” is meant literally. The Gospel speaker, intuiting the directive against humanly inflicted castration, appears to shake off the thrust of the Jewish mind-set—future, modern, medieval and ancient—specifying not to do it for self-profit but for the *sake of the kingdom heaven*. He thereby agrees with the sense of the prohibition against castration for self-promotion, qualifying why this literal castration should be permitted. Still, it is doubtful any faithful Jew would be happy with this pronouncement.<sup>29</sup> But the Gospel does mean what it says—eunuchs for the sake of heaven are an ideal for those who would willingly mutilate themselves.

<sup>27</sup> “Makes oneself” is the term verbatim. The passage is found in *b.Ta'an.* 10b.

<sup>28</sup> This wordy treatise is explained by *Responsa (she'elot uteshuvot): Ataret Paz* (Rabbi Pinhas Zbibi, Jerusalem, 1968, Part 1, *Even ha-Ezer* s. 2):

[One who castrates himself] through human agency, is forbidden to come into the congregation. [i.e. to convert to Judaism] The prohibition addresses a man such that *he not to make himself into a eunuch for the sake of employment* in a palace.”

<sup>29</sup> Josephus, *Ant.* 4:290 (compare *Apion* 2:270), equates castration with murder of the unborn. The Talmuds and Midrashim find the practice loathsome and the issue of castrating animals was a matter of contention in later times.

The argument which clinches the seriousness of the order, and allows us to not see this as a matter of teaching through exaggerated shock tactic or didactic rhetoric is the final sentence: *Let whoever is able to receive this receive it.* “To receive” means to commit oneself to abiding by a psychologically and physically disquieting teaching. So, for example, one who commits to abiding by the economically severe rules of interest for lenders and borrowers equally is said to “accept the yoke of heaven (*meqabel ‘ol shamayim*)” (*Sipra Behar* 5:5). One who commits to fasting “accepts upon himself a fast (*meqabel ‘alav ta‘anit*)” and one who accepts becoming a *nazirite* is also *meqabel alav nezirut* (*b. Nazir* 8b). The word “acceptance” refers to a commitment to a set of regulations that the majority of people find near impossible but still is the ideal norm. Sometimes it refers to voluntary compliance and at other times to mandatory compliance. In either case, the act is seen as heroic. The use of this word for self-mutilation for the sake of heaven must been seen as asking for compliance among those who can manage it. Were it otherwise, the verse saying “few can accept the teaching” makes no sense—anyone can adhere to something which has no real consequences.

*Then children were brought to him so that he might lay hands on them and pray for them. His disciples rebuked them. (v. 13)*

In this passage, the disciples apparently believe that Jesus would prefer to help the throng of sick adults and that children should not have priority.<sup>30</sup> They had taken his teachings about “little ones” (Matt 10:42 and Luke 18:17) as a dramatic metaphor, referring to adults who were the humble constituency who clung to Jesus’ teachings, as in Mark 10:14–15:

“[F]or the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them.

One of the most interesting passages in a *baraita* is the shocking request for blessing to be given by the mortal and high priest, Yishmael, to the Divinity in the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur (*b. Ber.* 7a). To this day, parents ask hasidic masters to give blessings to their children and offer prayers that they grow up to be healthy, learned and righteous.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> The position of the disciples here seems reasonable.

<sup>31</sup> In the Responsa called *She’elot u-Teshuvot Yehaveh Da’at* (part 5, s. 14), one finds a list of citations from many works discussing the propriety of laying both hands on the heads

*Jesus said, “Let the children alone, and do not prevent them from coming to me, for the heavenly kingdom belongs to such as these.” He laid hands on them and left from there. (vv. 14–15)*

Jesus protests the philosophic and speculative thinking that challenges blind, simple faith. Mark and Luke agree. At this point, however, we discover that the phrase “like a little child” was indeed intended to give children priority. Followers can be compared to children because children are the very stuff that the Kingdom is made of. “Children” is not just a metaphoric expression but the standard for the follower to emulate. More to the point here, however, is that Jesus does not even give the others his blessings, just the children. The scene ends. What follows is a series of exchanges regarding the entrance fee required in order to pass through the turnstile into the Next World.

*Look, one person came to him and said, “Good teacher, what good thing must I do in order to have eternal life?” (v. 16)*

The questioner seems to be asking, if he must choose a single good thing to do in order to attain life everlasting, what should that be? In Jewish literature, when the question is posed, “What should a person do . . . ? [in order to achieve some worthy goal or be saved from the final judgment],”<sup>32</sup> the answer is invariably to study Torah, do good deeds and give charity.<sup>33</sup> Rabbinic literature deals

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of the receiver of the blessing as is the general custom. These pages reveal the prevailing custom, past and present, of righteous scholars blessing grooms and disciples with their hands (and parents blessed children in this way), but there are no indications that Rabbis generally gave such blessings to children. Hasidic rabbis did and still do. My neighbor in Toronto relates that when he was a child, he could not retain even enough information to read. His father brought him to a hasidic Rebbe, and since then he recalls everything by heart. Shimon Peres, the former president of the State of Israel, proudly related that his grand-father brought him, when he was a young child of 7, for a blessing to Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan (*Hafetz Haim*) the outstanding non-hasidic pious teacher of prewar Europe.

<sup>32</sup> E.g., minor tractates *Kallah* 1:23 and *Kallah Rabbati* 2:11; b. *B. Bat.* 10b; b. *Sanh.* 98b; b. *Nidah* 70b.

<sup>33</sup> The question seems to challenge a widespread notion of meritizing eternal life by virtue of merit or belonging to the nation of Israel (*m. Sanh.* 10:1), the doctrine of the merits of the patriarchs. I have discussed this latter doctrine at length in connection with Paul’s usage of the term in “What Makes Exegesis Either Christian or Jewish?” (Basser 2006). But there is another widespread view that shares much with our verse in Matthew. *B. Avod. Zar.* 18a tells us Rabbi Hanina ben Teradyon defied the Roman ban on Torah study. Yosi ben Kisma asked him why he did so. “Rabbi, what else can I do to enter the Next World?” Came the reply, “Have not opportunities for *good deeds* come your way?” In other words, certain good deeds can provide an entry to eternal life.

with this question in the context of defining *ben olam haba*—someone who is granted eternal life (*hayei olam*) in the Next World. In discussions that address this question, it is not the performance of any one particular commandment, but the cultivation of certain positive habits that include good manners, self-discipline and diligence in study, showing respect to elders, reviewing lessons and the like.<sup>34</sup> The phrase occurs as a description of the qualities of those who occupy themselves with Torah study (*b. Šabb.* 10a). It would appear these teachings addressed areas of personal and interpersonal conduct that were being neglected. For Jesus, these areas seem to have included the major social commandments in the Torah.

*He said to him, “Why do you call me good? There is only One who is good—God. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.”* (v. 17)

Saying this distances Jesus from God as totally Other and the absolute Goodness to whom no human can be compared. This verse implies that one should keep all of commandments in the Torah, while the next appears to be a corollary intended to qualify that answer. Perhaps the latter stems from a time when Christianity sought to preach a social gospel for gentile converts, while v. 17 still considers all commandments in the Torah as being of equal weight.

Jewish Christians seem to have treated the Decalogue with more earnestness than other commandments. The Talmud (*b. Ber.* 12a) remarks that the custom to say the Ten Commandments outside of the Temple precincts was abolished because of issues with *minim*. Rashi (uncensored texts) surmised that when the Rabbis wanted to establish the recital of the Ten commandments in the *Shema* liturgy, they worried that the Christians (“followers of Jesus”) would teach the ignorant masses that nothing in the Torah was true except for the Decalogue, heard directly from God at Sinai. This verse in Matthew does not allow for that concern, while the next one does.

*He said to him, “Which?” Jesus said, “The ones, ‘Do not murder’<sup>35</sup> (Exod 20:13), ‘Do not commit adultery’ (Exod 20:14), ‘Do not steal’ (Exod 20:15), ‘Do not bear false witness’ (Exod 20:16), ‘Honor your father and your mother’ (Exod 20:12), and ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’ (Lev 19:18).”* (vv. 18–19)

<sup>34</sup> See minor tractate *Kallah Rabbati* 5:8; *b. Meg.* 28b.

<sup>35</sup> These are commandments #6 and #7 in the order of the LXX Decalogue Exod 20:12–13; while MT has the reverse order where #6 refers to adultery and #7 to murder.

The Gospel relates four negative “do not” commandments in the order they are given in the Masoretic text: #6 murder, #7 adultery, #8 theft, #9 bearing false witness. The LXX has the order: adultery, theft, murder and bearing false witness. Jeremiah’s list of grievous sins (Jer 7:9–10) includes “steal, murder, and commit adultery, and swear falsely.” Moreover the Rabbis counted three cardinal sins: idolatry, adultery, and murder (*b. Sanh.* 74a).

Omitted from this list of the Ten Commandments are the prohibitions that are theological, rather than social: idolatry, taking God’s name in vain and working on the Sabbath, the day of rest. The Rabbis understood that Gentiles honored parents and respected their court systems. The commandments prohibiting murder, adultery, and theft were meant to apply to them but their cultures had no commitment to these principles.<sup>36</sup> In my earlier work on these issues (2000, 86ff), I discussed *T. Sheb.* 3:6 in which I found a Rabbi and a Christian debating the wisdom of isolating the commandments concerning honoring parents, murder, adultery, theft, bearing false witness and coveting (absent from the list in Matthew). The list appears to have been aimed at strengthening areas of observance that were weakest. Pliny remarks that, at the end of the first century, Christians pledged to refrain from theft, adultery and breach of faith.

Then the Gospel cites a positive commandment: #5—honoring parents<sup>37</sup>—and then jumps from the Decalogue to Lev 19:8: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. In the discussion noted above, I cited Romans 13:9–10 (adultery, murder, theft, coveting—perhaps an alternate LXX order) and Paul’s notion of “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (cf. Lev 19:18). James 2:8–11 lists adultery and murder in the same order as Matthew and MT and refers to “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” as the “Royal Law.” In the Jewish Midrash *Pitron Torah* to Lev 19:8, *Qedoshim*, we find the listed order as follows: taking the Name in vain; murder; theft; false witnessing and coveting. And most

<sup>36</sup> See *Mek. R. Yish., Yitro, Hodesh*, par. 5; and *Sipre Deut., piska* 343.

<sup>37</sup> One might speculate here. The reward for honoring parents is “long-life” (understood as eternal life) and hence its inclusion in the list exposes the deeper intent behind the choice of passages: Honor your father and your mother that you may live long on the land that the Lord your God is giving you. *B. Qidd.* 39b remarks on the near parallel in Deut 5:5 “that you may live long” means “in the world of eternal duration.” The following text comes from the late text of *Bereshit Rabbati* which preserves many curious traditions:

And as for “Honor your father and your mother in order that your days will be lengthened” (Exod 20:12)—It is to teach you that all who honor their father and their mother are assured of a place in the next world. This is so even if one is not a student of the Torah—except that one must be free of idol worship, adultery, murder, slander, desecrating God’s name and desecrating the Sabbath in public (see Gen., *Vayishlah*, p. 146).

remarkably, these are also said to be fulfilled by “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:18), as is the case with the *Book of Didache* (chap. 2). I concluded observance of negative commandments is simply “not doing” bad things and, as such, cannot be rewarded. The above passages make the point that the injunction of “love of neighbor” is a positive commandment that gives fulfillment to the negative list.

*The young man said to him, “I kept all these things. What do I still lack?”*  
(v. 20)

The obvious answer ought to be—you lack nothing. And indeed it is, but now we move out of simply gaining admission to the Next World to the highest level of spiritual qualification—perfection. And the questioner implies just that: I have qualified for the entry level, but I want to do better. But Jesus’ response is no, you have not qualified.

*Jesus said to him, “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have a treasure in the heavens,<sup>38</sup> then come here and follow me.” When the young man heard the message, he went away in pain, for he had many possessions. (vv. 21–22)*

The radical teachings of Jesus in this chapter, meant for an ascetic recluse, include no marriage, no sex, no worldly possessions and the abandoning of family.

Jesus’ demand for celibacy was explicitly two-tiered, intended for some but not for others. Poverty as requirement for piety also seems two tiered. The sequence of teachings—the prohibition of divorce, the recommendation of celibacy and the requirement of generosity to the point of impoverishment—seem not to be haphazard but of the same unit. Josephus describes the piety of the Essenes as follows (*Ant.* 18:20–22):

(20) . . . all things are held in common; so that a rich man enjoys no more of his own wealth than he who has nothing at all. There are over four thousand men that live in this way. (21) Neither do they have wives in the community nor own slaves, thinking that the latter tempts men to be

<sup>38</sup> On the expression “treasures in heaven,” see my comments above to 6:19–20. Y. Peah 1:1 informs us that the treasure of deeds is for the next world while that of material wealth remains in this world. For the expression “follow me,” see comments to 4:19; 8:21–22; 9:9–10; 10:37–38.

unjust and the former opens the way to domestic quarrels; but as they live by themselves, they minister one to another.

Josephus identifies and juxtaposes two traits distinguishing the Essenes' way of life: they are celibate and they are personally devoid of material possessions, except what is shared within the closed, self-sustaining and mutually supportive community. Renouncing ownership of property and possessions enables them to avoid temptation and the need for servants. Celibacy avoids family feuding. The Talmudic Sages also juxtapose and point out the pitfalls of women, property and the servants needed to maintain them.

The more flesh, the more worms. The more *possessions*, the more worry. The more *wives*, the more witchcraft. The more *maidservants*, the more uncouthness. The more *slaves*, the more theft" (*m. Abot* 2:8).

While Rabbis cannot advise celibacy even as a rhetorical idea (although some personal individual exceptions are famous), they harangue here against having more than one wife. This sentiment is echoed in the Dead Sea Scrolls. And what things are expressed in the rabbinic saying? The same as in the Essenes description: servants, spouses, wealth.

As I have pointed out, whenever Jesus says to a would-be disciple "Follow me," a humorous turn of phrase ensues—and here again we find him talking about rich people and camels.

*Jesus said to his students, "Amen, I say to you, a rich person enters into the heavenly kingdom with difficulty. Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter God's kingdom."* (vv. 23–24)

The expression *a camel to go through the eye of a needle* or the Talmudic version, an elephant to go through the eye of a needle, to illustrate the impossible was a well-known idiom in Jewish culture, if not more generally near-eastern.<sup>39</sup> *B. Ber.* 55a mentions people do not dream the impossible, like a palm tree of gold or an elephant going through the eye of a needle. In *b. B. Meṣi'a* 38b, Rav Sheshet remarks, "Perhaps you are from Pumbedita, where they force an elephant to go through the eye of a needle."

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39 Qur'an, Sura 7:40, *Al Araf* (The Heights): "...nor shall they enter the gates of Paradise until a camel shall pass through the eye of a needle" [translation N.A. Dawood, Penguin (1974), 249].

We could supply some parallels to Rabbis giving up their possessions so as not to be encumbered in their Torah studies. We could also show places, like *Sip. Deut* 318 to Deut 32:15, to the effect that wealth quite often leads to corruption.<sup>40</sup> These passages do not exactly extol poverty as a virtue. It would be a grave error to see pauperism as a rabbinic ideal. However, see Rashi's comments on the topic to *b. B. Bat*, 1ob (also cited below). Those who are at the uppermost levels here in this world because of their wealth will be seen to be at the lowest level there in the next world. Those at the lowest level here will be highest there. The mendicants who are now lowly will be seen to be the most honored there.

If one neither marries nor supports children, as Jesus has just recommended, then renouncing all one's material possessions is possible. Generally, with rare exceptions, the ideal for Rabbis was to marry and have a livelihood. Poverty was never really an ideal for the Rabbis, as it was for Jesus: a poor man is considered dead (*b. Ned.* 64b). Nevertheless, according to *Kiryan Torah* (sometimes erroneously referred to as "Abot 6") 4:

"This is the way of the Torah: Bread and salt you will eat, measured water you will drink, on the ground you will sleep, a life of suffering you will live, and in the Torah you will labor. If you do this, 'You are fortunate and it is good for you' (Psalms 128:2). 'You are fortunate'—in this world; 'and it is good for you'—in the World to Come.

This Rabbinic ambivalence is resolved in the compromise position: Who is rich? He who is happy with what he has" (*m. Abot* 4:1).

*When his disciples heard they were greatly amazed: "Who then is able to be saved?" Jesus stared, and said to them, "For human beings this is impossible, but for God all things are possible."* (vv. 25–26)

Poverty as a requirement for a ticket to salvation? The disciples have never heard anything like this before. We need to pay close attention to Matthew's vocabulary. The Greek word for "stare"—*emblepō*—reflects the Semitic *mistaqel* which, besides its usual sense of "outward seeing", can mean "reflect upon, meditate upon." The word carries with it mystical nuances (such as in

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<sup>40</sup> *B. Ber.* 54a: one must love God with all one's material possessions. I take it to mean that one should chose to give up one's material wealth rather than forsake God. The parallel of giving up one's life proves the point. We speak of extraordinary circumstances and not the expected norm.

Dan 7:8: “While I was meditating upon the horns”), which I think should be inferred from Jesus’ response. In the following verses, there is reason to speculate that Jesus was indeed meditating upon the horns in Daniel 7, as to how God’s Kingdom would unfold for Jesus and his followers. Jesus implies here that humans have the ability to transcend their very nature and become God-like. In this mystical human-divine union, one is aided by God to achieve this spiritual attainment.

*Then Peter answered him, “Look, we have abandoned everything and followed you. What will there be for us?” Jesus answered them, “Amen, I say to you that you that at the new genesis,<sup>41</sup> when the Son of Man sits upon his Throne of Glory, you who have followed me will sit upon twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” (vv. 27–28)*

The Greek *palingenesia* or “new genesis” is rendered by the Syriac *Peshitta* as ‘alma *hatta*, the “new world”; the Zohar uses this word (vol. 2 *Shemot, Mishpatim* 108b) to describe God’s fashioning a brand new world, a new creation in the future that will be devoid of any of the filth of this present world. J.D.M. Derrett considers it to be the translation of the Hebrew *tehiyya*, (reviving), a technical term which, until the 13th century, is always found affixed to the word *metim* (the dead), not a freestanding noun.<sup>42</sup> The two together (*tehiyyat hametim*) refer to the phenomenon of the revival of the dead (e.g. *m. Soṭah* 9 end), i.e. bodily resurrection. The word *tehiyya* appears in the eschatological sense of the “period of resurrection” only after the 13th century (e.g. Ramban’s *Commentary to Torah*, Lev 18:29).

R.T. France does better in drawing our attention to 1QS 4:25:<sup>43</sup> “God has established them [the Spirits of Truth and Lies] until the Appointed Time of (literally *and*) the *New Formation*.<sup>44</sup> It would appear that for Matthew, “at the new genesis” refers to that time frame between worlds—this one and the next. Where *palingenesia* is the Greek “new genesis” in the Hebrew text of Matthew in Shem Tov’s *Even Bohan*, this passage is rendered as *yom hadin* or “judgment day.” So reads Howard (1995, p. 97). Jesus assures the disciples they will survive that time of cosmic turbulence when the wicked are destroyed along with the old world, while the new world is still in the making. The following

<sup>41</sup> Philo, *Life of Moses* 2.65, uses the term to refer to the new world that came to be after Noah’s flood.

<sup>42</sup> Derrett, “Palingenesia (Matthew 9:28),” 1984, 51–58.

<sup>43</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (2007) 743, nn. 13, 14.

<sup>44</sup> My translation of this phrase.

passage from *Midrash Psalms* (Buber) to Ps 46:2 shows the same concern for “between worlds” anxieties, offering a similar scenario to that of Jesus to comfort the righteous:

When God “creates the new heavens and the new earth (Isa 65:17) where will the righteous survive during that time [of transition]?—They will be connected to the Throne of Glory beneath the hems [or wings] of the Shekhina.

The righteous will more than merely survive. They will be first in the Kingdom, next to God. Jesus says his followers will be seated on thrones. Although they humble themselves now by taking back seats, in the future they will be given front seats with God and with Jesus. I cannot resist tying together the notion that Jesus was contemplating Daniel’s words in Matt 26. As I noted, the parallels in the verses from Matthew and Daniel 7:8–14 continue to resonate:

While I was thinking about the horns, there before me was another horn, a little one ... As I looked, *thrones* were set in place.... In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like [the] *Son of Man*, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the *Ancient of Days* and was led into his presence. He was given authority, *glory* and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

The idea of twelve thrones for the twelve apostles, originally understood to be for the twelve tribes of Israel, introduces a very important insight into the Gospel’s adaptation of early Church tradition. The re-creation is a re-formation of the world and most importantly of Jewish teachings. It would seem that the “Church” understood itself to be comprised, as was Israel of old, of twelve units that referred to themselves as the twelve tribes of Israel.<sup>45</sup> I am not sure whether this was meant literally or figuratively. Jewish prophets had foretold the re-establishment of the twelve tribes including the “lost tribes of Israel” (in 721 B.C.E.) and Jews expected the messianic era would see a fully restored Israel.<sup>46</sup> But the teaching in Matt 19:28 clearly divulges the understanding that the Jews, the people of Israel, will not be reconstituted in the Kingdom. The progenitors of the tribes of Israel—the twelve sons of Jacob who Jews expect to

<sup>45</sup> See James 1:1 and Acts 15:23.

<sup>46</sup> See e.g., Ezek 37:21; Isa 11:11; Jer 29:14.

be resurrected from the dead in Messianic times—will no longer be the leaders. Instead, according to the syntax of the Greek reading, Israel will be judged by the twelve apostles. This reading confirms that the time to which Jesus is referring as “the new creation” is the time of Israel’s judgment, i.e. Judgment Day. The judges are to be the followers of Jesus and Jesus himself. Hence it is reasonable that Mrs. Zebedee asks for her sons to be given immediate assurances they will flank Jesus as seniors members of his heavenly court. While the complete disenfranchisement of Jews is only alluded to in this passage, this might be the secret message of Jesus’ “stare.”

The Greek text supplies *“Amen, I say to you that you that at the new genesis, when the Son of Man sits upon his* (vv. 27–28). But there is another reading that should also be considered. Howard (1995, p. 97 to vv. 19:28) translates the Hebrew version of *Even Bohan* (whether a translation of a text we do not have or an early independent version): “When man sits upon the throne of his glory<sup>47</sup> you also will sit upon the twelve thrones of the twelve tribes of Israel.” I would slightly correct this to read, “Just as (*ka’asher*) the Man will sit on the throne of His Glory you will sit, so too you (*gam atem*), upon the twelve thrones of the 12 tribes of Israel.” *Ka’asher*” (in the sense of “just as”) signals a comparison between *ha’adam* (the man) and *atem* (you) in terms of sitting on thrones—but not a time sequence occasioned by “when” (another usage of *ka’asher*). The usage of *ka’asher* can be tricky. The parallel construction stresses the surprise of the pronouncement. The thrones reserved for the 12 twelve tribal ancestors, the sons of Israel—known as *shivtei yisrael*<sup>48</sup> will be occupied by you disciples in their place. In the new world there will be a new Israel and you are their progenitors. And the apostles here are compared to “the Man.”

The scene of recompense for past sacrifices in the future continues until the chapter’s end:

*But many who are first will be last and the last will be first.* (v. 30)

To my mind Matthew uses what we call today “*Janus Parallelism*”:<sup>49</sup>

47 The Hebrew Matthew (G. Howard, 1995) has “throne of his glory” But the Greek is better taken as “his throne of glory” which has no common Hebrew counterpart.

48 See Gen 49 v. 16 (as judges) and v. 28.

49 Certain texts contained a single phrase that was designed to have dual readings: one that completed a passage already mentioned and another that anticipated a passage yet to come. See C.H. Gordon, “New Directions” (1978), 59–66. Also see Scott B. Noegel, *Janus Parallelism in the Book of Job* (1996).

Reading retrospectively, the reference to “first” and “last” appears to complete the thought begun in Matt 19:23: *a rich person enters into the heavenly kingdom with difficulty*. We note in Luke 16:25: *But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony.* In the future world those who were rich will suffer while those who were poor will be at ease. A near parallel to the Gospel verse is found in *b. B. Bat. 1ob*:

I have seen an upside world [in a trance]—the upper levels below and the lower levels above.—The undistorted world [of the future] you have seen.

Rashi comments here:

Those who are at the uppermost levels here in this world because of their wealth will be seen to be at the lowest level there in the next world. Those at the lowest level here will be highest there. The mendicants who are now lowly will be seen to be the most honored there.

I do not know why Rashi chose the dichotomy of rich and poor, but I find it striking that it matches my understanding of the Gospel text, although poverty is generally not regarded as the highest virtue in Talmudic culture.<sup>50</sup>

In looking ahead to the next chapter, Matthew’s dichotomy of last/first refers to the duality of Jew and Gentile. The many—the Gentile masses who follow Jesus—will enjoy as many full reward points for coming aboard God’s itinerary for a short while as those Jews who were frequent travelers on it from the beginning. If the Jews are in the Jesus plan, they received no more benefit than do the Gentiles from God’s grace, and only from those labors they have performed faithfully from the beginning. In this way v. 30 ends chapter 19, with its near-impossible demands, and introduces chapter 20, which blurs the distinction between Jew and Gentile. The back-reading of v. 30 is meant to stress that those who were first here will be absolutely last in the future. This short

<sup>50</sup> It might be noted that the Rabbis do not always see wealth *per se* negatively. Many scriptural verses see wealth as a reward for the righteous and some esteemed rabbis came from wealthy families. Pr. 30:8–9 reminds us of the Jesus’ prayer. “Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’ Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God.” Also see Lev 26:3–13; Deut 25:15; Deut 11:13–16; Ps 112:3; Pr. 22:4; Pr. 10:4; *b. Ta'an. 9a*; *m. Abot 6:8*; *b. Erub. 86a*; etc.

aphorism (first/last and last/first) Matthew inherited in common with Luke 13:30 and Mark 10:31. But Matthew alone interprets the saying explicitly to refer to Jew/Gentile and the charming parable in chapter 20 works to convince us he is right. This forward-reading stresses that those who were first will have no more than those who came last. Those at the end will receive the same portion in the Next World as those who were present from the outset. Jew *qua* Jew ceases to be important, and imparts no benefit from having been a Jew. Should anyone think that Matthew is being generous to Gentiles while not discriminating against Jews in any way, the following parable from minor tractate *Semaḥot de R. Ḥiyya* 3 offers another example of a mindset that is surely that of Matthew:

They told a parable—to what can the matter be compared? To a king who hired two workers. One worked all day and received a *dinar* and the other worked one hour and received a *dinar*. Which one of them was beloved? Is it not the one who worked an hour and received a *dinar!*

This indeed is Matthew's message, as we will discover in the next chapter.

# Chapter 20

## Introduction

Chapter 19 introduced the radical teachings of Jesus to the pious Jews who followed the Law of Moses concerning the stringent requirements for entering the next world. The rift between Jew and Gentile deepens in chapter 20, shaped by the writer's reversal of Jewish teachings and rhetoric.

*But many who are first will be last and the last will be first* (Matt 19:30) opens a literary unit that closes with Matt 20:16: *So will the last be first and the first last.* Within this sandwich structure—sometimes called *inclusio*—is a parable through which we learn that Gentiles are to be favored in the next world. This parable reverses the Jewish perception of a divine plan that ultimately favors Israel against the Gentiles.

Whenever Jews have wondered why the people of Israel suffers in the here and now while the Gentiles live at ease, the traditional answer has been that God has promised to privilege them in the World to Come. A Jewish parable interpreting Lev. 26:9: “*For I will turn to you with favor,*” from *Sipra Behukotai, parasha 1, ch. 2,* expounds on this longer-term perspective:

They tell a parable. To what may this matter be compared? It is like a king who hired many workers. And there was there one laborer who had worked for him many days. The workers entered to receive their wages, and this very worker came with them. The king said to this worker “I will turn to you with favor.” Those many who have worked for me only a little time, to them I will give little wages but for you, in the future I will reckon a large sum.

So [in real terms] Israel seeks wages in this world from God and the Gentile nations seek their wages from God. And God says to Israel, “My children, *I will turn to you with favor.*” The Gentiles have only done a small amount of the work for me so I give them small wages (now). But in the future [world] I will reckon for you a large sum.

A kindred tension found in a parable is built upon the same surprise element as in Matthew. Here a laborer who has worked his whole life is not rewarded as much as one who just came to work a single day. This tension is close to Matthew's parable. But unlike Matthew, the astute midrashist resolves the tension without disparaging the faithful Jews. We find in *Midrash Psalms* (Buber) 37:3:

"Trust the Lord and do good." And to what can the psalm be compared? To a [parable] of a laborer who worked his whole life for a king who never gave him his wages. The king hired another laborer who only did a single day's labor and the king gave him to eat and to drink and gave him a full day's wages. This worker was distressed, thinking, "Perhaps I have not accomplished anything with my work at all."

The reader, like the faithful worker, suffers from the anomalous injustice of the Johnny come lately being rewarded beyond measure while the diligent one is neglected. That is the plain evidence—the righteous Jews suffer persecution without their faithfulness counting for anything. The wicked, the Romans, do not suffer, on the contrary they dine and feast. Matthew leaves matters here for us to ponder how divine justice works and why the come lately nations should be rewarded and the Jews not. But unlike Matthew, the midrash defends Israel and shows that ultimately they will be rewarded. So the tension is resolved in the final paragraph that contains the familiar motif—the wicked and the nations who do some good deeds are rewarded with material gains in this life while the faithful constant worker is rewarded in the future life.

The laborer who worked all his days for the king realized that if this worker who worked only one day was rewarded so generously, clearly I who worked for the king my entire life will receive a superbly generous reward. Rabbi Eleazar said, "From the ease of the wicked in this world you can deduce the reward of the righteous in the next world."... As Scripture states, "How magnificent is the goodness you have stored away for those who fear you!" (Psa. 31:20)

Jesus' parable, as related by Matthew, turns the tables on the Jews. He uses the same allegory of hired laborers, but here the message is that the amount workers are paid is not to be calculated according to the work done or the duration of employment, as in the Jewish parables. Instead compensation is granted by virtue of the Boss's graciousness, and His willingness to pay his laborers equitably, irrespective of the length of time they have been employed or what they accomplished during the work day. Both parables acknowledge the disparities in the time and effort expended, but one favors the Jews, the other the Gentiles.

These parables rely on the reader's knowing that it was customary for a "master of the house"—the boss (in Hebrew *ba'al habayit*), a householder or landowner—to contract with both Jewish and gentile day-laborers. He would stipulate the work to be done, the wages to be paid, the working conditions and benefits such as meal arrangements, at the time he employed them. The

laborers were to be paid the contracted sum immediately upon concluding their work done at sundown. If any problems ensued during the course of the day, a worker had the right to demand payment on the spot. If the boss was not available when the problem occurred, he had the whole night to straighten matters out (*m. B. Meṣi'a* 9:1), although it was otherwise forbidden to delay payment. If there were no complaints by the end of that day it was presumed that the boss would have paid in full.

The “circular proem”—the most common form of parable in Jewish texts<sup>1</sup>—takes as its starting point a biblical verse or some other classic text that appears to be cryptic and bothersome in the extreme. The body of the parable creates an analogy between the situation in the troubling text and a scenario involving some combination of royal family members, householders, servants and/or workmen, concluding with “So . . .” Sometimes the “so” acts as a fully explanatory key to understanding the parable. At other times, “so” serves as concise capstone that brings the analogy full circle back to the phrase with which it began, leaving it to the listener or reader to discern the point of the parable, distilling its profound implications. The *Sipra* parable gives us an example of a full key “So . . .,” while the Jesus parable offers us the capstone form: “So [now we can understand] *The last will be first and the first last.*”

Not only have we moved forward from the mundane, ordinal sense of first and last in relation to rich and poor, Jew and Gentile, but we will see further implications in the hierarchical inversion of master and servant in Matthew 20:27–28: “And whoever wishes to be *first* among you will be your *slave*; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom on behalf of many.”

Matthew then shifts from teaching about the impending kingdom—the breakthrough to which Jesus’ audience imagines as imminent—to pure narrative, summarizing the doctrine of atonement through the suffering and death of the Son of Man. The hidden messianic agenda seems to contravene earlier Hebrew prophetic visions of the End. Luke suggests that the coming events will bring about the correct understanding of these prophecies, although the disciples themselves remain clueless as to what lies ahead. While Jesus might share his corporate being with his disciples in the kingdom, to share it now would mean that they would have to die as he will.

The verses concerning the trials, crucifixion and resurrection need to be placed in context here. Let me explain. Christian theology breaks with Jewish teachings on the issue of the debasement and execution of the Messiah ben

<sup>1</sup> See Joseph Heinemann, “The Proem in Aggadic Midrashim: A Form-Critical Study” (1971), 100–22.

David. While suffering with the poor and sick might be expected of a messianic figure, God, in the Jewish view, would never decree the utter debasement of “our righteous Messiah.” This debasement of the Messiah gives rise to the Achilles heel of Christian theology that Paul calls “the scandal of the cross”—a stumbling block to Jesus’ Messiahship on grounds that his egregious humiliation disqualifies him as a contender for Messiah, son of David.<sup>2</sup> This issue clearly was a thorn in the side of the Apostolic Churches, as evidenced by Paul’s gargantuan efforts to develop the doctrines of the passion and crucifixion from prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures. These efforts attempted to soften the transformative shock for the members of the early churches, which up to that point had been composed solely of Jews under the mandate of the Peter’s authority.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus’ prediction to his disciples in Matt 20 serves as a flash forward, as though the events he foresees had already transpired. In the following chapter, dual time periods will overlap. Jerusalem will be both earthly Jerusalem (where, at one point, no one realizes who Jesus is) and, even more so, heavenly Jerusalem, where throngs and masses of people hail him as the long awaited one, the Davidic King promised in the Royal Psalms. Jesus will proclaim that Israel’s primacy, and its position as God’s cornerstone, will now be superseded by another nation, separate and distinct from Israel. The horrific events predicted in Matt 20:17–19 will slowly unfold, leading up to the resurrection three days after his execution.

I would guess that the brief sentences foretelling the betrayal of Jesus, his crucifixion and his resurrection were adapted from the earliest catechisms recited by Jesus believers, up to and including v. 28—“*and to give his life as a ransom on behalf of many*”—which the Gospel weaves into the fabric of the narrative. As I will show in my commentary to these verses, the pivot of the whole Christological event is not the passion, the crucifixion or the resurrection. These are simply the receptacles for the weight that Jesus shifts into human history by his voluntarily going to Jerusalem. This journey will set in

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor 1:23.

<sup>3</sup> See Romans 4:25: “...who believe in the one who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over for our transgressions and was raised for our justification.” Paul stresses the idea of Israel’s collective guilt and impending punishment, a punishment that can only be avoided if the people of Israel come to believe in the resurrection of Jesus. With such a belief, life eternal will be granted to them. The nations need not atone for sins for which they were not forewarned in the Law not to commit. Their belief in the resurrection brings them the life eternal that was promised to Abraham. Jesus had to undergo crucifixion to atone for the sins of the Jews. So in a way Jews are responsible for the necessity of the crucifixion. If they refuse this gift they have no hope.

motion a domino effect, piece after piece falling in a succession of betrayals, culminating in the doctrine of redemptive resurrection through the Christ: He gave himself as a ransom for the many.

Although it is a side issue for this commentary, let us look at a knotty discrepancy and try to unravel it. Luke's Gospel is the most blatantly pro-Gentile narrative of all the Gospels. His account of the events that transpired differs from those of Mark and Matthew, who relate that it was the Jewish priests and scribes who condemned Jesus to death while the "Gentiles" debased him and executed him. Luke says nothing about the role of any Jews in the actual execution scene. The first known report of Jesus' execution—that of Tacitus—also makes no mention of Jews:

Christus, the founder of the name, was put to death in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate, and the pernicious superstition was checked for the moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judea, the home of the mischief, but in the capital itself, where all things horrible or shameful from every part in the world find their center and become popular. (*Annales*, Book 15.44).

As I noted, Luke is a Gentile, whose Book of Acts regards the conversion of Paul—a Pharisee of Pharisees—to the faith of Jesus' followers as heralding the fading of the Jews and the ascendancy of the Christians.

Let us examine and compare these passages in the synoptics:

Matt 20:17–19:

Look, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death, and will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and scourged and crucified, and he will rise on the third day.

Mark 10:32–34:

And they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; and they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. And taking the twelve again, he began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, "Look, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death, and will hand him over to the Gentiles; and they will mock him, and spit upon him, and scourge him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise."

Luke 18:31–34:

And taking the twelve, he said to them, “Look, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written of the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be *handed over to the Gentiles*, and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon; they will scourge him and kill him, and on the third day he will rise.” But they understood none of these things; this saying was hid from them, and they did not grasp what was said.

Why is it that Luke alone lacks any mention of an active Jewish role in his depiction of the actual crucifixion scene, but inexplicably cites Pilate to the effect that the Jews are to blame? A number of speculations come to mind:

- a) The original catechism of the early liturgies (perhaps in Aramaic or Hebrew) did not mention anything about scribes and priests, in line with Tacitus. They were added later, perhaps by Mark followed by Matthew; Luke preserves the original version. We are referred to “Gentiles” (*goyim, umot*), most likely short for “*bet din shel goyim*” (courts of Gentiles). One might easily suggest the original setting of the summary was designed to bring to mind the widespread belief that executions by military courts of the Romans, in and of themselves, constituted rituals of *kapara*, supreme atonement (*b. Sanh.* 47b). The complicity of Jewish courts might have complicated or compromised the thrust of this belief.
- b) As well, an early inattentive copyist dropped the line (above in italics, between the two occurrences of “handing over”) about the Jews. Through the process of *homoioteleuton*, all subsequent major copies of Luke were corrected and recopied in conformity with this textual revision, which became the new prototype. Indeed, Luke subsequently lays the crucifixion solely at the feet of the Jews and quotes Pilate to the effect that “I have conducted my investigation in your presence and have not found this man guilty of the charges you have brought against him . . . so no capital crime has been committed by him.” (Luke 23:14).
- c) There were divergent traditions. Luke follows one strand, the others a popular variant which was inserted later into Luke by another hand.

As my job is to discuss Matthew’s story, I have no need to decide among the above possibilities. Nevertheless, I do wonder if we have any Lucan manuscripts that read as Mark or Marcan manuscripts that read as Luke.

## Commentary

[“*The last will be first and the first last.*”]<sup>4</sup> For the heavenly kingdom is like a person who is a householder, who went out early to hire workers for his vineyard. When he negotiated with the workers for a rate of a denarius per day, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out three hours later he saw them standing idle in the marketplace. He said to them, “Get yourselves to the vineyard, and I will give you whatever is right.” They left. Again he went out around the sixth and ninth hour, and did the same. When he went out around the eleventh hour he found them standing and said to them, ‘Why have you stood here all day idle?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one hired us.’ He said to them, ‘Get yourselves to the vineyard!’ When evening came, the lord of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wage, beginning with the last up to the first.’ When the ones hired around the eleventh hour came they took each a denarius. ‘And when the first one came, they thought that they would receive more, but he gave to each a denarius, even to them. When they took it, they murmured against the householder. ‘These last worked one hour, and you have made them equal to us, who suffered the burden and the heat of the day.’ He answered one of them, ‘I did not treat you unfairly. Didn’t you negotiate a denarius with me? Take what is yours and go. I wish to give to the last as I gave to you. Am I not permitted to do what I wish with what is mine? Or is your eye wicked because I am good?’ So [this is the point of] “*The last will be first and the first last.*” (vv. 1–16)

The above parable gives us six times during the course of a day, at intervals of 2–3 hours, when laborers are hired by a land owner or householder: daybreak (around 6 a.m.); the third hour (9 a.m.); the sixth hour (noon); the ninth hour (3 p.m.) and the eleventh hour (5 p.m.). At the onset of evening (6 p.m.) all of the workers stop their work and are paid the same wages. The first group of laborers has worked 12 hours, the second 9 hours, the third 6 hours, the fourth 3 hours, the fifth only one hour.

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<sup>4</sup> I have introduced this abbreviated form of Matt 19:30 for it obviously stimulates the need for the parable and also suggests the question “to what can this be compared” to which Matt 20:1 responds with the ritualized speech pattern to introduce parables in the Gospels: “the Kingdom of Heaven is like” which has no meaning other than “the matter can be compared to . . .” which introduces parables in Talmudic literature.

In the parable, the first workers hired represent the Jews, while the “others” to whom Matthew refers are non-Jews. The Jews received the original promise from God (the householder) and covenanted themselves to keeping all the commandments of God stipulated in the Torah. Others (i.e. *allous*—Gentiles) who come later are obligated to observe fewer of God’s commands but ultimately receive the same reward. When the Jews complain about the blatant inequality, they are told that the deal made with them was lawful. The Boss can then decide to contract with Gentiles on very different terms, paying them as much as He likes. The Gentiles are not compensated according to what is lawful and just for the Jews, but on the basis of the grace, mercy and generosity which God extends to them simply because He chooses to. And here we meet the final dichotomy separating first and last. The first covenant—with the Jews—operates through, and according to, the letter of the law; the last operates through grace. Many interpreters regard Matthew here as addressing the Jews in his church who believe in Jesus and in the commandments in the Torah as well. But these passages also make sense as they stand: Jews versus Christians.

The syntax of the verse is somewhat ambiguous. The Hebrew text (Howard, 1995, p. 99) “Is it bad in your eyes that I am good?” insinuates jealousy on the part of the Jews. What I think the closing speech in the parable asks is “*Do you have a bad eye because [mine] is good?*” The term “bad eye” means jealous and inhospitable, while “good eye” means hospitable, gracious and generous. The Jews view the Gentiles as non-deserving since they had not been given the Torah; they would consider it unfair were God to extend the same privileges to Gentiles in the next world that He will extend to Israel, who had kept Torah for more than a thousand years before the first century and the era of Jesus. To better understand what is being said here, we need to look at *m. Abot* 5:23.

Whoever possesses these three attributes is one of the disciples of our father Abraham: a good eye; a humble spirit; and a meek disposition. Whoever possesses the three opposite qualities—an evil eye, an arrogant spirit, and an arrogant disposition—is the disciple of Balaam the wicked.

How do the disciples of Abraham differ from the disciples of Balaam? The disciples of Abraham our father partake in this world and inherit the World to Come, as it is said (Proverbs 8:21), “Endowing with wealth those who love me, and filling their treasures.” But the disciples of Balaam inherit Gehennom and go down to the pit of destruction, as it is said. (Psalm 55:23) “But you, O God, will cast them down into the lowest pit; the bloodthirsty and treacherous shall not live out half their days. But I will trust in you.”

Insult is therefore added to injury in the final words of the parable. One suspects that Matthew himself had encountered Jews who told him that, although they were suffering in the present, the next world would be theirs in its fullness. He might even have heard their parables (as cited in the introduction to this chapter) and purposely inverted their intent in his Gospel so as to knock the wind out of their sails.

*When Jesus was going up to Jerusalem he took along the twelve disciples by themselves and spoke to them on the way: “Look, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death, and will hand, him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and scourged and crucified, and he will rise on the third day.” (vv. 17–19)*

We note the distinction here between priests and scribes (i.e. Jews) and Gentiles. Indeed Matthew uses the term *ta ethne* (Hebrew “*goyim*” i.e. nations), as do Jews, to signify those who were not Jews.<sup>5</sup> The end of the passion message has been worked into the narrative of Mark or his source (10:45) and is followed by Matthew (20:28): “and to give his life as a ransom on behalf of many.”

It is significant that these words find a counterpart in Luke's hymn at the naming of John (1:68) and in the hymn in 1Timothy 2:5–6: “For there is one God, and there is one go-between between God and human beings, a human being, the Messiah Jesus who gave himself as a ransom for all, the testimony for their own times.” Yet these ransom notices do not appear in connection with Luke's report that Jesus would rise on the third day. Even more important is the shared understanding in all the above sources that it was Jesus himself who voluntarily gave up his life himself as a ransom—not that he was betrayed, delivered or forced by Jew or Gentile. Hence there is some contradictory tension between being “handed over” and a conscious act of “self-surrender.” In the Markan/Matthean scene this tension is allowed to stand, with ten verses bridging the contradiction.

The tension is mitigated by the Gospel's key verbs: that “we are *going* up to Jerusalem and the Son of Man *will be* handed over.” The meta-message that Jesus is simultaneously giving is, “If we do not go, I will not be handed over. We do this of our own volition.” After that, the “handings over” (Mark/Matthew) or “handing over” (Luke) are immaterial. The act effecting “the ransom” actually lies in the realization that going to Jerusalem now is a *choice* that precipitates the anticlimactic but inescapable conclusion. This is the water-

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5 See J.D. Quinn and W.C. Wacker, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy* (2000), 341.

shed moment, the pivot of the passion, the fulcrum of the crucifixion, the tipping point of the resurrection. This decisive step begins the one way journey that will end in tragic triumph. The ransom pays in full the outstanding debt for the sins of the “many”—a doctrine as yet left undefined in the Gospel, and a matter to engage centuries of Christian synods, tribunals, thinkers and missionaries who never achieve consensus.

*Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and worshipped him, and begged something from him. (v. 20)*

The two sons of Zebedee are James and John. Their mother, called Salome in the Eastern Churches, seems to be a typical stage-door mom pushing her children to celebrity status. She kneels and supplicates—an act indicating not only her submitting herself to the authority of Jesus, but also one signifying that Jesus is Lord and master of the Next World. Jesus will soon correct her misapprehension. We have seen scenes like this before, in which a woman begs Jesus to help her offspring and Jesus demurs.<sup>6</sup> In an earlier episode, Jesus acquiesced to a Canaanite woman’s request for a basic need. Here he says he has no authority to grant a mother the favor of bestowing exalted status upon her sons.

The position of the sons of Zebedee in the Apostolic Church seems to have been on par with that of Peter. Luke records that John accompanied Peter on his missions and was imprisoned with him (Acts 3:1; 4:3; 8:14). Paul himself reports on James’ and John’s central importance: “And when they recognized the grace bestowed upon me (i.e. Paul), James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas their right hands in partnership, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.” (Gal 2:7–9). Matthew notes their singular stature among the disciples. Peter, James and John witnessed the Transfiguration (Matt 17:1) and the Agony in Gethsemane (Matt 26:37). James’ martyrdom is reported in Acts 12:1–2: “About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the Church. He killed James the brother of John with the sword.” Perhaps Acts intends to convey that James was killed by beheading, a gruesome death sentence characteristic of the Romans, or by means of a Jewish mode of execution known as “the sword”<sup>7</sup> as described in Deut 13:16 (see further b. *Sanh.* 52b for biblical warrants). The death of James, brother of John, as a martyr may account for

<sup>6</sup> See Matt 15:26.

<sup>7</sup> *Hereg* in *m. Sanh.* 7 is explained as “by the sword.” See *y. Sanh.* 7:1

some of the references to “drinking from the same cup” as did Jesus, sharing in the suffering that would culminate in redemption.

*He said to her, “What do you wish?” She said to him, “Say that my two sons will sit, one to your right and one to your left, in your Kingdom.” (v. 21)*

The seating arrangements mentioned here seem to indicate an etiquette known also from Talmudic sources. Rabbi Yehudah was adamant that the most eminent personage had to be located in the middle and his more esteemed disciple to the right. On his left would be the disciple next in esteem. *B. Erub.* 54b relates that Moses taught the divine oral tradition he had received from God. Once he had instructed Aaron, Rabbi Yehudah insists that Aaron had a permanent seat to the right of Moses, while Aaron’s sons were taught to sit on Moses’ left. In Moses’ absence, Aaron would teach those in need of instruction.

Rabbi Yehudah also held that only a rash ignoramus would walk to the right of his teacher. The deputy High Priest was positioned on the right side of the High Priest, *b. Yoma* 37a relates, while the head of the priestly family officiating in the Temple would keep to the left. The same passage also notes that the protocol for three scholars traveling was that the master, always accompanied by two students, would be in the center, the more proficient disciple to the right and the less proficient student to the left, slightly behind the master on either side. Similarly angels were declared to travel in a set formation: Michael in the middle, Gabriel to the right and Raphael to the left. (*b. Yoma* 37a). *Midrash Psalms* (ed. Buber), Ps 18 interprets Ps 110:1 as follows: Rabbi Yudan related in the name of Rabbi Ḥama that, in the Next World, God will seat King Messiah to his right and Abraham to his left.

*Jesus answered, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?” They said to him, “We are able.” (v. 22)*

While Matthew has placed the request in the mother’s mouth in order to avoid the brothers appearing arrogant and self-important, the words “*You do not know what you are asking*” discloses Gospel’s original account, according to which the brothers themselves put forward the suggestion.<sup>8</sup> What seems to

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8 The text is found in Mark 10:35–37:

“And James and John, the sons of Zeb’edee, came forward to him, and said to him, ‘Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.’ And he said to them, ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ And they said to him, ‘Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left in your glory.’”

be an anti-James/John pericope elsewhere emerges as very pro-James/John in Matthew.

*He said to them, “You will drink my cup. But to sit on my right hand and on my left is not for me to give, but it is given to those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.”* (v. 23)

You, Jesus explains, will experience the tribulations of martyrdom (at least James will) from the same source that I do, and for the same divine purpose. That makes you worthy candidates to share my portion in the Next World. However, I have no say in the seating arrangements there. Only God makes those assignments.

From early patristic times idea of the afflicted servant, and the cup of martyrdom that will bring salvation, have been associated with Psalm 116: (vv. 8–16). The very name of Jesus, *Yeshua* (plural *yeshuot*), meaning “salvation,” occurs in this Psalm:

For you, O Lord, have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before the Lord *in the land of the living*. I believed; therefore I said, “I am greatly afflicted.” And in my dismay I said, “All men are liars.” How can I repay the Lord for all his goodness to me? *I will lift up the cup of salvation [yeshuot] and call on the name of the Lord.* I will fulfill my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people. *Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.* O Lord, truly I am your servant; I am *your servant*, the son of your maidservant; you have freed me from my chains.

*When the ten heard, they resented the two brothers.* (v. 24)

This passage confirms that originally it was the brothers themselves who had requested that they be seated in positions of privilege. When the other ten heard the brothers asking to be recognized as the most favored disciples, they were angered by their arrogance.

*Jesus called them together: “You know that the Gentiles’ rulers reign over them, and the great ones tyrannize them.* (v. 25)

In the Roman system, slaves depended upon their masters (i.e. benefactors) for the necessities of their existence and had to keep them content and in good spirits by performing menial tasks that enhanced their comfort. Jesus tells his

disciples the opposite applies to them. In “our group” it is the master who is the servant. Leaders need not be begged for sustenance, nor must they be greeted as a superior lord and patron whose orders cannot be questioned and who must be obeyed on pain of banishment or worse.

*It will not be so among you, but whoever wishes to be great among you will be your server; and whoever wishes to be first among you will be your slave.*  
(vv. 26–27)

Luke, paralleling well known rabbinic rhetoric, says in 22:27:

Who is greater, the one who reclines at the table or the one who serves? Isn’t it the one who reclines at the table? But I am in your midst as the one who serves.

A similar sentiment (also introduced by a rhetorical question) is expressed in *Midrash Psalms* (Buber) 18:

Said Rabbi Hiyya: A disciple will go before his master at night. Which one holds the lantern? Is it not the student who does so before his master? But God held the lantern before Israel.

This passage seems to echo a tradition, in the context of a discussion of the *manna* that nourished the Israelites in the desert for 40 years (preserved in *Num. Rab. Shelah* 16), according to which God declares:

In the normal course of events, a person acquires a slave so that his slave will bake bread for him. But I did not do this. You are My slaves but I bake bread for you—from the heavens.

It is curious that Matt 18:5, and the subsequent narrative in that chapter, “*And whoever receives one such little child through my name receives me,*” said nothing about first and last or about being a servant as do the other Gospels (and as he himself will in subsequent chapters). Mark 9:35–37 states:

*He sat and called the twelve and said to them, “If any wishes to be first, he will be the last of all and the servant of all.” Taking a child, he stood it among them, and, taking it in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever receives one child like this one in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives not me but the one who sent me.”*

The upshot is that the first/last dichotomy is framed in servant/server terms in the non-Matthean traditions, while Matthew omits this explicit interpretation of first/last in his Gospel, although it remains implied. However, Matthew assuredly will pick up the theme of servant/server with the paradox of the humble/exalted in 23:11–12:

The greatest among you will be your server. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

Jesus tells them that the brothers did not seek personal gain or high office to lord it over the others. On the contrary, they wanted to help Jesus accomplish his service to the disciples, and even die on their behalf. “There is no room for complaint” Jesus admonishes them.

*Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom on behalf of many. (v. 28)*

The brothers deserve recognition for their service, and desire to give their lives for the good of all, just as Jesus himself will sacrifice his own life to redeem his faithful followers and those deserving of his ransom.

I have a few points concerning Jesus’ life as “ransom for the many” that I did not mention in the introduction to this chapter. The revelation of the secret of the Son of Man is given here and now in order to prepare the reader for the next chapter. Chapter 21, in substance, could have concluded Matthew’s Gospel. Everything after it provides richer details of the plot and drama. Yet the last chapter of Matthew’s Gospel lacks the triumph and glory, the theology and rich Christology that chapters 20–21 provide. There is nothing to prevent one from thinking the present passage could have been the close of a catechism or hymn in the early churches composed solely of Jews. The death of the righteous in order to redeem a generation from its sins is a genuinely Jewish concept. There is no hint in the Jewish passages, nor any hint here, that these deaths could suspend Jewish commitment to the legal traditions.<sup>9</sup> It is difficult to know whether the essence of the passage here is indeed early, or framed by the later churches.

It is usual to point to Isa 53, the Psalm of the Suffering Servant, as a model for the Christology of “ransom for sins.”<sup>10</sup> We also note Ps 130:7 which refers to God “And He shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities.” Ziony Zevit maintains

<sup>9</sup> See Galatians 2:21.

<sup>10</sup> Isaiah 53:1–12 is seen as the blueprint for the Gospel account of the trial, passion, resurrection, and redemption:

that Jesus fulfills tasks that Hebrew Scripture assigned to God and v. 34 further is a prime example of that role.<sup>11</sup> And Ps 130:7 seems to be the source for Matt 1:21—“*She will bear a son, and you will call his name “Jesus” [God saves], for he will save his people from their sins*”—which proclaimed even before Jesus was born that he had but a single task to accomplish—which we now discover requires the ultimate sacrifice. One who is executed without justification by the Romans could effect atonement. I would argue that “his people” refers to the people of Israel, and that the Gospel source for these pronouncements might well date back to a time when Christianity was still a completely Jewish sect. The death of a righteous person was atonement, as in *Midrash Tanh. Num.* [Buber], *Aḥarei Mot* 10:

Said Rabbi Abba bar Avina: “Why is the death of Miriam juxtaposed to the laws of the ashes of the red heifer? Only to teach that just as the ashes of the red heifer atone so the deaths of the righteous atone.

Who hath believed our report? And to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed? For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground. He hath no form nor comeliness, and when we shall see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him. He is despised and rejected of men, a Man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief. And we hid as it were our faces from Him; He was despised, and we esteemed Him not. Surely He hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we did esteem Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. *But He was wounded for our transgressions; He was bruised for our iniquities. The chastisement of our peace was upon Him, and with His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and He was afflicted, yet He opened not his mouth; He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter; and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so He openeth not His mouth. He was taken from prison and from judgment; and who shall declare His generation? For He was cut off out of the land of the living; for the transgression of My people was He stricken.* And He made His grave with the wicked, and with the rich in His death, because He had done no violence, neither was any deceit in His mouth. Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise Him; He hath put Him to grief. *When thou shalt make His soul an offering for sin, He shall see His seed, He shall prolong His days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in His hand. He shall see of the travail of His soul, and shall be satisfied. By His knowledge shall My righteous Servant justify many, for He shall bear their iniquities.* Therefore will I divide Him a portion with the great, and He shall divide the spoil with the strong, because He hath poured out His soul unto death. *And He was numbered with the transgressors; and He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.*”

<sup>11</sup> See Z. Zevit “Jesus, God of the Hebrew Bible” (2010) 14–32, and J. Marcus, “John the Baptist and Jesus” in *When Judaism and Christianity Began* (Avery-Peck, Harrington and Neusner 2004) v.1, 194–97.

*When they were leaving Jericho, a great crowd followed them. (v. 29)*

It may well be that the mention of *Jericho* is intended to evoke the memory of the reformed Rahab, a righteous Canaanite inhabitant of Jericho in the days of Joshua. Or perhaps it merely indicates their progress as they make their way toward Jerusalem. Although the city is still at a distance, they are now on the western side of the Jordan, and in Judea proper. Leaving with a crowd signifies the close of a unit. Once again an episode miracle healing concludes with “and followed...” The episode is set apart and demarcated, bringing us to the entry into Jerusalem where his multitude of followers greets him as the “one who comes in the name of the Lord”.

*And look, two blind men sitting by the road heard that Jesus was coming by, and cried out, “Have mercy on us, Lord, David’s son!” The crowd rebuked them so that they would be quiet, but they cried out louder, “Show mercy on us, Lord, Son of David.” Jesus stood and called them: “What do you wish me to do?” They said to him, “Lord, let our eyes be opened.” (vv. 30–33).*

We compare this with Matt 9:27–30:

When Jesus passed by from there, two blind people followed, calling out and saying, “Have mercy on us, Son of David!” And when he entered the house, the blind people came to him, and Jesus says to them, “Do you trust that I am able to do this?” They say to him, “Yes, Lord.” Then he touched their eyes, saying, According to your trust, let it be done to you.” And their eyes were opened.

Again Matt 15:22 shares the motif of a desperate request:

Look, a Canaanite woman from those regions came out and shouted, “*Show mercy on me, Lord, son of David!* My daughter is cruelly possessed by a demon.”

And in 11:5 Jesus details the evidence that he is the long awaited redeemer:

*Blind people see again* and the lame walk; lepers are purified and the deaf hear, dead people are raised and the poor are receiving good news.

Earlier, in my commentary to 9:30–31, I discussed the meaning of eyes “being opened” to mean “cured.”

*Feeling compassion, Jesus touched their eyes, and right away they saw again, and followed him. (v. 34)*

These individuals who have regained their vision join the crowd of such individuals who “followed” (v. 29 above). Jesus and his troupe continue towards Jerusalem.

# Chapter 21

## Introduction

In chapter 21, Jesus will be welcomed in triumph into Jerusalem in what Matthew depicts as a foreshadowing of the future—a vision of the end of days. The Temple of the Jews will be spiritualized, and the people of Israel replaced by another nation which better deserves what was once promised to the Jews—familiar teachings that the Christian reader will recognize as carrying the branded message of the New World where Christ is King.

The Gospels offer us hagiographic accounts of Jesus' birth, miracles, sermons, encounters, conflicts, crucifixion and resurrection. The intermingling of these themes captivates the reader who firmly grasps all of the intertwined strands, accepting them literally as "gospel truth." Theologians of various outlooks have grappled with the loose ends of the twine, while scholastics have investigated the innermost fibers of the philosophic and mystical core.

Modern scholars, separating out the various threads in order to try and discover their compositional origins and historical development, often refuse to learn the ropes, so that they can fully appreciate the ways in which the cord has both tied together and bound apart communities around the globe. For the most part, the works of modern scholars accept certain tenets as axiomatic such as Markan priority and the borrowing from Mark by the other Gospels. Among these are that the Gospels record, most likely verbatim, some of the authentic teachings of a person called Jesus; that members of the Jewish establishment were complicit with the Romans in the trial and in carrying out the death sentence of Jesus; that the crucifixion occurred; and that the Gospels have a Hellenistic rhetorical flavor peppered with Jewish references and biases. However, within each of these areas of broad general agreement, fierce debates rage, and the corpus of scholarly literature is comprised of every conceivable position.

Within the past century, increasing attention has been directed to the Jewish background of the Gospels. The theoretical perspective within which I operate considers the Gospels to be a product of early church traditions, originating within an entirely Jewish framework, which was modified to meet the needs of Gentile churches that the later evangelists addressed. Thus the Christian or prospective convert could appreciate that Jesus had first come to the Jews. They refused to acknowledge his divine appointment as Messiah which led to his interim appointment as Son of Man, then as Son of God for all time. The Jews rejected the message Jesus brought them while the righteous Gentiles

embraced it. The message of faith is literally embodied in the person of Jesus Christ who provides the only hope for salvation.

It is noteworthy that Jewish literature provides a mirror image of this paradigm. Initially God offered his Torah to the Gentiles, who rejected it. He then offered it to the Jews, who embraced it as the cornerstone of their covenant with Him and the basis of their hope for salvation. *B. Abod. Zar.* 2b relates in the name of Rabbi Yohanan: "The Holy One offered the Torah to every nation and people but none of them accepted it. When at last He came to Israel, they accepted it." *Sipre Deut.*, *piska* 343 and *Mek. Yitro (Bahodesh 5)* and many other works also know of this tradition that "the other nations had their chance and they missed it."

This is the very message the Gospels depict: Jesus came to save the Jews and they rejected him. Inherited from the early churches whose first adherents were Jews, the Gospels preserve the fading image of a very Jewish Jesus. Increasingly frustrated and angry, Jesus has no sympathy for Jews who do not accept his teachings, but he is full of compassion for Gentiles. The Jews have not only been displaced, they have been replaced.

Based upon my close reading of this chapter, I contend that, except for the very last section, it is largely structured around original Jewish materials, preserved by the earliest evangelists. Rather than being Judaized in a later period, the chapter has been *gentilized*. Its rhetoric reveals its roots in Jewish tradition in very subtle ways. This explains why scholars have erred in virtually every discussion of it, for example, in poking fun at Matthew's putative ignorance in vv. 2–6:

"Go into the village before you, and right away you will find a donkey tied up and a colt with her (Gen 49:11). Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, reply 'The lord needs them.' He will send them right away." This happened to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: "Speak to the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, meekly sitting on a donkey, and a colt, the foal of a riding animal." (Zech 9:9)

Matthew has been ridiculed for failing to recognize that Zechariah uses a poetic construction called "*parallelismus membrorum*," a repetition using synonyms for heightened effect, rather than to refer to two separate things (*donkey* and *colt*). How could Matthew have thought the messiah would play Ben Hur, riding two different animals at once when clearly only one animal is meant? Did not Mark 11:6 and Luke 19:35 only refer to one animal—a colt—with *donkey* qualifying what type of colt it was?

I described two Jewish usages of fulfillment texts in the introduction to the first chapter. Matthew's source undoubtedly preserves the fuller tradition of a "Type 2" fulfillment text, which refers to a prophetic biblical verse—in this case Zech 9:9—and endeavors to convey in a hyper-literal fashion the text's precise wording of a text, rather than its intent. A non-textual analogy might be someone desiring to fulfill Jesus' command "to walk the extra mile" (Matt 5:41), ignoring its idiomatic meaning and actually taking a pedometer and walking precisely one mile (or the Gospel equivalent) to the exact thousandths of a millimeter.

From the first verses of the chapter onward, we are squarely in a purely Jewish text. And the imagery will continue, until we encounter certain adjustments to the narrative for the purpose of privileging Gentiles and disadvantaging Jews. Chapter 17:22–3 had anticipated that, "The Son of Man is about to be handed over into peoples' hands. And they will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised. They were greatly pained." Matt 20:17–19 was more explicit about the role of the Jewish authorities:

Look, we are going up to *Jerusalem*; and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief Priests and the Scribes, and they will condemn him to death, and will hand, him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and scourged and crucified, and he will rise on the third day."

The actual entry into Jerusalem in the present chapter, however, represents a coronation and a welcome of Jesus into the Kingdom, depicted in explicitly Jewish imagery. It is a literary shift ahead to a dream sequence, taking a liminal zone oscillating between present and future. Jesus will tell us in chapter 23 that events mentioned in this chapter 21, where we are right now, are reserved for the coming Kingdom: Matt 23:39 says, *I say to you, you will not see me again until you say, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."* But 21:9 recounts the throngs proclaiming: *Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.* What we find here is a foreshadowing of events that lay ahead, beyond the conclusion of the Gospel, which will occur when the Kingdom has been founded and Jesus is being welcomed for the first time in the New Jerusalem. I discussed this phenomenon in the introduction to chapter 14. The description of the entry and its reference to the book of Psalms solidly mark this part of the chapter as both early and Jewish.

The account continues in this way until verses 15–16: *The chief Priests and the Scribes saw the wonders which he did, and the children crying out in the Temple, 'Hosanna to the Son of David!', and they became indignant.* This happens in real time, in contrast to the earlier shouts of "Hosanna" which foreshadowed

a scenario yet to come in some distant ethereal future. The flash forward to the future reverts to narrative “now time” at the point of Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem.

There is a question among scholars as to whether or not Jesus’ overturning the tables in the Temple is part of the earliest strata of Gospel tradition. I vote yes. Through a number of studies devoted to this chapter of Matthew, I came to the conclusion that the episode in question shows us a Jesus who is pro-Temple, insistent that it function as the House of the Lord in fulfillment of Zechariah’s vision.<sup>1</sup>

Let me reconstruct the thinking of the exegete who painted the scenes in the early part of chapter 21. He was a master artist who could weave oral traditions about the life of Jesus, biblical verses and moral precepts into a short, compelling narrative. The definition of robbers as those who steal, kill, commit adultery, swear falsely and worship foreign gods that Jeremiah cited is superseded by the Gospel, which redefines them as those who arrogate space to themselves in God’s holy House for commercial purposes. That which is permissible in the present is not to be permitted in the Kingdom, which demands full consecration of the space where God dwells. This is how the original author of the tradition pieced together his story:

Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for *My house* will be called a house of prayer for all nations.” (Isaiah 56:7). Specifically, a house of prayer and not a house of robbers. “Has *this house*, which bears my name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the Lord.” (Jer 7:11) And who are these robbers? Those who sell and buy in the Temple compound, making it a “house of trade.” Jesus will restore the holiness of God’s house in the Next World, fulfilling Zachariah’s prophecy “in that day there shall be no more any merchant (*kena’ani*) in the *house of the Lord* of hosts.” (Zech 14:21b).

### *Jesus and Jeremiah: The Sanctity of the House of God*

Jeremiah’s words are only one of several citations that comprise a string of scathing prophetic critiques of the misuse of God’s house. We need to examine the degree to which Gospel narrator regards Jesus as a latter day Jeremiah. In earlier chapters I rejected the idea, propounded so often and so widely it has become a gospel truth, that Matthew viewed Jesus as analogous to Moses and

<sup>1</sup> Bassar, “Matthew 21:12: Trading Words, Turning the Tables, Timing the End” in *When Judaism and Christianity Began* (Avery-Peck, Harrington and Neusner 2004), 17. The entire article (pp. 3–18) provides substantial bibliography on the pertinent issues of Matt 21. I expanded upon certain ideas in “Planting Christian Trees in Jewish Soil,” 91–112.

that the reader was expected to make such a connection. However, the proposition that it is Jeremiah, rather than Moses, who is the model for the Jesus narrative, deserves some attention.

Some have noted the observable parallels in the two story lines. God commissions Jeremiah to warn the people that their faith in the Temple, its cult, its priestly authorities and false prophets will not prevent the Babylonians from destroying Jerusalem and carrying them off to a bitter exile. What will save them is true repentance and sincere character reform. In this chapter Jesus emulates the stance of Jeremiah. The Temple is but an empty shell if the people ignore the plight of the needy. They need to recognize that their leaders are deceiving them if they say otherwise, as Jer 7:1–8 declares:

This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: Stand at the gate of the Lord's house and there proclaim this message: Hear the word of the Lord, all you people of Judah who come through these gates to worship the Lord. This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. Do not trust in deceptive words and say, "This is the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord!" If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your forefathers for ever and ever. But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless.

I suspect that the earliest form of the Gospel cast Jesus as a type of Jeremiah, and taught that true repentance was attainable through the observance of certain commandments. We need to direct our attention to the concept of "commandment." We will soon see in Matt 22 that Jesus identifies two commandments as key to keeping God's covenant. Jews have long observed that in Exodus 24:12, the Lord said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain and stay here, and I will give you the *tablets of stone*, with the *law* and *commands* I have written for their instruction." The foundational commands are found in Deut 6:4–6: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These *commandments* that I give you today are to be upon your hearts." The primary commandment to love God is followed by the Decalogue. It is interesting to note that the Rabbis sometimes used the word *commandments* to refer to deeds of kindness not specifically legislated anywhere, which were called by later authorities the "duties of the heart."

Jeremiah 7:9–26 emphasizes certain ethical and societal commandments we can identify as being derived from the second half of Decalogue, whose violation is equated with, and tantamount to, idolatry:

Will you *steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury*, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, “We are safe”—safe to do all these detestable things? Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the Lord. . . . but I gave them this command: Obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people. Walk in all the ways I command you, that it may go well with you. But they did not listen or pay attention; instead, they followed the stubborn inclinations of their evil hearts. *They went backward and not forward. From the time your forefathers left Egypt until now, day after day, again and again I sent you my servants the prophets. But they did not listen to me or pay attention. They were stiff-necked and did more evil than their forefathers. . . .*

Jeremiah's list of sins is echoed in Matthew 19:18: “Do not murder; do not commit adultery; do not steal; do not give false testimony.” The parable of the evil tenant farmers in Matthew 21:33–39 is reminiscent of Jeremiah's reference to God sending his servants and prophets, who are consistently ignored.

But the term “commandment” can also refer to the cultivation of the inner traits of love and compassion. Reflecting this long recognized significance, the *Yerushalmi* uses *mitzvah* to denote “a good and ethical deed”. *Y. Pe'ah* 1:5 mentions an ancient teaching that certain laws (*mitzvot*) have no operational standard of quantity, frequency, intensity or duration for determining the adequacy of their fulfillment. No minimum or maximum requirements limit the degree and extent to which these commandments have been properly observed. When the Talmud asks why some such laws are declared to have no set limits and while others are not, the answer is in some cases, going beyond certain limits in the performance of a particular *mitzvah* might be unnecessary and even unreasonable, since it would result in no greater benefit to the person who performs it or to anyone else. Other *mitzvot*—particularly certain acts of loving kindness—have no point of diminishing returns. The greater the effort expended, the greater the benefit derived from their performance. It is not surprising that, in popular parlance, the word *mitzvah* has been and continues to be used to mean “good deed,” apart from any imperative connotation of *commandment*.

Thus in Chapter 22, when Jesus is asked about the primary commandments, he responds with two commandments to love. In the Sermon on the Mount

(chapters 5–7) he also delineates the inner qualities of those who are blessed, and points out those needing attention and correction. The idea of perfecting character traits that flows from Jeremiah and Deuteronomy are codified by Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* ("Laws of Repentance" 7:3) as follows:

A person should not think that repentance is only necessary for those sins that involve a deed such as promiscuity, robbery, or burglary. Rather, just as a person is obligated to repent from these, similarly, he must search out his evil character traits (*de'ot ra'ot*). He must repent from anger, hatred, envy, frivolity, the pursuit of money and honor, the pursuit of gluttony, and the like. He must repent for all [of the above]. These sins are more difficult than those that involve physical deeds. If a person is attached to these, it is then more difficult for him to separate himself.

Jeremiah stresses these aspects of *mitzvah*. He calls the leaders of his day hypocrites and stage actors. Jeremiah 8: 8–13 castigates the "scribes" in much the way that Matthew does:

How can you say, "We are wise, for we have the law of the Lord," when actually the lying pen of the scribes has handled it falsely? The wise will be put to shame; they will be dismayed and trapped. Since they have rejected the word of the Lord, what kind of wisdom do they have? Therefore I will give their wives to other men and their fields to new owners. From the least to the greatest, all are greedy for gain; prophets and priests alike, all practice deceit.... "I will take away their harvest, declares the Lord. There will be no grapes on the vine. *There will be no figs on the tree, and their leaves will wither.* What I have given them will be taken from them...

The Gospel uses the parable of the fig tree (21:19–20) to discuss faith, at the same time pointing to the fulfillment of the prophecy of Jeremiah. Matthew declares that Israel has been rejected and that its inheritance will be given to another nation (Matt 21: 41–43). Jeremiah also spoke of Israel's land and possessions being taken away but he makes it abundantly clear that when Israel repents, they will all be restored. I would speculate that the original Gospel of the Jewish churches referred to Jews forfeiting their possessions to another nation, but not Israel's covenant being given to the Gentiles, or Jews being eternally dispossessed of their election as God's treasured nation. Jeremiah 12:14–15 is instructive:

This is what the Lord says: "As for all my wicked neighbors who seize the inheritance I gave my people Israel, I will uproot them from their lands

and I will uproot the house of Judah from among them. But after I uproot them, I will again have compassion and will bring each of them back to his own inheritance and his own country.

Parallels between the Gospels and Jeremiah are evident in the following passage which has Jeremiah arrested for speaking against the Temple, and for which he is to be killed.

Jer 26:4–16:

This is what the Lord says: If you do not listen to me and follow my law, which I have set before you, and if you do not listen to the words of my servants the prophets, whom I have sent to you again and again (though you have not listened), then I will make this house like Shiloh and this city an object of cursing among all the nations of the earth.

The priests, the prophets and all the people heard Jeremiah speak these words in the house of the Lord. But as soon as Jeremiah finished telling all the people everything the Lord had commanded him to say, the priests, the prophets and all the people seized him and said, “You must die! Why do you prophesy in the Lord’s name that this house will be like Shiloh and this city will be desolate and deserted?” And all the people crowded around Jeremiah in the house of the Lord. When the officials of Judah heard about these things, they went up from the royal palace to the house of the Lord and took their places at the entrance of the New Gate of the Lord’s house.

Then the priests and the prophets said to the officials and all the people, “This man should be sentenced to death because he has prophesied against this city. You have heard it with your own ears!”

Then Jeremiah said to all the officials and all the people: “The Lord sent me to prophesy against this house and this city all the things you have heard. Now reform your ways and your actions and obey the Lord your God. Then the Lord will relent and not bring the disaster he has pronounced against you. As for me, I am in your hands; do with me whatever you think is good and right. Be assured, however, that if you put me to death, you will bring the guilt of innocent blood on yourselves and on this city and on those who live in it, for in truth the Lord has sent me to you to speak all these words in your hearing.”

Then the officials and all the people said to the priests and the prophets, “This man should not be sentenced to death! He has spoken to us in the name of the Lord our God.”

It would seem that the early Gospel tradition saw parallels between Jeremiah's life and that of Jesus. It may therefore be the case that, to the very end, Jesus expected he, like Jeremiah, would be spared death. This would explain the perplexity at the crucifixion when Jesus is not saved, which I believe may be a vestige of an earlier Gospel. Through the chain of transmission, editorial glosses and compositions reworked these earlier sources, so that Jews became the enemy and the Gentile nations the redeemed.

### *Matthew's Parables*

The parables in the chapter whose message is that the Jews have been disinherited from their promised portion in the Next World I view as having been based on parables told by the Rabbis—with one small but very significant difference. The usurpers in the rabbinic parables were unlawful interlopers claiming to be descendants (Paul might have called them “sons”) of Abraham and the Patriarchs. In the Gospel parables, the true lessees of the Kingdom are indeed the Gentiles, since the Jewish workers have forfeited their claim to their legacy of eternal life promised to them by not paying their fair share. The parables, likely heard in debates from Jews who discounted Christian claims that they were to be the real heirs, reverse the roles of the principal characters to suit the evangelist's agenda.

### **Commentary**

*When they had come near to Jerusalem, they came to Bethphage, on the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent out two disciples: (v. 1)*

Bethphage (in Hebrew *Beit Pagi*) is very close to Jerusalem. According to *t. Pes.* 8:8, "One slaughters his Passover offering first in the Temple and then mourns his father in *Beit Pagi*," while *Sip. Num piska* 151 states, "If he brought his sacrifices from *Beit Pagi* I might erroneously think he could offer them in Jerusalem and then return to sleep in *Beit Pagi*.

At the close of the chapter the Gospel will again make metaphorical use of fig trees, which one can uproot with faith.<sup>2</sup> The Gospel will also speak of moving mountains with faith, the background to which appears to be Zech 14:4:

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<sup>2</sup> Some commentators see the fig tree as a metaphor for Pharisees and hypocrisy: outward show of foliage but barren of productive fruits. The association between the withered fig tree and the fruitless Jews was so hackneyed by the time of St. Bernard of Clairvaux in the 11th century that he referred to Jews as the “sterile fig tree which had to be pruned” (see the

On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives will be split in two from east to west, forming a great valley, with half of the mountain moving north and half moving south.

Subsequent scenes are predicated on Gen 49 and on Zech 9—scriptural sources in which Jews found messianic allusions.

*He said to them, “Go into the village before you, and right away you will find a donkey tied up and a colt with her. Untie them and bring them to me.”* (v. 2)

According to the Gospel tradition, Jesus is consciously fulfilling the literal import of the Scriptures. Gen 49: 10–11 foretells, making abundant use of literary parallelism:

The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be. *Binding his foal unto the vine, and his ass's colt unto the choice vine;* he washed his garments in wine, and his clothes in the blood of grapes.

Now the time has come to untie them—although the foal and the colt are one and the same—in order to demonstrate the fulfillment of a scriptural prophecy. Since the verse uses two different words, Jesus will ride on two animals. By doing so he will fulfill Zechariah 9:9 (cited only by Matt 21:5), John 12:15:

Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having *salvation*, meek and riding on a donkey and a colt, *sons of she-asses*.

The phrase “sons of she-asses” highlights the basis for understanding that more than one animal is being referred to. Nevertheless, Luke (19:30) Mark (11:2) and John (12:14) only mention the colt. More significant is that the word for *salvation* (*nosh'a*) derives from same trilateral Hebrew root as Jesus’ name (*Yeshua*). (Matthew has omitted this from his scriptural citation, and further along in the commentary we will speculate as to why he did so.)

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sources in D. Berger, *Persecution, Polemic, and Dialogue: Essays in Jewish-Christian Relations* (2010) 259, n. 75). My own preference is to think that sometimes a fig tree is also a fig tree and there is no metaphor. There is a display of the power of faith, with two examples, and that is enough reason to report it the Gospel.

Jerusalem is the referent of the prophetic text, and it is therefore the place to which Jesus must ride. Luke and Mark make a point of stating that no one had ever before ridden the animal on which Jesus is mounted, implying that it was reserved exclusively for the messiah.

*If anyone says anything to you, reply “The lord needs them.” He will send them right away. (v. 3)*

The angel in charge of these animals awaits the password “the lord needs them” so he can provide Jesus with these special messianic donkeys. This response is widespread throughout all Gospels.

*This happened to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet... (v. 4)*

As I explained in the General Introduction and the earlier chapters of this book, “Type 2” fulfillment (*qiyyum*) of a prophecy requires a specific act performed for the sole purpose of literally carrying out the prophet’s words, even if originally an idiomatic expression.

*Speak to the daughter of Zion, “Look, your king is coming to you, meekly sitting on a donkey, and a colt, the foal of a riding animal” (see Zech 9:9). (v. 5)*

The citation here interweaves Isa 62:11 “Speak to the Daughter of Zion, ‘Look, your savior is coming!’” with Zech 9:9.<sup>3</sup> But Isaiah says “savior” and not

<sup>3</sup> See Victor Eppstein, “The Historicity of the Gospel Account of the Cleansing of the Temple” (1964), 42–58. He discusses historical problems in the narrative: how is it Jesus is not outraged by the commerce when he first enters the Temple precincts but only after he re-enters from the Mount of Olives, how is it no one purifies themselves when entering the Temple (as Luke says Paul did—Acts 21:26). The author supplies Talmudic evidence that the Mount of Olives bordered on the Temple’s holy spaces and that presumably the Jesus party was there a week to complete purification rituals. Furthermore the High Court had departed from the Temple chamber to relocate near the Mount of Olives (40 years before the Destruction of the Temple) to the place where sacrificial animals had always been sold for use in the Temple. The locals there used those funds to help support the High Court since the Temple officials had cut off its revenues for some reason of dispute. The spiteful High Priest that day began to sell animals (at reduced prices?) in the Temple. Jesus was outraged by the spiteful act aimed at the High Court and attacked the newly erected stalls with the approval of most including the Temple guard. The anti-Jerusalem Gospel writers rewrote the episode as an attack on the institution of the Temple. This piece, written in 1963, did not receive much attention. Our purpose is to explicate the text of Matthew and not engage in historical reconstruction.

“king” here, utilizing the term *yish’ekh*—a form of *yeshu’a*, the name of Jesus. Curiously, the Gospel omits both this reference to salvation (*yesh’ā*) in Isaiah and also the words of Zech 9:9, “righteous and having salvation” which echo Jesus’ name. Be that as it may, by the chapter’s end, Jesus will have caused a disruption in the Temple, which in its original setting would have been understood as a pro-Temple move. The Gospel will radically rework the whole into a portrayal of Jesus rejecting the Jews, their leaders and their legacy, replacing all of them with Gentiles. In an unequivocal condemnation of Jewish society, the Gospel asserts that tax collectors and prostitutes will take priority over the “decent” folk who have not heeded Jesus’ call to faith.

Matthew nonetheless discloses his Jewish sources in having Jesus ride two animals in literal fulfillment of his task. We should consider the account to be based largely on early apostolic tradition, with omissions here and there to suit the audience of Matthew’s time. To clear the varnish and later accretions requires no great strain on the imagination. Seeing beneath the later touch-ups by omitting certain verses altogether, or deleting words and phrases like “your savior,” allows us to observe the process by which the Gospels were updated in the first century, with minimal literary violence to the received tradition.

*The disciples went and did as Jesus ordered them. They led the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them, and he sat upon them. (vv. 6–7)*

The text states that the disciples carried out Jesus’ instructions to the letter, without changing a single detail, in response to the directive “the lord has need of it.” After leading the donkey and foal to Jesus, their assigned mission ended. Consider *Sip. Zuta* 8:3 speaking about Aaron the priest’s obedience to the instructions of Moses.

He did as he was ordered: he did not subtract and he did not add.

As for the disciples decking the donkeys with their garments, this was their own act of homage based upon, I suspect, the well-known custom of showing respect to a new king by placing a barrier between him and mundane surfaces such as floors or animals. Consider the spreading cloaks to this effect when Jehu was proclaimed King of Israel.

2 Kings 9:12–13:

And he said, Thus and thus he spoke to me, saying, Thus says the Lord, I have anointed you king over Israel. Then they hurried, and each person took his garment, and put it under him on the top of the stairs, and blew with trumpets, saying, Jehu is king.

*The great crowd spread their own cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. (v. 8)*

Perhaps the crowd covered the road for the same reason the disciples covered the animal (v. 7). It is also possible that winter might have ravaged the path, and the throngs “resurfaced the roads” so that the animals would not slip.

While in previous works I have written some clever explanations of this verse which connect it to Scriptural citations and Jewish rituals, upon further reflection I am convinced we need not find anything more in the author’s intent here than engendering appreciation of the size of the crowds that thronged the processional path and of their recognition of Jesus as their savior.

*The crowds that led him and the ones that followed him called out, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! (Ps 118.26) Hosanna to the highest place!” (v. 9)*

We have here a *Hoshanna* hymn that began, as above, and a series of short phrases: “*Hoshanna* to X”; “*Hoshanna* to Y” etc.<sup>4</sup> Each stanza likely closed with a phrase referring to Jesus (such as Son of David)<sup>5</sup> followed by the refrain *Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord*, indicating that Jesus was “the one who comes.” Then a new series of *Hoshanna* phrases began. Such hymns are typical of medieval and modern liturgy but their current alphabetic structure suggests a longer oral history behind them. Indeed, *Hoshanna* as a term of adulation was unknown until post-Talmudic times. Yet in the Gospels we discover the antiquity of its form and usage.<sup>6</sup> I would expect that we have an original Jewish/Christian hymn.

It may be of interest to note that the word *hoshanna* is in fact found in the Talmud in the sense of a palm branch (*b. Sukkah* 31a; 33b; 37a; 46b), as well as in *Lev. Rab.* 37:2, where the name of the festival known as *Hoshannah Rabbah* occurs without explanation. *Hoshannah* in the sense of “glory to” first appears in the written record of Jewish liturgy within the corpus of medieval *piyyut* poetry.

<sup>4</sup> For the meaning and history of interpretation of this term see J. Fitzmyer, “Aramaic Evidence Affecting the Interpretation of Hosanna in the New Testament” in *Tradition and Interpretation in the New Testament* (Hawthorne and Betz 1987) 110–118.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 19:38 replaces *Hoshanna* by “Glory.” Mark 11:9–10 in what seems to me an original Jewish *piyyut* (before its Christianization in Matthew’s source) introduces the hymn with *Hoshanna* and then recites *Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord* which it expands in targumic fashion: *Blessed be the coming of our father David*. This is followed by *Hoshanna—in the highest*.

<sup>6</sup> For the waving of branches as a sign of festive celebration, apart from its use in the *Sukkot* ceremonies, see Kister, “Words and Formulae,” 120–22.

The Gospels confirm that what would appear to have been a relatively late usage, according to Jewish attestation, is in fact a very early usage. The Gospel narrative assumes complete familiarity with the meaning of *hoshannah*. Once again we find justification for using late Jewish sources to illustrate Gospel passages, and vice versa.

*When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was shaken, saying "Who is this?"*  
(v. 10)

In this layer of tradition the inhabitants of Jerusalem have no idea who Jesus is, and we need to stop and sort out the issues. Jesus has been riding on two animals as a messianic sign (which also points toward a future dimension). Crowds have been following him—but their chanting, praising him and welcoming him as king and savior happens in future literary time. As far as we know, all of the crowds follow him because they know him as Son of David, the faith healer and preacher, and nothing more. The disciples have been sworn to secrecy. Only from a perspective in the future can it be realized that this was a victory procession and coronation, inaugurating the Kingdom, with Jesus as its prince. But in real time, the crowds are following Jesus solely because he is a heroic faith healer.

In Jerusalem, a place far from Jesus' usual sphere of activity, crowds are assembled for the Feast of Booths (as John describes the occasion for the pilgrimage) or perhaps Passover (as the synoptics have it). Then Jesus and his followers arrive, attracting attention. Some among the pilgrims entering Jerusalem apparently inquire as to what this ragtag procession is all about.

*The crowds said, "This is the prophet—Jesus, the one from Nazareth in the Galilee"* (v. 11)

"The prophet" here means a holy faith healer, a term also used to describe Abraham (Gen 20:7) and Jesus (Matt 13:57). Such prophets were not uncommon, so it must be specified that Jesus is the one from Nazareth in the Galilee. I see no confrontational tone either in the question or in the answer. That these crowds consider Jesus to be a prophet is reiterated at the end of the chapter. It is difficult to reconcile his popularity with the Jerusalem crowds here with their demanding his execution in chapter 27.

This is why the next verse comes as surprise, capturing the attention of virtually all Matthean scholars and commentators.

*Jesus entered the Temple and threw out all those who were selling and buying in the Temple, and he overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the chairs of the dove sellers. (v. 12)*

It seems certain that there were *sheqel* exchangers within the Temple precincts beginning 19 days before Passover began. The moneychangers would forego their usual exchange kiosks (likely only makeshift tables), and make no commissions when they collected the Temple tax. They sat in those few areas of the Temple complex that were designated as “unconsecrated” (see Meiri, *Beit Ha-behirah* commentary to *b. Meg.* 29b).

Most illuminating for us is that *Malbim*—perhaps the most learned of modern religious commentators—explains Zechariah 14:21 to mean that all available pots in Judah and Jerusalem will have been used many times for sacrifices from all the converts to Judaism in messianic times; therefore no unconsecrated ones will be available for mundane purposes. I am struck by how well his words match the those of the Gospels.

*There will no longer be any merchants or sellers of lambs, turtle doves, doves for sacrifices as there was previously when they sold them for cash. In the future no one will trade for profit but everyone will gladly donate his animals to the Temple.<sup>7</sup>*

We have here the fulfillment of a verse not quoted in the Gospels: *[A]nd in that day there shall be no more any merchant (*kena'ani*) in the house of the Lord of hosts* (Zech 14:21b). The prophet proclaims that the day when there will be no more traders in the Temple will inaugurate the Messianic Era, I am inclined to see the Gospel engaging either a continuation of or flash forward to the future dimension of the realized Kingdom. I do not think the Gospel tradition records this to indicate something symbolic of the future but rather intends to transport us into to the future where we see the event transpire. As understood by the first Jesus celebrants in this early Jewish account, the Kingdom is not

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<sup>7</sup> When Mark 11:16 refers to Jesus preventing anyone from carrying vessels in the Temple, I take it he is referring to the permitted areas which were not sacred space. Josephus lets us know in *Apion* 2:106–108 that no one at all carried in the Temple, “Lastly, it is not permitted to carry any vessel into the Temple . . . nothing like food or drink is brought within the Temple.” Jesus does not enforce Temple rules, rather he is zealous to protect the permitted areas from unconsecrated activity—everything should be holy in the Kingdom including the bells of the horses, as Zech 14:21 stipulates in poetic hyperbole.

envisioned as a platonic world of souls but as a spatial and temporal domain with physical places and people.

*He said to them: it is written, “My house will be called a house of prayer,” (Isa 56:7) but you have made it a cave of robbers.<sup>8</sup> (Jer 7:11).” (v. 13)*

The fuller and more precise passage from Isaiah reads, *My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations*. The citation is incomplete, lacking the universalistic concluding phrase that opened the Temple to Gentiles and to all who behave justly, in Isaiah's idealized future beyond salvation, a pro-Temple motif. No conclusion can be drawn as to whether or not the omitted ending was originally there in Matthew (and Luke) was later deleted. Mark preserves the fuller reading as does Howard's *Hebrew Matthew*. Scribes and copyists could fill in a few words or abridge a well-known scripture by habit. Without more unequivocal evidence, no invidious motives should be imputed to the truncation of these citations in the process of combining them. Their primary purpose is clear: to sharply contrast the ideal “house of prayer” anticipated by Isaiah with the “cave of robbers” excoriated by Jeremiah. For Jesus, “robbers” are people who charge money for holy items (see further the comments of Malbim), which completely alters the definition of robbery given by Jeremiah. Stealing, murder, adultery, swearing falsely, worshipping Baal, and idolatry (Jer 7:9) are supplanted in the Gospels by the islands of profane space in the Temple compound that rob the Temple of its identity as the complete and utter sacred abode of God's presence. The sanctity of the Temple—God's home—has been undermined and that is the only concern in this passage. It is not about Isaiah's theology and eschatology, but about justifying Jesus' violent reaction.

*Blind and crippled people came to him in the Temple, and he cured them.*  
(v. 14)

Here begins a new unit where children in the present world intuit what transpired in the earlier part of the chapter—a part that transcends the world of the here and now and projects ahead to the triumph of v. 39. In conjunction with this vision Jesus fulfills Isaiah's “messianic” vision of the redeemed world in Isa 35:5–6: “then the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf will be unstopped; then he who limps will leap like a stag and the tongue of the dumb sing.” This is important not only for the obvious reasons but also because some sects of Jews excluded handicapped people from participating

<sup>8</sup> LXX Isa 56:7: “My house of prayer; Jer 7:11: My house is not a den of robbers.”

in the congregation. We note the following from the Dead Sea Scroll Library [*1QSa* 2:3–9 (cf. *CD* 15:16–17):

And no man who is afflicted in a single one of all human defilements may enter the congregation of God. And as for any man so afflicted that he lacks stability within the congregation; and anyone afflicted in his flesh such as one who is crippled in feet or hands, lame, blind, deaf, mute or one who has a defect in his flesh that is visible, or a stumbling old man who cannot take care of himself within the congregation; these may not enter to take office within the congregation of the men of God, because the holy angels are in their congregation.<sup>9</sup>

We should keep in mind Matt 21:9, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” which the children unwittingly echo (21:15). It would seem the chapter has been subjected to some ironic cross-referencing that alludes to a promise of triumph yet to be fulfilled (Matt 21:39). Messianic prerequisites are being met, conflicts flare, upheaval is deemed imminent, and a messianic reference in Scripture is left suspended, awaiting both interpretation and fulfillment. It is a very busy chapter.

*The chief priests and the scribes saw the wonders which he did, and the children crying out in the Temple, “Hosanna to David’s son!” and they became indignant. (v. 15)*

Here the children invoke the Hosanna phrase liturgically (*krazontas*—in a beginning tone) and the weight of chap. 21:9 carries forward. Jesus, Son of David, is the one who comes in the name of the Lord and we bless him from the house of the Lord (Ps 118:26: *Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, from the house of the Lord we bless you*). I would read the account here as intimating that the children recited the full hymn, identifying Jesus as the one who is to come in the Lord’s name. There is no reason to suppose that these priests and scribes have ever heard of Jesus. They want to chase away the children because, while faith healing most likely was not an uncommon occurrence in the ancient world and, according to contemporary reports, there was no shortage of redeemer claimants in the first century, referring to Jesus as “Son of David” in worshipful tones would be considered seditious both by Rome and the Judean political and religious leadership.

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9 Translation from *The New Damascus Document: the Midrash on the Eschatological Torah of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Wacholder 2007), 311.

*They said to him, “Do you hear what these ones are saying?” Jesus said to them, “Yes. Have you never read ‘From the mouths of babes and those who are suckling I shall prepare praise.’”<sup>10</sup> [Ps 8:3] (v. 16)*

The priests, dismayed, ask whether Jesus understands the implication of the children's chanting. Their concern is without malice; they expect Jesus to correct and subdue the children's messianic excitement, ignoring their words instead of encouraging them, and avoiding awkwardness for all concerned. It seems me, although I cannot be certain, that the Gospel is following a very early apostolic tradition here. I cannot tell. Jesus' response is confrontational, and in not complying appears to contradict his instructions to the disciples to keep his identity a secret. He cites a scripture affirming that the “mouths of babes” have got matters exactly right, and makes it clear that he will not discourage them from praising him.

*Leaving them he went out of the city to Bethany and was lodged there. In the morning, returning to the city, he became hungry. (vv. 17–18)*

The details of what transpires at Bethany are given at 26:6, when Jesus is anointed in preparation for burial and resurrection. But here we see a very human Jesus who is looking for nourishment. This human Jesus shows that people can work wonders if they have not closed off their hearts to the possibility that faith rules the natural world; the natural world cannot rule faith.

*He saw a single fig tree by the road and came to it and found nothing on it, but only leaves. He said to it, “May there never be fruit from you!” Suddenly the fig tree withered. (v. 19)*

Fruit trees, in Jewish tradition, serve important needs. To this day they inspire, and require, the recitation of codified blessings of their Creator, not only when eating their fruit but when seeing their buds, as in *b. Ber. 43b*:

Rav Yehudah ruled, “Whoever goes out in the month of Nisan (the month when Passover occurs) and sees trees budding says: Be He blessed for nothing lacks in His world. He has created goodly creatures and goodly trees that people may benefit from them.”

The blessing, for which we have no evidence prior to the mid-fourth century, may well lie behind this pericope. Yet again the Gospels hint at the antiquity

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<sup>10</sup> LXX Ps 8:3: “From the mouths of babes and those who are suckling I shall prepare praise.”

of practices recorded in the Talmud, which expects fruit trees to bud in Nisan. I do not know whether a fig tree would have been expected to have fruit so early in the spring. The Gospel seems to think so. In the judgment of Jesus, whatever does not satisfy human needs—the basis for the Talmudic blessing—deserves to be cursed and wither away. In biblical law one is not permitted to destroy fruit bearing trees, but barren trees that can serve another purpose may be cut down.<sup>11</sup>

Jesus would use the tree to teach a lesson and that seems sufficient to warrant cursing it. The tree then withers on its own. What does not sit well, even in the most generous reading of this passage which I have tried to provide, is that Jesus condemns the tree to never bearing fruit, at which point it has no further reason to live. This is quite different from the message of the midrash from *Exod. Rab.* 1:29 that explains why Moses saw fit to use the divine name to pronounce a curse and kill an Egyptian abusing a Hebrew slave, because he could foretell that nothing positive would ever emanate from him or any of his descendants:

And the Rabbis say that Moses saw there was no hope (ripening fig) of righteous offspring from him or his seed until the end of time . . .” so he smote the Egyptian” (*Exod* 2:12) . . . the Rabbis said he [cursed him] with the divine name to kill him.

It is striking that the word for “hope” here is *tohelet*; in its Aramaic form, *tohalta*, refers to “a near ripened fig” that holds out the promise the tree will be fully productive.

*Seeing this, the disciples were amazed: “How did the fig tree wither so suddenly?”* (v. 20)

This is exactly the point: Jesus can control nature. In no other way would it be possible for a tree to dry up in a moment.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> The value of the fruit tree is illustrated in *b. Ta'an.* 23a: “When I was born into this world, I found many carob trees planted by my father and grandfather. Just as they planted trees for me, I am planting trees for my children and grandchildren so they will be able to eat the fruit of these trees.” Cf. *b. Ta'an.* 5b: Tree, O tree, with what [blessings] shall I bless thee? . . . May it be His will that all your shoots be like you!

<sup>12</sup> Cf. *Hab* 3:17–18: “Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my savior” (Heb: *yishi'i*, the root of the name Jesus—*Yeshua'*).

*Jesus replied, “Amen, I say to you, if you have faith and do not stop to consider, you will not only do this thing of the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ it will happen. When you are trusting, whatever you ask for in the prayer you will receive.”* (v. 21–22)

*Y. Ta'an . 1:4* describes a simple donkey driver whose prayers were answered. The Rabbis tried to find out the reason why, when their own prayers went unanswered:

He told them: One time I sold my donkey for a certain woman who was crying in a theatre (where prostitutes gathered). I asked her what was wrong, and she said “My husband is imprisoned and I need to attend to whatever can be done to free him.” So I sold my donkey and gave her the funds. “This is yours! Free your husband and so do not sin.” [The Rabbis said] to him. “You are worthy of praying and being answered.”

The Rabbis never underestimated the power of faith in prayer, as I discussed in the introduction to chap. 17 above, but they valued the verdict we now know from 1 Macc. 2:52: “Was not Abraham tested and found faithful, was that not considered as justifying him?” Faith is more effective with an act of self-sacrifice than simply by justification through faith alone. And the lesson? Shut out what you believe to be possible and know for certain that with faith all things are possible. If the cartoon coyote chases Road-runner over the cliff, he will not fall as long as he believes he is still on the ground. Once he realizes he is not, he cannot stay suspended in the air, and because of the laws of physics he falls at a horrendous rate of speed. Philo records that it often happened, as he shut out his rational thoughts about how God governs the world, that he was transported into sublime realms of the spirit where all of the visions he experienced transcended what was physically possible.

The fig tree is but one example of the power of faith, about which an earlier saying of Jesus comes to the fore:

Amen, I say to you, if you had faith in the amount of a mustard seed, you would ask this mountain, ‘Move there from here,’ and it would move. Nothing would be impossible for you to do.” (Matt 17:19–20).

According to many commentators, this aspect of the Gospel tradition prepares us for the denouement in the final chapters, by implicating the chief priests and elders—identified as Pharisees in v. 45—who were the major authority figures, in the trial and death of Jesus.

F.F. Bruce provides illuminating botanical information about fig trees:

"The time of figs was not yet," says Mark (11:13), for it was just before Passover, about six weeks before the fully-formed fig appears. The fact that Mark adds these words shows that he knew what he was talking about. When the fig leaves appear about the end of March, they are accompanied by a crop a small knobs, called *taqsh* by the Arabs, a sort of forerunner of the real figs. These *taqsh* are eaten by peasants and others when hungry. They drop off before the real fig is formed. But if the leaves appear unaccompanied by *taqsh*, there will be no figs that year... For all its fair show of foliage it [the tree Jesus cursed] was a fruitless and hopeless tree.

The whole incident was an acted parable. To Jesus the fig-tree, fair but barren, spoke of the city of Jerusalem, where He had found much religious observance, but no response to His message from God. The withering of the tree was thus an omen of the disaster which, as He foresaw and foretold, would shortly fall upon the city.<sup>13</sup>

Nonetheless, I consider the interpretation of Jesus' cursing the fig tree as a prophecy about the destruction of Jerusalem, however plausible and creative, to be unwarranted and misleading as the text itself says nothing of the sort.

David deSilva, like Bruce and most others, sees the episodes of clearing the Temple and cursing the fig tree, whole cloth, as pro-Gentile and anti-Temple.<sup>14</sup> It is true that the Gospels aim to highlight the wickedness of Jewish authorities in the time of Jesus. Yet to me the fig tree does not symbolize the lack of sustenance provided by the Temple, elders etc. The subsequent vineyard parables, on the other hand—in which the Jews are displaced from being its rightful lessees—imposes this understanding on earlier episodes, so that the chapter can be read as a coherent, anti-Israel whole. While Matthew and the Gospel authors may well have seen matters in this way, I would nonetheless argue that the first 22 verses of this chapter need not necessarily have stemmed from the regnant position of Gentiles in the churches in Matthew's day.

*When he came to the Temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him while he was teaching: "By what authority do you do these things? Who gave you this authority?" (v. 23)*

<sup>13</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (1960), 74. Bruce cites W.M. Christie, *Palestine Calling* (1939) 118ff.

<sup>14</sup> David A. deSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods & Ministry Formation* (2004), 216.

The wording suggests the condemnation in Isaiah 3:14 of Israel's leadership, *zekeinim* and *sarim*:

The Lord enters into judgment against the *elders and prime leaders* of his people: It is you who have ruined my vineyard; the plunder from the poor is in your houses.

The Gospel then directs attention to the question of whether Jesus has authority in God's house.<sup>15</sup>

*Jesus answered them, “I also will ask you one thing: If you tell me what I ask you, I will tell you by what authority I do these things.”* (v. 24)

This exchange is reminiscent of the repartee found here and there in the Talmud, and at times in the mouths of children. But Jesus is reluctant to disclose his messianic credentials prematurely. So he resorts to the most common ploy in polemics: setting a rhetorical trap for his opponents. However, in this case it really makes very little sense. It is plausible that a wise person might not know whether or not something was ordained by God. This is hardly equivalent to not knowing where one received one's credentials and authorization to teach in the Temple. The rhetoric is exaggerated, but the point is brilliantly made: that the Pharisees and Sadducees who remained indifferent to John the Baptist are inferior to the tax-collectors and prostitutes who repented because they trusted him. Jesus' authority is evident from their turning towards John and repenting because they have faith that the end is rapidly approaching. That being the case, from whom should he seek authority to teach?

*“The immersion of John: Where did it come from? From heaven or from human beings?” They considered among themselves: “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Then why did you not have faith in him?’”. “But if we say, ‘From human beings,’ we fear the crowd, for they all hold that John was like a prophet.” They answered Jesus: “We do not know.” He said to them as well, “Neither am I telling you by what authority I do these things.”* (vv. 24–27)

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<sup>15</sup> See Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism*, 217 ff. Daube provides us with sources for understanding the usage of “authority” in Talmudic literature, some of which may be relevant here. His discussion would be more applicable to expounding upon legal matters than preaching about the need for faith.

The question suggests that the leaders of the Temple establishment were skeptical about, perhaps even hostile to, John's practices. Yet they could not openly declare that John was not like a prophet. Behind Jesus' question to them is the implication that Jesus himself has divine authority. It is apparent here that the prophetic status he enjoys is not as great as John's, so the earlier reply of the crowds declaring Jesus to be a prophet is not completely germane. Nevertheless, in v. 46 below the narrator indicates that the crowds did consider Jesus a prophet. This seems to be an afterthought explaining why he had not been seized on the spot for threatening the welfare of the Jews and the Temple, a scene that occurred in a trance-like dream, as I pointed out. Nevertheless, Jesus will compare himself to John in these harangues (v. 32). He has all but declared that he is the Messiah.

Jesus then tells two parables. In one, the status of tax-collectors and other reprobates is declared to be superior to that of the priests and elders. The other elevates Gentiles from outcasts to central players in the coming Kingdom.

*"What does it seem like to you? A person had two children, and he came to the first and said, 'Go, work in the vineyard today. (v. 28)*

Looking back at Matt 18:17—*And if he does not pay attention to them, speak to the assembly. If anyone does not pay attention to the assembly let him be to you just like a Gentile and a tax collector*—we see the reiteration of previous expressions of the utter worthlessness of Gentiles and tax-collectors in earlier Jesus teachings. These reversals are brilliantly executed in the Matthean framework, although the message is hateful and contemptuous. What begins as the narrow edge of Matthew's contribution to a “persecution license” will, at the wider angle of the wedge separating Jews and Christians, encourage Christian mobs in their attack on Jews in the Middle Ages and into the modern period. Jesus himself will conclude his teaching with the dire prognostication that the Gentiles will crush the Jews (most likely predicting the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE). In this passage, Jesus insults his interlocutors by suggesting they are far below these most reviled categories and deserve to die horrible deaths.

*He answered, 'I do not wish to.' But later on he regretted his decision and went. (v. 29)*

The parable conveys that the tax collector and prostitute originally rejected any calls for repentance. Subsequently, as they considered John's message, they adopted his form of baptism and view of repentance, believing the End to be near.

*Going to the other one, he said the same thing. He answered, 'I [will do], Lord.' But he did not go. (v. 30)*

The leaders of the Jews, while acknowledging the notion that the messianic era will only save those who repent and await a personal redeemer, did not concede that the way was open only through John (i.e. Jesus in code), and they will now suffer the consequences. Discussing a period before the ministry of Jesus, the Gospel anachronistically refers to the time after Jesus when segments of the lowly, poor classes of Jews adhered to Christian doctrine and the elite ignored them. I know of no other satisfactory reading of the text here.

*"Which of the two did his father's will?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, Amen, I say to you, tax collectors and prostitutes will go before you to God's kingdom. (v. 31)*

Here the Gospel rises to absolute polemical brilliance in having those who reject Jesus unwittingly condemn themselves. This is how polemic works: posing a question that elicits a response which undercuts the position of the respondent. Similarly, Nathan the Prophet elicited David's condemnation of his own actions by presenting him with a parable (2Sam. 12:1–23). There is a Jewish expression, "May your ears hear what your mouth has spoken." *Tanh. Vayakhel* 2, dealing with a complaint that God gives wisdom to the righteous, asks to whom someone would be more inclined to lend money: a rich person or a poor one? The obvious answer is the rich one. Conclusion: "May your ears hear . . . etc." In the same way, according to the argument here, God gives wisdom to those who will not misuse it.

*John came to you on the path of righteousness, and you did not have faith in him. The tax collectors and the prostitutes had faith in him. You saw him, but later you did not regret your decision and have faith in him (v. 32).*

The message of the parable thus far seems to be that those who had turned their backs on the Torah and decency came round to having faith in John, the priests and elders did not. Here faith in John is tantamount to faith in Jesus, as the distinction between the two is blurred. In Matthew 11:18–19 the roles were clear: *For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, "He has a demon." The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners."* Matthew must be well aware of his own insistence that Jesus hung around with riffraff. So when Jesus talks about faith in John, the reader understands he means himself.

The second parable is indisputably a Gentile Gospel teaching, preparing the ground for the prophecy that Israel will forfeit the covenanted promise that it is to be God's special people, privileged with His inheritance. The first parable speaks of the Jewish enemies of Jewish Christianity; the second of the Jewish enemies of Gentile Christianity.

*Hear another illustration: A person was a householder who planted a vineyard, put a wall around it, dug out a winepress, and built a tower. He let it out to farmers and went on a journey. (v. 33)*

Isaiah 5:2–7 presents what appears to be a related parable with an almost identical beginning, but with a very different focus and function:

He dug it [the vineyard] up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit.

The Gospel criticizes the sharecroppers who keep the harvest to themselves, and must be fired. Isaiah's parable vituperates against the useless and destructive produce of the vineyard, which must be razed. In the literature of the Jewish sages, the imagery and setting of Isaiah's parable will become part of a standard denunciation of all those who would usurp Israel's rightful inheritance. One might view such Jewish stories as directed against those of the Gospel, or conversely see the Gospel as countering the Jewish stories. We will return to this issue in vv. 34–36.

The phrase “let it out to farmers” can refer to either of two arrangements by which land was leased from a landowner by tenant farmers who did not own property, according to the terminology discussed in commentaries to *m. B. Meṣi'a* . 9:1. A *ḥoker* rented the field or vineyard for a year or more in exchange for a fixed sum or fixed amount of produce. An *aris* (sharecropper) entered into a contract with the landowner to work the vineyard until the completion of the harvest or some other fixed date, turning over two-thirds of the produce and keeping a third (or other agreed upon proportion, such as a quarter or a half) for himself. The latter arrangement is operative in the parable below:

*When the harvest time drew near, he [i.e. the landowner] sent his servants to the farmers to take his harvest. The farmers took his servants, beat one of them, killed another, and still another they stoned. A second time, he sent other servants, more than the first time, and they did likewise to them. Later*

*he sent his son to them saying, “They will defer to my son.” The farmers, seeing the son, said among themselves, “This one is the heir. Let us kill him here and we will divide his inheritance.” Taking him, they threw him outside of the vineyard and killed him.* (vv. 34–39)

Many commentators interpret the two delegations of “servants” (all of them beaten, killed or stoned) as having been prophets (servants of the Lord). We now need to decipher the sense of the parable and the referent of “the harvest.”<sup>16</sup> We begin by looking at a vineyard parable found in *Sip. Deut piska* 312:

This is comparable to the matter of the king who had a field and let it out to tenant farmers. The tenant farmers began to plunder it. He took it from them and gave it to their children who began to be worse than their predecessors. He took it from their children and gave it to their grandchildren. They became much worse than their predecessors. When a son was born to him [the king] he said to them, “Get off my property, I do not want you to be on it. Give me my portion that I may have it distinguished through mine!”

In like fashion when father Abraham came into the world—there issued from him the dregs of Ishmael and all the children of Kethura. When Isaac came into the world there issued from him the dregs of Esau and all the chiefs of Edom. They became much worse than their predecessors. When Jacob came there issued from him no dregs for all his children were born upright people.

This midrash has been discussed by numerous scholars of an earlier generation: Urbach, Derrett, Mihaly and Sanders. Some think it might have been response to Paul’s teachings, aimed against his leveling of God’s vineyard so as to admit and even to privilege the Gentiles. Others believe it is pre-Christian. Personally, I think the midrash is modeled on pre-Christian vineyard parables even if the immediate specimen above is actually from a later period. I suggest the Gospel has kept the *dramatis personae* of the parable intact, but casting Jesus as the son and the Jews in the role of the obstreperous tenant farmers. The Jewish versions identified Israel (i.e. the Jews) as the son, and the Gentile nations as the tenant farmers. Both the Jewish and the Christian stories work through two stages of tenant-farmer recalcitrance until the landowner’s son

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<sup>16</sup> The studies in John S. Kloppenborg’s *The Tenants in the Vineyard: Ideology, Economics, and Agrarian Conflict in Jewish Palestine* (2006) provide good material for the history of interpretation of the parable in the first two chapters, and in the discussions of its redaction in chapter 7.

appears. In the Jewish story these stages make sense as they relate to the errant children of Abraham and Isaac, until we come to Jacob's children. The Gospel story says the landowner sent one group of servants, then another, and what had happened to the first servants happened again.

In the Jewish story, Jacob's sons, the tribes of Israel, are the rightful heirs just as Jesus is in the Christian story. The complete break and shock is that the legitimate heir is killed and tossed out from the vineyard. Appended to the parable's conclusion is the postscript added by Matthew, in polemic dialogue form, infused with dramatic irony throughout. The landowner will come and eject the wicked tenant-farmers, replacing with them with new ones. The Jews are to be removed from divine election and supplanted by the Gentile nations.

"Election" as God's chosen is the vineyard. The Jewish sharecroppers, having reneged on their contract with the landowner, have forfeited their right to toil in the vineyard, and their covenant is therefore null and void. God had expected the Jews to produce a harvest of good works for Him but they gave him nothing. Then they killed the prophetic messengers He had sent to them, and in the end killed his son too. Whereas the Jewish prototype of the parable had ended on a note of comfort and consolation, the Gospel's concludes in shocking violence. No audience in his own time could have been expected to grasp the significance of the parable in its relation to the life of Jesus. Only we readers who already know the outcome can recognize the parable as presaging the Gospel's account of the murder of Jesus by the wicked Jews.

Here we have a story that takes an early Jewish parable and subverts its pro-Israel message, recasting both its original intent—the Divine election of the Jews—and its ultimate outcome, which is deicide. There can be no more forceful form of literary polemic than this—creating a counter-history by appropriation of a rival's most cherished myths, and then reversing the identities of the heroes and victims. This technique has been of scholarly interest since Amos Funkenstein popularized the notion of polemicists inventing counter-histories.<sup>17</sup> Adding to the irony, the Gospel has the Jews celebrate this inversion of identities in their rendering of the point of the parable, the consequences of which they do not grasp until after they have been caught in a verbal trap.

*When the lord of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those farmers?*  
(v. 40)

Jesus again elicits a response from the elders by which they condemn themselves, before they comprehend the point of the parable.

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<sup>17</sup> Amos Funkenstein, "Anti-Jewish Propaganda: Pagan, Medieval and Modern" (1981), 56–72, and *Perceptions of Jewish History* (1993), 36–40; 169–201.

*They said to him, “He will ruin those wicked people wickedly, and let out the vineyard to other farmers, who will pay to him the crops in their seasons.”*  
 (v. 41)

The Jews will be severely punished, exiled and shamed. The Gentiles will be faithful to their duties and give God his due at the proper times. The rabbinic parable that we showed above as a model for vineyard parables was based on a biblical verse that closed the parable: *This is according to the matter of which Scripture states, “Jacob was a perfect man dwelling in tents.”* (Gen 45:27). Jesus' parable concludes with his citing a scriptural verse:

*Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the scriptures, ‘The stone which the builders rejected, this one has become the cornerstone. This was by the Lord, and it is a marvel in our eyes.’?”<sup>18</sup> This is why I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation that makes its fruits.*  
 (vv. 42–43)

We look at Matthew's startling exegesis of Ps 118:22: “The stone [Heb. *even*] which the builders [Heb. *habonim*] rejected was to be the head stone of the corner.” The stone refers to the Gentile nations in Matt 21:42, although in Mark 12:10, Luke 20:17, Acts 4:11, Eph. 2:20, and 1Peter 2:7, it is Jesus. The original referent in Psalms is the nation of Israel. According to the Rabbinic Targum, David is the cornerstone:

The child [*talia*] the craftsmen [*ardikhlayia*] rejected—he was the son among the sons of Jesse and merited to be selected for ruling and governing.

The basis for this paraphrased interpretation of the nouns are the verbs *rejected*, *was* and *to be* in Scripture that are rendered literally in this Targum. This brings us to the dream interpretation motif that surrounds Joseph in Genesis and the related *pesher* allegorical interpretations found in Qumran biblical exegesis. In full form, the ancient interpreters would have had something to say about our verse:

*“The stone the builders rejected, this one has become the cornerstone”:* its interpretation refers to the child of Jesse whom the superintendents refused and he was chosen to be king.

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<sup>18</sup> LXX Ps 117:22–23 cf. Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17; Acts. 4:11; 1 Pet. 2:7: “A stone which the builders rejected, this one has become the cornerstone. This was by the Lord and it is a marvel in our eyes.”

The rendition of Matt 21:42–3 demonstrates Christian exegesis in its extreme, which arrogates these Jewish interpretations of Scripture and reverses the roles played by Jews and Gentiles. In other words, we might imagine a Jesus *pesher*<sup>19</sup> that would read as follows:

*“The stone the builders rejected, this one has become the cornerstone”*: its interpretation refers to the Nations whose faith the Jews refused to emulate and they are chosen to be foundation of the Kingdom.

The Jesus parable ends with a verse, as do most rabbinic parables. The message reverberates with echoes of Acts 28:22–28 where the Jews of Rome meet with Paul.

“But we want to hear what your views are, for we know that people everywhere are talking against this sect.” They arranged to meet Paul on a certain day, and came in even larger numbers to the place where he was staying. He witnessed to them from morning till evening, explaining about the kingdom of God, and from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets he tried to persuade them about Jesus. Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe. They disagreed among themselves and began to leave after Paul had made this final statement: “The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your ancestors when he said through Isaiah the prophet: Go to this people and say, “You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving....” Be it known therefore to you, that the *salvation of God is sent to the Gentiles, and that they will hear it.*

Matthew subscribes to the same supersessionist theology found in Acts. This “replacement theology” was likely the normative perspective of the Christ followers in Matthew’s day. However, it was not the teaching of Paul in his authentic letters. It is in this new context we should understand his commission to make “disciples of all the nations (*panta ta ethnē*), baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Whatever difficulties this verse entails, it should be noted when LXX says “all the nations”, it uses the same phrase as does Matthew, a rendition of the Hebrew *kol ha-goyim* or even *kol goyim*. I count some 50 such instances. There are passages in the *Tanakh* and LXX where it is made clear only Gentiles are meant by the phrase as “all the nations.” Most of these equate “the nations” with Israel’s enemies.

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<sup>19</sup> *Pesher* refers to the exegetical literary form, found among the Dead Sea Scrolls that relates some present, future or past historical event to a biblical verse.

Some, however, prophesy the awakening of God's glory upon "the nations" in their turning to Jerusalem or recognizing that God's providence has protected Israel. Psalm 117:1–2 says: "Praise the Lord, all nations (*kol goyim*); extol him, all the peoples. For great is His love toward us, and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever." Now Paul quotes this in Romans 15:11 "Praise the Lord, all the nations (*panta ta ethnē*), and sing praises to him, all you peoples." In this passage Paul speaks of himself as the teacher of the Gentiles. The context of his citation is that Gentiles attain salvation through Christ. His proof-text is the Psalm, which distinguishes between Israel and the nations. Paul rightly sees the expression *panta ta ethnē* (the nations) as referring solely to the Gentiles, although here Paul does not see Gentiles supplanting Israel, unlike Matthew and Acts, whose point is that God has abandoned the Jews and replaced them with the Gentiles.

*"Whoever falls upon this stone will be shattered. It will crush whomever it falls on. When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his illustrations, they knew that he was speaking about them. (v. 44–45)*

Only now do the leaders of the Jewish hierarchy (the *chief priests and elders* in v. 23 and *chief priests and the Pharisees* here, both terms likely referring to members of the Sanhedrin Court in the Temple) begin to comprehend the terrifying threats that underlie Jesus' charming stories. When they first heard the parables, not realizing what he was getting at, they incriminated themselves—which they would not have done had they discerned their full implications.

*They were seeking to seize him, but they feared the crowd, because they held that he was a prophet. (v. 46)*

The sentence is almost the twin of Matt 14:5: *And wishing to kill him, he feared the crowd, because they held that he was a prophet*, when the authorities are in a quandary about whether or not to openly criticize John. They know the people think John to be "like a prophet"; nevertheless they have no hesitation about confronting Jesus in front of the same crowd. Here, however, we are told they feared seizing Jesus because the people considered him to be a prophet. This seems to be an addition, borrowed from the earlier episode about John, and placed here to explain why they will soon begin to plot against Jesus, rather than immediately having him arrested at the Temple.

# Chapter 22

## Introduction

In the previous chapter, Gospel tradition presented us with the parable of the tenant farmers. Its point was to show that the Jews had contracted with God to be His privileged workers but had failed to keep their end of the bargain. In exchange for acknowledging God's suzerainty by faithfully following His injunctions and rendering him His due, they were to have enjoyed God's portion—eternal life and an occasional “get-out-of-jail free” card for minor back-sliding if they repented their misdeeds. However, when the time came for them to render their account, they refused to be chastised for their utter neglect of their end of the bargain, killing God's messengers and even His son. Moreover, the Jews had disregarded their contract, not out of ignorance or forgetfulness, but out of malice, ignoring God's pleas to live up to their responsibilities and incurring guilt for sins of omission as well as for evil deeds. For this they will be punished and eternally tormented.

But Matthew speaks with a deeper voice now. I do not know if this voice echoes an earlier, more general Gospel tradition no longer present because it was censored out by anti-Gnostic fathers, or if it more narrowly represents Matthew's own mystical penchant for viewing Jesus as the divine *logos* and bridegroom. Most likely Matthew used a Gnostic parable which he fine-tuned to reflect his own agenda. Rejecting or ejecting inappropriately dressed guests from a feast is a distinctive genre of parable. While only one guest will actually be bound and thrown out at the parable's conclusion, that “many are called but few are chosen” (v. 11) suggests a more thorough vetting process. “To call” is of course “to invite.”<sup>1</sup> This aphorism may have been derived from a popular Gnostic proverb, perhaps constructed around Jewish mythic notions,<sup>2</sup> which inspired the feast parable. In my above commentary on the bridegroom imagery in Ch. 9, I substantiated my approach by citing Lapinkivi:

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew uses *klesis* which means both to call and to invite. It is like the Hebrew *qar'a* which also means both “to call” and “to invite” as in Esther 12: “And that's not all,” Haman added. “I'm the only person Queen Esther invited to accompany the king to the banquet she gave. *And she has invited me* (lit. I am *called* to her) along with the king tomorrow.”

<sup>2</sup> See the background to such theologies within Jewish contexts as suggested by Louis H. Feldman, “Philo and the Dangers of Philosophizing” in *Maven in Blue Jeans* (Jacobs 2009) 147–159. For the anthropology of Gnostic terminology concerning the divisions of the soul in Philo and Paul, see G.H. van Kooten, *Paul's Anthropology in Context* (2008), 300–312.

Gnostics believed that their souls were brides of angels, they saw their entrance into the world beyond as wedding-feast. When Sophia receives Christ the bridegroom, they also receive their bridegrooms—the angels... man is drunk and only the call of the redeemer can wake him up.

This typology is either part of Matthew's own Christological formulation or may have been embedded in one of the sources he considered authoritative.<sup>3</sup> The tip-off to the parable's Gnostic background is that the one who is not dressed like the others was banished from the feast. In Gnosticism, appropriate clothing is a metaphor for the astral soul that makes one worthy of inclusion in the upper echelon of soul people.<sup>4</sup> The wrong attire is worn by those people destined for darkness and proper garb by those imbued with spirit, as in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, "The Paraphrase of Shem," (paragraph 8, translation by Frederik Wisse):

The light of the infinite Spirit came down to a feeble nature for a short time until all the impurity of nature became void, and in order that the darkness of Nature might be blamed. I put on my garment which is the garment of the light of the Majesty—which I am.

Also in that collection we see in the *Gospel of Philip* (translated by Wesley W. Isenberg), paragraph 21:

In this world, those who put on garments are better than the garments. In the Kingdom of Heaven, the garments are better than those that put them on.

The material in Matthew has been formulated as a parable based on the wedding myth of Gnostic thought. While Jews may have conceived of the Greek mystic's understanding of Wisdom and Demiurge as personifications of divine

<sup>3</sup> Zony Zevit, in a private communication, suggested that my mentioning Gnosticism in this commentary might alienate otherwise sympathetic readers. Nonetheless my wide reading of articles and chapters discussing this parable, and my own sense of the range of relevant Jewish materials, suggests to me that the Gnostic scenario may have been chosen to offer a deepened critique of Jews for certain communities, centered around theologies challenged by Jews. See Elliot R. Wolfson, "Parting of the Ways that Never Parted: Judaism and Christianity in the Work of Jacob Neusner" in *A Legacy of Learning: Essays in Honor of Jacob Neusner* (2014), 300 n. 5.

<sup>4</sup> The Jews have refused even to consider coming to the wedding of the Gentiles; not all are suited to do so. Only those with correct faith in Jesus are able to be at the banquet.

powers, the actual divine wedding/banquet motif is thoroughly Gentile (i.e. pagan), as Lapinkivi points out. The versions of the parable found in Luke and even in the *Gospel of Thomas* have few if any traces of this Gnostic motif. While it may have been edited out, it seems more likely Matthew's version is peculiar to him because he preferred to allude to these mystic theologies.

In the following Eucharist parable (Luke 14:16–24), there is a hint that the phrase “taste my banquet” means gaining eternal life:

...he said to him, “A man once gave a great banquet and invited many. And at the time for the banquet, he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, “Come, for everything is now ready.” But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, “I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it. Please have me excused.” And another said, “I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them. Please have me excused.” And another said, “I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.” So the servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house became angry and said to his servant, “Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame.” And the servant said, “Sir, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.” And the master said to the servant, “Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.”

The main thrust of this parable is that those invitees who refuse to heed the summons of the king will be replaced by those who had previously been neglected, including those brought in from afar. Those dwelling at the periphery will now be at the center. *Gospel of Thomas* 64 seems to exclude from the banquet those who are involved in worldly pursuits:

Jesus said: A man had received visitors. And when he had prepared the dinner, he sent his servant to invite guests. He went to the first one and said to him, “My master invites you.” He said, “I have claims against some merchants. They are coming to me this evening. I must go and give them my orders. I ask to be excused from the dinner.” He went to another and said, “My master has invited you.” He said to him, “I have just bought a house and am required for the day. I shall not have any spare time.” He went to another and said to him, “My master invites you.” He said to him, “My friend is going to get married, and I am to prepare the banquet. I shall not be able to come. I ask to be excused from the dinner.” He went

to another and said to him, “My master invites you.” He said to him, “I have just bought a farm, and I am on my way to collect the rent. I shall not be able to come. I ask to be excused.” The servant returned and said to his master, “Those whom you invited to the dinner have asked to be excused.” The master said to his servant, “Go outside to the streets and bring back those whom you happen to meet, so that they may dine.” Businessmen and merchants will not enter the Places of My Father.”

These Christian parables all concern people who decline to attend the royal feast, differing from rabbinic parables in which the guests belatedly show up. In the Gospels those who refuse to attend are replaced by other attendees who were not on the original guest list.

But Matthew’s parable is in a class of its own, as neither rabbinic nor other Gospel accounts speak of a wedding feast, but rather of a royal banquet hosted by a king. In the rabbinic versions the guests are faulted for their tardiness, their lack of prior preparation, and their muted anticipation of the event, but eventually they do arrive.<sup>5</sup> We will examine some examples of Jewish parables from *Midrash Psalms* in order to illustrate the range of the meal/feast genre of parables—of which there are a great variety—whose messages are not always consistent. The first (*Midrash Psalms* [ed. Buber] 25:9) suggests that not only will the righteous gain eternal life, but ordinary Jews as well.

Rabbi Eleazar related a parable—A king made a large meal and told his attendant: “Invite [able] merchants to my meal. But do not invite craftsmen.” He replied: “My lord your majesty, yours is such a huge feast that the merchants will not be sufficient to consume it without craftsmen there.

In this parable, the king would prefer to limit the invitations to his feast to a social and economic elite, but the plenitude of the foods is such that the guest list must be expanded in order to consume all of it. The next parable allows even dilatory stragglers who arrive late to partake and be counted among the righteous. The emphasis is not on selectivity but on the king’s gratitude for the invitees’ eventual presence, so that the feast he had prepared is not wasted.

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5 For a serious discussion of the parables, see Richard J. Bauckham, “The Parable of the Royal Wedding Feast (Matthew 22:1–14) and the Parable of the Lame Man and the Blind Man (Apocryphon of Ezekiel)” (1996) 471–488; 485, nn. 51, 52 and 53, which includes references to modern scholarship on the rabbinic parables.

Rabbi Yosi bar Hanina told a parable about a king who made a meal and invited guests. By the fourth hour no one showed up and so at the fifth and so the sixth. As evening approached the guests slowly started to arrive. He said to them: "I am very grateful that you came, for otherwise I would have had to throw my entire meal to the dogs." In like fashion God said to the righteous, "I am grateful to you because I created my world for you." If not for you coming, to whom could I give what I prepared for you in the Future World?"

Woody Allen once said, "Ninety percent of life is just showing up," and this apparently applies to the afterlife as well. Those who are righteous in this world are particularly appreciated and will be rewarded, since they prepare themselves for the World to Come by acting justly in accordance with the Torah.

The next parable sees matters quite differently. Although the king's invitation and instructions are non-specific about arrival time, he shows no tolerance for insouciant late-comers who take his beneficence for granted:

*Eccl. Rab.* 9 (variant *b*. *Sabb.* 153a):

Rabbi Judah the Prince told a parable about a king who made a meal and invited guests to come: he said to them, go and bathe and anoint yourselves and launder your clothes to prepare yourselves for the meal. He set no particular time for them to arrive. The wise ones came and waited in line at the door of the royal palace. They thought the palace of the king should not even for a moment lack for an invited seat. The foolish ones paid no attention to the royal command, thinking that at the end they would receive ample notice of the time to arrive at the royal meal, since every meal requires much planning. And they colluded such that the plasterer went to his trade and the mason went to his trade, and the smith to his trade and the washer-man to his trade. Without warning the king sent word all should come now to his meal. They were harried and so the wise came in dignified apparel while the others came in their work clothes. The king rejoiced over the wise who obeyed his command for they dignified the royal palace. He became angry with the fools who did not keep his command and disgraced the royal palace. The king announced that those who had prepared themselves for the meal should come and eat at the king's meal. Those who had not prepared themselves for the meal should not come and eat at the king's meal. They tried to go by excusing themselves. The king responded by saying no—rather these ones will recline and eat and drink while these other ones will stand

on their feet and be embarrassed while they watch the others and feel pained sorrow. So likewise in the future World to Come will be fulfilled the words of Isaiah 65: *Behold my servants will eat and you will starve.*

In another midrashic parable (*Midrash Zuta Qohelet* [Buber] 9),<sup>6</sup> God adds insult to injury:

Zivattataye said in the name of Rabbi Meir moderately (In the banquet in next world) some (the fully deserving) will recline and eat and drink; and some (the totally undeserving) will recline and not eat or drink. Others (the moderately deserving) will stand on their feet and not eat or drink. Those (moderately deserving) who must stand experience considerably less *angst* than those who recline [but do not dine]. [How so?] The ones who stand without eating will be mistaken for waiters, while those who recline but do not eat will experience exponentially more agony. Their faces will turn ash white from [their public humiliation]. So the Prophet says (Malachi 3:18) to the wicked: “When you are sitting (without food), you will see the reward of the righteous as distinct from the wicked.”

Extending the range of Jewish royal banquet parables even further is a perplexing Kafkaesque parable from the minor tractate *Semahot*. It suggests that some people were wise in preparing for a gentle death while there was still light and ease available. Others who did not were killed in chaos.

#### *Semahot* 8:10:

Rabbi Meir gave a parable about a king who made a meal and invited guests and fixed no time when they were to leave. The wise got up at 9 hours (3 p.m.) and left to go home and get into bed while there was still light. Others got up at sunset while the shops were still open and lamps were burning to go home and get into bed while there was still candle light. Still others got up at two and three hours (8–9 p.m.) into the night while some shops were still open even if others were closed. Some had lamps burning while others were extinguished. They came home and got into bed in the darkness. Those who remained at the meal got drunk and wounded each other and killed each other . . . as for other servants of the king the senior ones were beaten by the minor ones.

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<sup>6</sup> The text is slightly emended.

We can add to this array what appears to be a parody of royal meal parables. A story was told of a corrupt and incorrigible tax-collector who did a single good deed in his lifetime—he invited the poor to a meal when his rich guests declined to come (*y. Sanh.* 6:6):

And what merit did bar Ma'ayan the tax collector have? Indeed, he had some small merit in that, having never done a good deed in his life, once he made a meal for the notables who did not come. And he said, "Let the poor come and eat, that the food not go to waste."

His reward was a lavish funeral. But he never made it to the heavenly banquet in the afterlife, instead suffering eternal torments for his sins.

As I noted earlier, I know of no royal banquet parables in Jewish sources where the invited guests refuse to attend altogether and are replaced by others, and I know of none that are explicitly described as celebratory wedding banquets. All the Christian parables, however, do replace the guests who decline to come with those who had not been previously invited. Jews are invited first but choose not to attend. Their willful choice is to their own detriment, resulting in their exclusion. In the Jewish stories, however, it is the Gentiles who are the outsiders; invited to convert to Judaism, they decline, and therefore they stand condemned by those who accepted, who in the end will gain life eternal. In the following excerpt we see an example from *Seder Eliyahu Rabbah* 7 (ed. H. Friedman) of the stories Jews told about their own destiny as compared to that of the Gentiles:

Once I was traveling on the way and a man confronted me. He approached belligerently. He said, "You [Jews] say that seven prophets rose for the Gentiles of the world who testified they would descend to *Gehenna*." Now after these seven [had come and gone] the nations can properly justify their behavior: "Because you did not give the Torah to us and consequently there can be no testimony against us, why are we fated to go down to *Gehenna*?" I said to him, "My son, the Sages have taught that to anyone who comes to convert we are to stretch out our hands to facilitate bringing him under the shelter of the *Shekhina*. So the answer to you is that after the seven prophets [to the nations] had come and gone, all the righteous converts of each generation testify [by their mere existence] against their generation.

### *Gnosticism and Matthew's Gospel*

The question of whether or not certain passages in Matthew are accurately described as “Gnostic” warrants special attention. While a commentary such as this is not the proper venue in which to examine all facets of this issue, I do need to address why I term certain passages of Matthew as “Gnostic” and cite Gnostic Gospels to understand Matthew’s use of certain imagery. Ziony Zevit has questioned my use of “Gnostic” and I am not unaware of the problems in using the word. First, most scholars prefer to nuance their language by saying *proto-Gnostic*, *nascent Gnosticism*, *non-radical Gnosticism*, small-g *gnostic* as opposed to *Gnostic*, or to employ other terms that evade and avoid speaking of “Gnosticism” as a canonical concept within Christianity. I speak of Gnosticism as a cultural artifact of the Hellenistic (Greco-Persian) world view that subscribes to a foundational myth of a supreme deity who, through a process of birth, emanation, and creation, manifests various personifications of godly attributes (sometimes called *hypostases*) that infuse and govern the world. Wisdom is personified as a divine Daughter or Bride (and so Glory and so Power, Mercy, Justice, and perhaps even Chaos can be similarly personified).

Gnostics divided the world into matter and spirit, and people into matter-persons and spirit-persons. The potential for salvation was a characteristic only of the spirit. Some of this mythic language appears in Philo’s doctrine of the *Logos*, in the writings of Paul, of Thomas, of Mani; all of it can be found in the Nag Hammadi library. At some point in the third and fourth centuries, Church Fathers declared such teachings to be heretical, and since then the term “Gnostic” has had negative connotations. The later Kabbalah incorporates these myths, and one might well argue from certain passages in classic rabbinic writings that some early Jews also espoused such notions. There is an insufficiency of historical evidence to support any definitive statement as to whether or not Rabbis saw the world through the lens of such myths before the twelfth century. I’m not sure I can definitively define Gnosticism but, as Associate Justice Potter Stewart remarked about pornography, “I know it when I see it!” and I recognize Gnostic typologies when I see them. I have no hesitation in pointing them out in Matthew. It is nevertheless possible that these passages are later interpolations into the Gospel from the second century or so.

### **Commentary**

*Jesus again replied in illustrations to them. (v. 1)*

The discussion between Jesus and the Temple authorities resumes. The author aims the message directly at the Gentile reader, who wonders how it has come

to pass that Gentiles occupy the illuminated center, while the Jews, the original beneficiaries of the promise of eternal reward, are now cast into the peripheral darkness. Furthermore, why, when the Jews were the original guests invited to the eschatological banquet, had others not been sent invitations too?

*The heavenly kingdom is compared to a human, a king, who made a wedding for his son. (v. 2)*

The wording here replicates a Hebrew phrase commonly used in midrash parables: “*melekh basar vedam*”. The phrase very literally translates as “a king—flesh and blood” to portray God’s relationships with people. While no rabbinic parables use the motif of a king making a wedding feast for his son, the author of this parable is very familiar with the style and structure of Jewish parables. The source of this parable may have been in a Semitic language, perhaps even Jewish. To my mind, the distinctive motif of the wedding feast for the “son” derives from a recognizably Gnostic setting that is hostile to the notion of Jewish Israel as the fulfillment of divine promises. The parable is not Jewish but rather is anti-Jewish.

*He sent his servants to call those who had been called to the wedding, but they did not wish to come. (v. 3)*

I know of no Jewish parable in which where the invited guests actually refuse the invitations, although they might dither and delay their arrival.

*Again, he sent other servants, saying, “Tell those who have been called: Look, I have made my meal ready; my oxen and fattened animals have been slaughtered, and all things are ready. Come to the wedding.” (v. 4)*

We note that Balak, king of Moab, sent new messengers to Balaam after his initial refusal to come with the first ones.<sup>7</sup> In the parable, the first messenger may have been John the Baptist, the second messenger either John or Jesus himself.

*But they paid no attention and left, the one to his own field, the other to his shop. (v. 5)*

Ignoring the call of the spiritual messengers, some go about their worldly pursuits, a common Gnostic theme. The God of Spirit calls on those with trapped souls to liberate themselves from earthly materialism, and to live in the Spirit

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<sup>7</sup> See Num 22:15.

by participating in a divine wedding. Those who exchange their earthly souls for garments of light will be initiated into the Kingdom of Light. The dichotomy of light and darkness, Israel and the nations, is not uniquely Gnostic but its usage here is unmistakable.<sup>8</sup>

*The others seized his servants, insulted them, and killed them. (v. 6)*

The same scenario ensues here as in the parable of the tenant farmers in chapter 21: the messengers bearing the king's invitation become the target of the recalcitrant invitees. The dual suffering of "insult and kill" resonates with Matt 20: 18–19, referring to Jesus.

*The king became furious and sent his armies and killed those murderers and burned their city. (v. 7)*

Here the king's armies are Roman pagan soldiers who punish those who killed Jesus. Burning "their city" refers to the Roman destruction of Jerusalem, so this parable, in its present form, cannot predate 70 C.E. The Roman burning of Jerusalem and the Temple and slaughter of its people are signs that God has rejected Israel because they rejected Jesus and his messages. Matthew's theological interpretation of an historical event—the Roman assault on the Jewish nerve center—remains deeply embedded in Christian thought. Some Christian theologians interpret the *Shoa* (Holocaust) in the same way: as divine punishment for the putative Jewish rejection and killing of Jesus.<sup>9</sup>

*Then he said to his servants, "The wedding is ready, but those who have been called were not worthy. Go then to the main road, and whoever you find there, call them to the wedding." (vv. 8–9).*

The Jews who do not respond to the invitation are unworthy. By going to the major thoroughfares, there will be many others who will accept the invitation and join in the celebration of the wedding festivities. The Jews will be thereby be replaced by the numerous Gentiles who are willing to accept the message and partake in the banquet of initiation into eternal life. This is another distinctive feature of Christian feast parables; while Jews might have spoken of

8 The *havdallah* recital at the close of Jewish festivals and Sabbaths proclaims: "Blessed be He who has divided between the sacred and the profane, *between light and darkness, between Israel and the nations...*"

9 For an interesting study confirming that these ideas still persist, see Robert Michael, "Anti-Semitism, The Holocaust and Christianity" (2005).

sharing the next world with others, they would not have talked about being superseded and replaced as a group.

Not all Gentiles will have the spiritual wherewithal to enter the Kingdom of the Spirit. Gnostic typologies require a culling process to separate the “spirit-people” from the others. Calvin’s notion of the “Elect” can find some justification here.

*The servants went out from these into the streets and gathered everyone they found, both bad and good, and the wedding was filled with diners. When he came to observe the diners, he saw a person who was not wearing wedding clothes. He said to him, “Friend, how is it that you have come here not wearing wedding clothes?” He was unable to say anything. (vv. 10–12)*

Here we find an example of the characteristic Gnostic distinction between the called and the chosen, the newly invited and those actually allowed to enter the “Kingdom of Light”. This dualism is far more rigid than the dichotomy of the “Caesar/God” aphorism that follows. As pointed out in the introduction to this chapter above, the invitee who has no garment of light is viewed as an unwelcome intruder who must be sent to his rightful place in the “Kingdom of Darkness”. Not merely an alien who has no seat at what we might term the “Banquet of Light,” the intruder is a spiritual zombie who lacks all power of speech.

*Then the king said to the servers, “Tie his hands and feet and throw him into the darkness outside; there will be wailing and the grinding of teeth there.” (v. 13)*

Although it is not clear if Jews are meant here because they have refused to even come, in general it would seem that for Matthew, the outcasts who wail and gnash their teeth are the Jews:

- 1) But the children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness: there shall be wailing and grinding of teeth (Matthew 8:11–12).
- 2) And shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and grinding of teeth (Matthew 13:41–42).
- 3) And shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and grinding of teeth (Matthew 13:49–50).
- 4) The lord of that servant shall come in a day when he is not looking for him, and in an hour that he is not aware of, and shall cut him asunder, and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites: there shall be wailing and grinding of teeth (Matthew 24:50–51).

- 5) And cast out the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be wailing and grinding of teeth (Matthew 25:29–30).

*“Many are called, but few are chosen.” (v. 14)*

This verse is not an afterthought tacked on to the parable—it is its essence, functioning as proof-texts do in classic midrash parable. (In citing those parables I have often skipped over the proof texts to lighten the burden of the reader.) The Jesus saying must be older than the parable itself, since the pericope is shaped around the Gnostic aphorism in order to illustrate it. An even better translation gives us: “Many are invited but few are selected”.

*Then the Pharisees made a plot to ensnare him by speech. They sent their students to him with the Herodians, to say, “Master, we know that you are truthful, and that you teach the way of God truthfully, without taking concern for any one person. You do not look at a person’s appearance.” (vv. 15–16)*

The issues here are far from clear. Any identifications of the group referred to as “Herodians” and the tax discussed here rest on speculation. The problem Jesus will be asked to solve seems to have been fraught with difficulty. Perhaps the issue was that, on the one hand, to comply with a corrupt taxation system was to support a wicked and oppressive regime, but not to pay the tax was to threaten the surface placidity of the status quo. Or perhaps the reference is to a special Roman tax imposed on Jews which conferred certain privileges if paid, while on the other hand required attendance at pagan celebrations if not paid.<sup>10</sup> The question posed to Jesus was therefore a controversial one that had split the Jewish community. There was no way out of the dichotomy of the dilemma; the question was whether Jesus supported the Kingdom of Rome or the Kingdom of God.

As I pointed out earlier, if *didascale* translates as “Rabbi,” it would suggest the passage might be post-70 C.E., when the title seems to have become widely used. Alternatively, the term may have been glossed in to demonstrate that the questioners were expecting him to give a pious answer worthy of a rabbinic teacher. Jesus, with the reputation of an honest judge and not offering self-serving decisions is flattered to think his interlocutors are telling him to ignore the political ramifications of his answer and just state his opinion on the mat-

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<sup>10</sup> See E. Mary Smallwood, *The Jews under Roman Rule From Pompey to Diocletian: A Study in Political Relations* (2001), 345. While that tax was a post-70 tax, perhaps the concept existed earlier—or the Gospel writer envisions such a choice.

ter. The questioners have already let him know they have no illusions that he will bow to Rome because of their wealth and power. As a result, whatever he says will infuriate one party or the other.

*"Tell us how it seems to you: Is it permitted to pay a tax to Caesar or not?"*  
(v. 17)

The question is phrased as a legal query: Is it legal to give the Roman government money—a government that treats Jews cruelly and deifies its emperors? Although, according to Josephus, all Pharisees shared certain theological teachings, they were divided on the question of whether or not to pay taxes to Rome. In Judea, most probably did, but others, likely in Galilee, followed Judas and Zaddok (c. 6 c.e.), who claimed that paying taxes to Rome was tantamount to betraying God's dominion.<sup>11</sup> For Jesus to declare that paying the tax was permitted would be taking an unpopular stand, especially in Galilee, the home of Judas; to oppose it was to identify as a rebel and foe of Rome. The public nature of the debate pushes Jesus to take a definitive position with regard to Roman oppression.

*Jesus, knowing their wickedness, said, "Why are you testing me, stage-actors?"* (v. 18)

It is not clear what “wickedness” means here—perhaps “plotting”. He discerns that the question is intended as a test, a trap, not as a query by serious people seeking guidance from a rabbi on a controversial issue so they will know what the proper thing to do is.

*"Show me the coin for the tax." They brought him a denarius. He said to them, "Whose image is this, and whose inscription?"* (vv. 19–20)

Here we find the structure of a typical debate, which begins the explication with a simple question, the answer to which unravels the entire argument in favor of the defendant. The use of a coin as a concrete visual aid to drive home his point is reminiscent of Jesus standing a child before a crowd (Matt 18:2): “Calling for a little child, he stood him in their midst.”

*They said to him, "Caesar's." He said to them, "So pay to Caesar Caesar's wages, and God's wages to God."* (v. 21)

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<sup>11</sup> Josephus, *Ant.* 18:25; *War* 2:118.

The answer, which recommends accommodation rather than confrontation, is of a type closely identified with Jesus' legal understanding of a biblical verse forbidding the price of a dog or the hire of a prostitute to be used for the Temple.

Tosefta *Hullin* 2:24 relates how a Christian of Jewish descent told Rabbi Eliezer of a law upon which Jesus had expounded that even Rabbi Eliezer himself had not been able to deduce. That teaching was viewed favorably by the rabbi. Nevertheless, the teachings of Jesus were considered dangerous, since his understanding of difficult passages was sensitive to both social and textual problems and his solutions to them brilliantly simple. The Jesus movement as a whole undermined the essential underpinnings of covenantal Judaism based on Torah and long established traditions in various communities. Consequently the rabbinic inclination was to ridicule Christians of Jewish descent.<sup>12</sup> *B. 'Abod. Zar.* 16b-17a, *t. Hul.* 2:24, and *'Abot R. Nat.*<sup>13</sup> all relate the following exposition in the name of Jesus:<sup>14</sup>

"You shall not bring the *wages of a harlot* or the wages of a dog into the house of the Lord your God."<sup>15</sup> (Deut 23:17).—Is it permissible to use these funds for a latrine for the high priest? [Jesus taught the answer was embedded in Micah 1:7] "For from the *wages of a harlot* she gathered them and to the hire of a harlot they shall return." From a place of filth they came, to a place of filth they shall go.

Jesus' response to the question of the permissibility of paying Caesar's tax is precisely the same: what came from filth goes to filth. Hardly a statement of support for Roman tyranny, it most likely is based upon the injunction to despise the "wages of a dog." At the same time, it pragmatically permits the payment of Caesar's tax and the avoidance of the penalty for not doing so. The dilemma is resolved. This genre of Jesus story, which at one time may have contained biblical verses from the Old Testament prophets, demonstrates Jesus' rhetorical resolution of the dilemma by equating Roman money to filth, suitable for the hire of a harlot or the price of a dog (male prostitute?); what

<sup>12</sup> See my commentary to 5:16 above concerning the family of Rabbi Eliezer exposing the lack of integrity of a Christian teacher. *B. Šabb.* 116a–b.

<sup>13</sup> Version B (ed. Schechter), 13, n. 22.

<sup>14</sup> See Basser, *Studies in Exegesis*, for a fuller discussion of the passage.

<sup>15</sup> The typical understanding is that we speak of the very coin itself being melted down or used to decorate holy vessels. Using such coins to pay for things that will be used or donated to holy purposes would not, at least on the surface, be prohibited by Deuteronomy's injunction.

better to do with Roman coinage than consign it to its source—Rome, latrines and the like? Loyalty and faith belong to God; what better to do with them than direct them towards their source—the Kingdom of Heaven?

*Hearing this, they were amazed, and they left him and went away. (v. 22)*

The Pharisees are satisfied with his teaching and depart the arena of conflict. Now the knights of the Sadducees enter to do battle.

*On the same day Sadducees came to him, who say that there is no resurrection, and questioned him. (v. 23)*

This chapter contains one of the doctrinal duels between Jesus and Jewish groups that do not espouse and share his theological premises. Sadducees denied the Pharisaic doctrines that the soul was immortal and that there would be a physical resurrection of the body in the World to Come.<sup>16</sup> For Sadducees there would be neither reward nor punishment after death. Since Jesus is said to believe in resurrection—it is essential to the Jesus story—from a Sadducee point of view he would seem to be a student of Pharisaic doctrine (at least in this regard), that is to say, a Rabbi.

*"Master, Moses said that if anyone dies without having any children, his brother will marry his wife and raise up seed for his brother." (v. 24)*

Debate protocol requires terms of respect for one's opponents, much as lawyers who tear at each other in modern courts refer to their adversary as "my illustrious colleague."

The paraphrase of biblical verses in Matthew is a topic requiring much more detailed scrutiny than I can give it here. Nevertheless, I would be remiss not to point out that the Talmuds similarly paraphrase Scripture at times, truncating, rearranging words and interpolating explanatory phrases to sharpen their point and their consistency with Rabbinic interpretation. Such operations signal that the audience, the intended listener, is totally conversant with the culture of Scripture and understands where the speaker is headed from the beginning.

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16 See *Acts of the Apostles* 23:8; Josephus, *War* 2:164; and *b.Ber.* 54a.

Where Deut 25:5–6 says “son,”<sup>17</sup> Matthew gives us the rabbinic interpretation (“any children”) as found in *Sip. Deut piska* 28: the rule of marriage to a sister-in-law applies only when the dead brother leaves no offspring of either gender. The verse in Deut 25 does specify “son,” but the Rabbis limited the levirate marriage to situations when the deceased had no children. Jewish commentators routinely cite the verse from Deuteronomy as saying “*lehaqim zer'a le'aḥiv*”, word for word as Matthew does—“raise up seed for his brother” (*kai anasthsei sperma tō adelphō autou*).

The *Mishneh La-Melekh* commentary by Rabbi Yehudah Rosens (early 18th century) to Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah* (*Ishut* 15:4) remarks:

[A]nd so wrote Ritva, chap. 1, b. *Qidd.* (10a), “Since it is written “*to raise up seed for his brother*”<sup>18</sup> (current edition of Ritva’s comments emends the text!) and likewise wrote Ramban in his comments to b. *Qidd.* (10a).

The expression “to raise up seed for his brother” is also used by Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk (19th–20th centuries) in his *Or Sameah* commentary to Maimonides’ code (*Isurei B’ah* 18:5). There is a long tradition of understanding “son” as children” attested to by commentators, although I know of no exemplary biblical texts that contain this phrase.

*... There were seven brothers with us. The first married and then died; he had no offspring so he left his wife to his brother. Likewise the second and the third, up to the seventh. Last of all the woman died. At the time of the resurrection, then, whose wife will she be, of the seven? They all married her.* (vv. 25–28)

The Sadducees disparage the idea of bodily resurrection by asking a hypothetical question that, on the surface, ridicules the whole notion of a New Creation after death. They phrase their question in a style characteristic of the Talmudic interrogative convention known as *ibaya lahu* (“posed a dilemma for them”). On page after page in the Talmud we encounter similar queries which take

<sup>17</sup> If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband’s brother shall take her and marry her and fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to her. The first son she bears shall *raise up* the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel.”

<sup>18</sup> The expression “to raise up seed for his brother” is cited verbatim in medieval and early modern commentaries to the Torah such as Abarbanel (Gen 38:1), Eliyahu Mizrahi (Gen 38:8) and Malbim (Gen 38:11).

agreed upon formulations and pose challenges to them that appear to be arguable in several directions. Here the Sadducees engage in what seems to be a kind of puzzle posing, with which they confront Jesus. The goal is to undermine the conceptual possibility of a New World by demonstrating it will lead to self-contradiction.

*Jesus answered them: "You are in error, not knowing either the Scriptures or God's power." ( v. 30)*

The Rabbis sometimes ridiculed Sadducees' reading of Scripture by putting absurd literalisms into their mouths, and then refuting them with equally preposterous literalisms. The Mishnah (*b. Sukkah* 48b) discusses a Sadducean high priest who mocked the Pharisaic practice of drawing water (based on Isa 12:3: *And you will draw water in gladness*) on the Festival of Sukkot. The Talmudic discussion beneath the excerpt from the Mishnah depicts an exercise in exegetical one-upmanship between Rabbi Abbahu and a Sadducean *min* (in this context a heretic, although in earlier texts it usually connotes a Christian) whose name, Sasson, means "gladness":

The Sadducee declared, "In the Next World you are fated to draw water for me since it is written 'And you will draw water in Gladness' (Isa 12:3)." He [Rabbi Abbahu] replied, "If the verse had said '*for* Gladness,' you would be right, but now that it in fact says '*in* Gladness,' your hide will become a water bag for drawing water in it."

There were undoubtedly many accounts of exchanges such as these with Sadducees, cast in satirical scenes, behind each of which is the implicit accusation, "You who pride yourself on your precise knowledge of Scripture do not, in fact, know Scripture."

In the question posed in Matthew about whom a hypothetical wife, married to seven brothers in succession, would be with upon her resurrection, Jesus first deals with the applicability of the laws of marriage to the afterlife:

*At the time of the resurrection they neither acquire [another] in marriage nor are acquired [by another] in marriage, but they are like the angels of God in heaven. (v. 30)*

The language of the Gospel reflects the actual Jewish legal usages of two verbs relating to marriage, preserved in active and passive voice, in *m. Qidd. 1:1* (acquire/is acquired) and *2:1* (marries/is married). In Rabbinic law the *levir*

(brother of the deceased) can choose whether or not to marry his sister-in-law; she has no choice in the matter. However, the Mishnah makes clear that, in all circumstances, the marriage terminates with the death of the husband. This is definitively stated in regard to an ordinary marriage and is reiterated in a case of levirate marriage (*Qidd.* 1:1). Jesus' answer to the question posed by the Sadducees seeks to demonstrate their fundamental misunderstanding of the laws of marriage, and their ignorance that these laws no longer apply after the death of one of the spouses. This is why a widow is permitted to remarry, and may even marry a high priest. In chapter 19 Jesus objected to divorcees remarrying, not widows. Furthermore, people who are resurrected will not have physical spouses and earthly families, but will exist in spiritual bodies "like angels." God's new creation will be a wholly different world from the present material reality, which the Rabbis explained as follows in *Kallah Rabbati* 2:3 and *b. Ber.* 17a:

It was taught: in the world to come there is no eating, no drinking, no procreation, no jealousies, no hatreds and no strife. The righteous sit with halo-crowns around their heads and partake of the splendor of the *Shekhina*.

Jesus first explains the nature of God's relationship with those who have passed from this world. He then puts forward a scriptural proof text for the doctrine of resurrection:

*Concerning the resurrection of the dead, haven't you read what was said by God, "I am the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." God is not the God of the dead but "of the living."* (vv. 30–31)

There are two ways to derive the concept of the resurrection of the dead from Hebrew Scriptures. The first is to focus on the verse "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Exod 3:16). A personal God requires a relationship between God and an individual. Each of the patriarchs is understood by Jewish tradition to have had his own distinctive personal relationship with God. To speak of "the God of Israel" presupposes that there is an ongoing relationship between Israel and God. Relationships are between living entities. Ps 115:17 declares that the dead do not praise the Lord, nor do all those who descend into the pit of the netherworld; there can be no relationship between one who is nonexistent and God. Yet God tells Moses that he is the God of patriarchs deceased long ago. There can be no literalist resolution of this scriptural dilemma other than to posit that the patriarchs are alive in another realm into which they were resurrected. It is this dimension into which the living Jesus is raised in Matthew 28:6 and Luke 24:51.

There is an another reading, predicated upon on two intersecting Scriptures, that provides an alternative interpretation of what Jesus is telling the Sadducees about resurrection. We must read Exod 3:16 carefully: “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” Jer 10:10 relates: “But God is the God of truth, *the God of the living*, the King of the everlasting.” The verse in Jeremiah has been rendered here with a parenthetical gloss highlighting the question of resurrection. What does it mean to say “God of the living”? That He is *not* the God of the dead. When Matthew juxtaposes “I am the God of Abraham etc.” with “He is the God of the living,” it is apparent that “God of the living” is an appositive of “God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob.” “Abraham, Isaac, Jacob” and “the living” are synonymous, and the two verses are intended to be read in conjunction with one another. The operative question in this reading is how, since Scripture records their deaths (Gen 25:8; Gen 35:29; Gen 49:33), the three patriarchs can be living. The answer is that Scripture speaks of the realm of resurrection, where they live on eternally. God is therefore praised for resurrecting the dead.

Whatever exegetical strategy one uses to unravel Jesus satisfies the hermeneutic conditions for arguing from close readings of Jewish Scriptures. While I am not certain that the second argument would have convinced Sadducees, it is doubtful that the passage in Matthew’s source would have accurately reflected what the response of a Sadducee audience would have been. Like Talmudic proofs, it is more likely it would have appealed to a Rabbinic/Pharisee audience seeking confirmation of doctrine. Readers have wide options in understanding the contexts in which these debates in Matthew occur. It is clear, however, that Jesus employs authentic Jewish techniques for interpreting Scripture.

We can further sharpen the point here.

*When the crowds heard they were astounded at his teaching. (v. 33)*

Rabbis would use various hermeneutical techniques (*b. Sanh. 90b*) to argue for resurrection from the *Torah* while bypassing the one explicit reference in Daniel (12:2),<sup>19</sup> just as Jesus does. Jesus understands the Sadducees were ridiculing the concept of resurrection. So he invokes Scripture, the sacred source of all truth for Sadducees, in support of the doctrine of resurrection. If we accept the first of the two possible readings explained above—God speaking of Himself in the present as the God of each of the three patriarchs, who cannot be dead if He has maintained a relationship with them—the exegesis is acceptable but not dazzling or amazing. But that is not the case if we accept

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<sup>19</sup> “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt.”

our second reading, the proof of which is based upon a Talmudic interpretive principal called *heqesh*. *Heqesh* juxtaposes two or more scriptural verses with the same or very similar wording. Reading and interpreting one verse in light of the other creates a conceptual parallelism between them, based upon—but also going beyond—the shared word or phrase. In this case, juxtaposing “*God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob*” in one verse with “*God of the living*” in the other, infers from the parallel usages of *God* of that, long after their earthly deaths, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are among “the living,” and yields the conclusion that Scripture promulgates the doctrine of resurrection to an afterlife. Again, I do not know if Sadducees would have been impressed with a *heqesh* argument from Exodus and Jeremiah, but Pharisees and their followers would have found such an argument logical and perhaps even impressive.

*The Pharisees, having heard that he put the Sadducees to silence, they gathered to discuss it.* (v. 34)

It is uncertain at this point if the Pharisees will attempt to discredit Jesus after his display of skillful scriptural proof-texting in support of the classical touchstone of Pharisaic doctrine: resurrection. Since he argued their case so effectively, perhaps they may want to reconsider whether they should even consider him a threat. The following exchange shows how closely Jesus’ teaching on resurrection aligns with that of the Pharisees.

*One of them asked him, to test him. “Master, what is the greatest commandment in the Torah?” He said to him, “‘You will love the Lord your God with your whole heart and with your whole soul and with your whole mind’ [Deut 6:5].<sup>20</sup> This is the greatest and first commandment. The second is this one: ‘You will love your neighbor as yourself.’<sup>21</sup> [Lev 19:18]. On these two commandments the entire Torah and the Prophets hang.”* (vv. 35–40)

To love God and to love one’s fellow are concomitant requirements of the Torah. *Kinyan Torah* (m. *Abot* 6:1) records:

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- 20 Cf. Mark 12:30; LXX Deut 6:5: “You will love the Lord your God from your whole heart and from your whole soul and from the *whole of your power*.” The Gospel renders this as “the whole of your mind,” a singular version that must have been a Pharisaic understanding of “*me’odekha*” since the passage is aimed at Pharisees. The intentionality of doing commandments as an expression of “love of God” is heightened.
- 21 Cf. LXX Lev. 19:18 cf. 19:19, 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27; Rom 13:9; Jas 2:8: “... you will love your neighbor as yourself.”

Rabbi Meir said: "Whosoever occupies himself in Torah (learning and doing)... loves God and his fellow human... And he becomes humble and long-suffering, and forgiving of insult, and it (humility) magnifies him and exalts him over all things."

*B. Ber.* 28b relates that the dying Rabbi Eliezer advised his students to both respect one another and to honor God in order to merit life in the World to Come. Matthew, speaking of humility that exalts, will say much the same thing in 23:12.

Arguing from the perspective of the breach rather than the observance, *t. Šeb. 3:6* claims breaking the social code is an affront to God. Indeed the prophets of old railed that God will punish sins of those who did not hear pleas of the orphan and the widow. The interdependence of piety and social responsibility is one of the true insights of Israel's legacy. *Didache* chapter 2, an early Christian work arguably originating with Jewish adherents of the Christ cult, juxtaposes Deut 6:5 and Lev 19:18, following this with "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow." The author then lists the negative commandments found in the Decalogue. In my earlier study (2000, 90–100), I discuss a twelfth century midrash that echoes *Didache* and other Jewish sources that develop the same themes in almost the same wordings. Let us look at the Yemenite Midrash.

*Pitron Torah*, (ed. E. Urbach, pp.79–80) *parashat Qedoshim*:

"And you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev 19:18). This commandment includes the observance of all the negative commandments which were stated in respect to treating human beings. For whenever you perform the commandment of "And you shall love your neighbor," you will have thereby fulfilled your obedience of "Do not take the Lord's name in vain," and "Do not kill," and "Do not steal," and "Do not bear false witness," and "Do not covet" (Exod 20:7,13–17 and all such similar commandments). For Sages have said: All of the commandments in the Torah are dependent on two verses; the first "And you shall love the Lord God" (Deut 6:5), and the second, " And you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev 19: 18).<sup>22</sup> That is, the 248 positive commandments are dependent upon "Love the Lord your God etc.". For anyone who loves God and loves himself will

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<sup>22</sup> Although Leviticus comes before Deuteronomy, the order here puts love of God first, just as Matthew and *Didache* (ch. 2) do. I find it hard to believe that this is simply coincidence, although I would not hazard any conjectures as to the history of the tradition at this point. See also *t. Šebu* 3:6 (also see James 3:10–11): one cannot transgress any commandment without denying God as the source of the commandments.

perform them. And all of the negative commandments are dependent on “You shall love your neighbor as yourself”. For whenever you fulfill “And you shall love your neighbor as yourself,” these [*i.e.*, all the negative precepts] you will have fulfilled. Also concerning the sojourner Scripture states, “[A]nd the stranger who sojourns among you shall be] to you as the native amongst you [and you shall love him as yourself]” (Lev 19:34). From here Sages derived, “What is hateful to you do not do to your fellow” (*b. Šabb.* 31a).

In my fuller study of this passage, I analyzed it and tried to trace its original form.<sup>23</sup> The relationship to *Didache* is striking: two love commandments; a list of social commandments as fulfillment of the love commandment; a statement saying, “What is hateful to you do not do to your fellow.” What is most noteworthy is the parallel with *b. Šabb.* 31a: “What is hateful to you do not do to your fellow—this is the whole Torah in its entirety and the other commandments are commentary.”

Here too, in Matthew’s Gospel, we find the assertion “On these two commandments the entire Torah and the Prophets hang,” which is anything but antinomian. All of Jewish Scripture must be fulfilled through the recognition that serving God and serving one’s fellow are the entire objective of God’s revelation. The commandments were intended to provide an essential, detailed blueprint for applying these two enormous imperatives within human experience.

The metaphor of the entire Torah and prophetic prescriptions suspended from few but strong pegs is well known in the literature of the Rabbis.<sup>24</sup> Consider the following examples:

*Sipra Qed.* par. 1:

Speak to the Children of Israel and you shall say to them, “Be thou holy . . .”—This teaches that this component was to be taught in the assembly. And why was it to be taught in the assembly? Because many essentials of the Torah hang upon it.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Basser, *Studies in Exegesis*, 90–105.

<sup>24</sup> See Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism*, 250–252.

<sup>25</sup> In *Lev. Rab. Qedoshim parsha 24:5* the sentence begins: “Rabbi Ḥiyya taught . . .”

*Sipre Zuta 15:*

What is the commandment upon which hang all the commandments? It is the prohibition against idolatry, as it is said, “Take care lest you forget the covenant of God etc.” (Deut 4:9).

*Midrash Aggadah Gen.* (ed. Buber) 47:29:

So he swore to him by circumcision because the 613 commandments hang upon it.

*B. Ber.* 63a:

Bar Kappara taught: [W]hat is that diminutive component upon which hang all the essentials of the Torah? “In all your make-up know Him” (Prov 3:6).

The dialogue at the conclusion of chapter 22 concludes with Jesus upholding love of Torah, love of one's fellow, love of God. No one can object to any of these pronouncements. Matthew, or his editor, cannot leave matters in such an amicable state. In vv. 41–46, Jesus interrogates, attacks and then silences the Pharisees—to what end we do not know.

*When the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them... (v. 41)*

Jesus now goes on the offensive, aiming to show off his superior interpretive skills, while demonstrating that the Pharisees, renowned for the meticulous attention to detail in their scriptural interpretations and their ability to resolve textual difficulties, cannot meet the scriptural challenge he puts before them. The implicit answer Jesus seeks to impart is that David's son (Jesus) is much greater than David. Given the Gospel's cloak of secrecy around Jesus' status, which is still ambiguous as far as his critics are concerned, he does not state this outright. Nevertheless, the astute reader/listener cannot fail to grasp Jesus' intention.

*“What does it seem to you about the Messiah? Whose descendant is he?”  
They said to him, “David’s.” He said to them, “How is it then that David through the [Prophetic] Spirit calls him ‘lord’?: ‘The Lord said to my lord,*

*Sit at my right, until I put your enemies under your feet' (Ps 110).<sup>26</sup> If David calls him 'lord,' how is it that he is his son?" (vv. 42–45)*

The near parallel in Mark 12: 35–37 asks why the Scribes say the Messiah is the son of David. In Matthew the question is directly asked of the Pharisees. The obvious and ineluctable response here is that Jesus, the Scribes and the Pharisees all agree the figure of whom God speaks in Ps 110:1 is the Messiah, God's anointed savior, who will rescue Israel from her enemies and lay them low. The question for the Torah teachers is whether the Messiah figure in this Psalm is David's son or perhaps one who is greater than a mere mortal. If he is the son of David then he is human. But is he David's son as the Jews taught? Apparently not; when David (informed through the infallible Holy Spirit) introduces his prophetic vision of God speaking to the Messiah, he says, "God said to my lord ...". If the character in the vision were David's son, surely David would have written, "God said to my son," rather than the deferential address "my lord." But that is exactly what David, according to tradition, did write. Hence, the argument goes, the Teachers of the Law cannot be correct that the Messiah is David's son. Who the Messiah is therefore a mystery. From the phrasing in Matthew ("Whose son is he?"), the implication is that the Messiah is the Son of God, not the son of David, as is commonly supposed. A wedge is inserted between the genealogy that opened Matthew's Gospel (Jesus Christ, son of Abraham, son of David) and the later Christology of the Church. Matthew, like Mark (e.g. 10:47) does not refrain from using the title "son of David."

It is noteworthy that the question posed to the Pharisees from Ps 110:1 continued to vex Jews throughout the Middle Ages. Monks and children taunted Jews with Matthew's argument to silence all opposition to the divinity of Jesus.<sup>27</sup> Most Jewish interpreters have not identified the figure in Ps 110:1 with the Messiah since early Talmudic times. Rabbinic literature has speculated that the referent might have been Saul, Abraham or even David, the arguments for each ingeniously deduced from various grammatical and philosophical observations, none of which are convincing. *Targum Psalms* interprets "sit at my right (*yemini*)" as "wait for King Saul, the Benjamite (also *yemini*) to die." "My lord" (in this verse of the Psalms) is transformed into "I will make you a lord," in words directed by God to David. *Midrash Psalms* (ed. Buber) to Psalm 110:1 follows suit. Talmud (*b. Ned.* 32b; *b. Sanh.* 108b) *Mekhilta R. Yish. Beshalah*,

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Mark 12:36; Luke 20:42; Acts. 2:34; 1 Cor 15:25; Heb 1:13; LXX Ps 109:1 (MT 110:1): "The Lord said to my lord, 'Sit at my right until I place your enemies as a footstool under your feet.'"

<sup>27</sup> See Nachmanides' debate with Fra Paulo: *Vikuach ha-Ramban in Kitvei ha-Ramban*, ed. HD. Chavel, (1964), v. I, 317, par. 91.

*Shira* 6 understands the addressee to be Abraham the Patriarch, who merited that David refer to him as “my lord.” However, the messianic connection did survive in fragmentary form. *Yalkut Šim’oni* (2Sam sec. 162 and Ps 110 sec. 869), a medieval anthology of rabbinic citations, incorporates the ancient tradition that Ps 110:1 refers to a messianic “son of David” seated to the right of God while Abraham is seated to the left of God and the Messiah:

Rabbi Yuden said in the name of Rabbi Aha bar Hanina: In the future world God will seat King Messiah to his right and Abraham to his left. The face of Abraham will turn colors from a sense of personal shame. He will lament, “The son of my son [David] sits to the right and me to the left.” Then God will pacify him: “The son of your son is to your right and I am to your right...”

Given that the Talmudic tradition had Abraham sitting to the right of God, the midrash that places the Messiah, son of David, there depicts Abraham as complaining about it. The midrashists are well aware of the history of their traditions and can draw upon much older materials without offending their contemporaries.

In the Gospel debate scenes between Jesus and his opponents regarding doctrinal issues, this debate with the Pharisees stands out. It arrives as an import from foreign sources far removed from the understanding of Jesus as a mortal son of David, or indeed a son of David at all. The title “Christ” in this record of Jew vs. Christian in confrontational disputation has lost its Jewish definition, along with Jesus’ Davidic messianic legacy from the early Jewish roots of the Jesus movement.

*No one was able to offer any answer, nor did anyone from that day dare to ask him anything at all.* (v. 46)

Jesus initiated the confrontation with the Pharisees; it was he who asked the questions. That no one asked him anything from that day forward is testimony to his triumph. Jesus has silenced all opposition from all groups. The curtain comes down over the debate scenes. From this point on, Jesus will vituperate against the Scribes and Pharisees, not argue with them, and he will mock the Romans in official positions of authority with his silence.

# Chapter 23

## Introduction

Thus far Matthew's Gospel has been depicting a Jesus who ministered to Jews with an eschatological message: just as the inner person directs the outer person, so the pure innermost conscience of the universe is manifest in the outer kingdom.<sup>1</sup> This message is carried forward into chapters 21–23, deepening the dichotomy between inside and outside, and suggesting that the insiders—the Jews—are responsible for the inner corruption of the cosmos that must be, and will be, cleaned out. The exterior, more peripheral Gentiles will replace them at the heart of the new heavenly kingdom, while the Jews will be cast out to the farthest regions of Hell.

In chapter 23 we encounter several themes touched upon previously. In chapters 5–7, I argued that Matthew's Jesus has long realized the Pharisees with whom he is dealing really have little idea of what they are talking about. What some declare to be inviolable tradition, others dispute and challenge with counter-arguments. Jesus must apprise them of the actual Pharisaic doctrine. He declares that he wants to restore the original teaching, explaining that the Pharisees with whom he is arguing are confused and tells us why. Chapter 23 both summarizes the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish authorities and urges us forward with its vision of future messianic celebration.

As M.A. Powell points out, by all accounts Matt 23:2–3 does not fit, and indeed in places seems to contradict, the generally anti-Pharisaic tenor of the Gospel:<sup>2</sup> “*The Scribes and the Pharisees sit in the seat of Moses.*<sup>3</sup> Everything,

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1 See above Matt 15:18–19: “But the things that come out of mouth come out of the heart, and they make the person impure. For coming out of the heart are wicked thoughts, murders, adulteries, sexual immoralities, thefts, false testimonies, blasphemies.” Since the ancients and medievalists saw the cosmos organically, the rabbis (*t. Qidd. 14; b. Qidd. 40b*) absorbed this common view into their religious thought to mean the human being and the universe are one and the same. The overall human condition in its collective governs the condition of the visible world. Matthew is more concerned about the purity of inner spirit and the rabbis about proper behaviors.

2 M.A. Powell, “Do and Keep What Moses Says (Matthew 23:2–7)” (1995), 419–435.

3 *Kathedra* (seat) is also an Aramaic loan word from Greek. In context it seems to represent a specialized usage of Hebrew *kisei* or *moshav*—a sitting court: “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on the court of Moses.” I have opted for the more literal rendition “sit in the seat of Moses.” It is important to note that in chap. 19 a divide occurs between God's ideal of marriage and Moses' practical legislation. While Moses and presumably those in his seat (akin to the

*whatever they say to you, thou shalt observe, keep and do.*" If Pharisees sit in the seat of Moses, how can Jesus argue with their teachings? Yet he does so almost immediately after stating their instructions must be obeyed. Throughout Matthew, Jesus rejects what Powell takes to be—and what Pharisees seem to claim are—Pharisaic teachings.

Powell finds no explanation of this anomaly offered by any scholar that sufficiently clarifies what he considers to be an insurmountable difficulty. Powell's own resolution is to claim that Jesus wants people to study Torah textual readings with Pharisees but not accept their interpretations. But in fact Jesus seems to object to their character traits, not their interpretations. In point of fact, there is no difficulty in reading the text of chapter 23 as is.<sup>4</sup> Jesus is talking to the Scribes, priests and Pharisees at some points, and addressing crowds and his disciples (jointly in 23:1–3) at others. In addressing all three of these audiences, the bulk of his barbs are nevertheless aimed primarily at the Pharisees (e.g. 23:3). I am inclined to think it makes sense to identify Scribes with Levites, as D. Schwartz has proposed.<sup>5</sup> But the matter is far from certain.

According to Exod 18:26, Moses did not judge cases, except for those that were too difficult even for the judges. Deut 17:8–11 institutionalized that arrangement for all time:

If there arise a matter too hard for thee in judgment, between blood and blood, between plea and plea, and between stroke and stroke, being matters of controversy within thy gates: then shalt thou arise, and get thee up into the place which the Lord thy God shall choose. And thou shalt come unto the *priests, the Levites [Scribes?], and unto the judge [Pharisee?]* that shall be in those days, and enquire; and they shall teach thee the sentence of judgment. And thou shalt do according to the sentence, which they of that place which the Lord shall choose shall teach thee; and thou shalt *observe to do according to all that they inform thee*. According to the

*smicha* succession from Moses to the Rabbis) have authority to rule for the benefit of society, their voice is not exactly God's voice.

<sup>4</sup> The most complete review of scholarship on the topic is David E. Garland, *The Intention of Matthew 23* (1979), who presents a detailed examination of the synoptic sources bearing on chap. 23 and its various conundrums. He sees chaps. 21–25 as a unit and argues for a single message: the Pharisees are on trial and will be found guilty. The introduction to Garland's work highlights how Jewish scholars have seen this chapter as encasing Matthew's vulgar anti-Judaism, his deep seated hatred of Jews. See further D. Flusser, "Two Anti-Jewish Montages in Matthew" (1975), 37–44.

<sup>5</sup> See Daniel R. Schwartz, "Between Priests and Sages in the Second Temple Period" in *Variety of Opinions and Views in Jewish Culture* (Kerem 1992), 89–101.

sentence of the law which they shall teach thee, and according to the judgment which they shall tell thee, thou shalt do: thou shalt not decline from the sentence which they shall teach thee, to the right hand, nor to the left.

Jesus understands the High Court to be an institution originally set up by Moses. The problem is not with the teachings of this Court, but rather that its judges set down laws that many of the Pharisees of his own time do not follow. Run-of-the-mill Pharisees justify doing things that differ from, and even contradict, the High Court's pronouncements. Jesus castigates these Pharisaic leaders for their deviation from the authentic rulings of the High Court, epitomized by the example of oaths and vows, by citing teachings that apparently were very common in his day and age. Two positions emerge as operative: one that Jesus believes came down from a High Court at some point in the past, and another practiced widely by the Pharisaic schools he is castigating. Although Jesus does not say so, the passage in Deuteronomy prescribes the death penalty for those who do not heed the teachings of the High Court. Matthew's Jesus declares he himself agrees with the Court's teachings, and criticizes Pharisees for finding both motives and means for disregarding the High Court's decisions, inventing intricate legal mechanisms that Jesus will now challenge. For the Gospel author, traditions have become muddled, as reflected in the discrepancy between precepts and practices. Deuteronomy 17 had warned against those who refused to follow the Court's pronouncements.

In the Mishnah and other teachings of the Sages, we encounter various rabbis who express personal doubts as to whether a teaching has indeed been handed down authoritatively over the generations. If it has, all is well and good; nevertheless, a counter suggestion may be offered that casts doubt upon the authenticity of a teaching: "If this is an authentic tradition we have to accept it, but if it is a reconstruction of a ruling we will disprove it." Jesus in effect says this to his opponents about the Pharisaic formulae for oaths and vows: if it is a real teaching, we accept it,<sup>6</sup> but because confusion rules the day and matters are muddled, we will challenge what you claim are the authentic teachings.<sup>7</sup>

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6 *T. Ed.* 1 tells us that just as the Fathers of the World (*avot ha'olam*)—the pre-eminent first century scholars Hillel and Shammai—did not follow their own habits where there was established tradition, how much more no person should follow his own habit where is an established tradition.

7 In *m. Keritot* 3:9, Rabbi Akiva says he is prepared to accept traditional teachings which were declared to be authentic binding traditions, but will present counter arguments against those which lack cogency. His argumentation is based on arguments of the less inclusive, the less stringent to the more inclusive, the more stringent cases. He is allowed to object to and refute what have been the more accepted positions. Jesus does the same.

In the following Gospel passages the word “oath” is used, but likely in some cases “vow” is meant. The two have become confused. That the terms are used interchangeably in non-scholarly discourse is well documented. Josephus speaks of “oath” while his example refers to “vow” (*Ag. Ap.* 1:167).<sup>8</sup>

Matthew’s rhetorical scheme (although I doubt that he himself originated it) works as follows in 23:18–19. “Greater” in these passages means “of higher sanctity.” Contagion—that is actual contact, passes on its sanctity but to a lesser degree. The original source of sanctity is stronger than what is derived from it by contact. This still is a higher degree of sanctity than the mere connection to the gold donated, used to purchase holy items, which has not much sanctity at all before it is used for some holy purpose:

[You say] *“Whoever swears an oath by the Temple, it is nothing, but whoever swears an oath by the gold of the Temple, that one is bound.”*

[Not so!] What is greater, the gold or the Temple that consecrates the gold?

And [you say] *“Whoever swears an oath by the altar, it is nothing, but whoever swears an oath by the offering that is upon it, that one is bound.”*

[Not so!] For what is greater, the offering or the altar that consecrates the offering? Whoever swears an oath by the altar swears by it and by everything that is upon it.

In other words, if you assign sanctity to items not in fixed contact with the divine, like sacrifices that go on the altar, then you must assign even more sanctity to the altar (for it is God’s very table). If the former effects a pledge of some type, the latter must certainly do so.

But do we speak of oaths or vows? A vow operates by attaching itself to some object X that was given to the Temple for a sacred purpose. That object—or its concept—is made to extend to some different object Y (that I control). And the proper phrasing should be, “Just LIKE object X is forbidden for my private use (it belongs to God’s realm), so too object Y is forbidden for my private use.” While *m. Ned.* 3:1 provides examples all using the word LIKE (the altar, the Temple), *t. Ned.* 1:3 provides the same examples where some other preposition is used but must be understood implicitly to mean “like.” The Babylonian Talmud and most commentators emend the Tosefta text (*t. Ned.* 1:3) to fit in with the Mishnah by adding “like.” The Tosefta likely represents an authentic tradition which Rabbi Yehudah rejects by insisting that the word “like” must be

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<sup>8</sup> S. Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine*, 128–9, explains the interchange between vow and oath.

uttered to effect a binding vow. An oath cannot be effected by any such reference to a dedicated object, only by reference to God or some substitute name or item that represents his uniqueness and brings down divine punishment if the oath is desecrated—that works even by just saying “oath that....” The same Tosefta (*Ned.* 1:3) rules that referring to objects (e.g. altar) mentioned in *m. Ned.* 1:3, while effective for vows, does not effect a binding oath. Yet the Talmud itself refers to Rabbis using expressions such as “by the *Avodah*” (see e.g., *Sipre Deut.* 1: the ritual of sacrificial offering) and “by the *Heichal*” (the Sanctuary) as “pseudo oaths.” In much the same way, Muslim tradition frowns on swearing oaths on anything or anyone other than Allah; nevertheless, the *Qur'an* includes examples of oaths sworn on, among other things, the *Ka'bā*, Mt. Sinai and even the *Qur'an* itself.

The most elegant solution for understanding the Gospel teachings is to treat Jesus’ words, except in vv. 21–22, as vow formulae. I suspect that no modern reader is going to care much at this point whether vows are made referencing a sacrifice or the altar that supports the sacrifice. Nevertheless, it is important to understand, since various teachings were current in Jesus’ time, that Jesus is portrayed as taking the distinction seriously; he is determined to clarify what for him is the authentic tradition. In this material, which must date to a very early layer of Church teaching, what is represented as Jesus’ own position is the very position of *t. Ned.* 1:3<sup>9</sup> This tradition allowed one to vow without explicitly saying the word “like” which remained 1) implicit and also to refer to offerings in the Temple by 2) employing a larger category that contained the gift. The altar and the Temple were such categories. This accords with the position of Jesus. Rabbi Yehudah allowed neither case and insisted that “like” be stated and the gifts be named outright. This position accords with that of Jesus’ interlocutors. A third position also exists and it is the dominant one now: *m. Ned.* 3:1 insists that “like” be explicitly declared but allows referring to larger categories such as the Temple or altar.

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<sup>9</sup> For oaths made using the expressions see *t. Ned.* 1:3 (ed. Lieberman) “Jerusalem,” “for Jerusalem,” “by Jerusalem”; “Sanctuary,” “for the sanctuary,” “by the sanctuary”; “Altar,” “for the altar,” “by the altar”; “Sheep sacrifices,” “for sheep sacrifices,” “by sheep sacrifices” etc. etc. they all take effect. An instructive detail is found in *b. Ned.* 13a-b: If he designates a vow by using the word “sacrifice” to refer to its physical being [the being (*hayei*) of the sacrifice] only, ignoring the fact it is like something dedicated and sacred which underwent a change in status from personally “useable” to “not useable,” the Sages agree in this case with Rabbi Yehuda: the vow is of no import. Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine*, 118 wonders about the precise and literal meaning of *hayei*.

Pharisaic/scribal legal theory needs to be understood if we are to grasp the significance of the Gospel's argument. Were seemingly arcane issues not rooted in *realia*, they would not have been preserved in polemic. I suspect that the invective was grafted onto the original Gospel stalk (e.g. "blind guides"; "blind fools") to emphasize the harsh judgment against these Pharisees, who really ought to know better but to Jesus' mind are visually impaired by their lack of clear thinking. This is why they do not follow their own longstanding traditions, as Jesus would have it, concerning formulae for vows. Beneath the diatribe, the Gospel actually preserves longstanding Jewish teachings about vows that would later be found in Tosefta, Mishnah, and the Talmuds, as well as in medieval commentaries.

The act of vowing serves as the model for all promissory declarations. By designating something to be "like a dedicated item," a person associates his act of declaration with placing the item out of anyone's reach, as one does when offering a sacrifice. The associated item thereby acquires the aura of something dedicated to the Temple. It becomes completely off limits for personal use, although in reality the "fenced off" item need not belong to the Temple at all. The declaration has the effect of changing the status of the avowed item from permitted to forbidden.<sup>10</sup>

Since both the oath and vow formulas deal with mention of the holy and sacred, there is some ambiguity at times about what the declaration was intended to accomplish in the first place. There apparently was also fluidity in using oath formulas to effect vows by ordinary people. In popular usage, the vow formula was often used to take an oath. The fine line between declarations of oaths and vows became blurred and was crossed. The Pharisees and their heirs, the Rabbis, began erecting boundaries between them, to distinguish

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<sup>10</sup> A curious case is found in *t. Ned* 1:4 as cited in *y. Ned* 1:3: One who pronounces a vow "by the inherent sacredness of a Torah scroll" (meaning physical parchment) is not bound by that vow. But if the vow is "by what is written in the Torah" (that is, the intent is to reference the various items mentioned in the Torah), or "by the scroll of the Torah and by what is written in it," he/she is bound by the vow. "Inherent sacredness" is not produced by human endeavor but is an automatic characteristic of Torah parchments: they are sacred by definition without being designated as such. Thus no one changed its status from profane to sacred. A vow which references an item that did not change its status by dint of having been dedicated to the Temple is not binding. On the other hand, since sacrifices and other gifts to the Temple are written in the Torah (plus many other things), the rule of containment applies and the vow referencing things written in the Torah is binding. This, in effect, is the same principle as saying "(like) the altar". Sacrificial animals were once unhallowed property which underwent a change of status when they were given to the Temple. Then they became off-limits to all.

between binding and non-binding vows or oaths. The Gospel and the Talmud show such congruence on this matter that one cannot fail to be impressed by the parallels between the two literatures in this regard. I am convinced that in our Gospel, vv. 16–17 refer only to vows.

With respect to vows mentioning items normally dedicated as gifts to the Temple, rendering them off-limits for any other purpose, could be used to create a vow. It was understood that one could create an effective analogy between the forbidden status of a gift to the Temple and the object over which one pronounced the vow. Preferably the one taking the vow would explicitly declare, “*Just like* a dedicated sacrifice is forbidden to be enjoyed by me, [so] is your food forbidden to me.”<sup>11</sup> The food becomes off limits, subject in theory to the same prohibitions that would apply to sacrificial offerings. Its use for any mundane purpose, or any subsequent benefit derived from it, not only would be robbery of the divine precincts, it would be sacrilege. Issues arose if the items were stated without prefixing “like”; in some cases by common usages they might be understood to be there (thus *qorban*—offering—alone suffices).<sup>12</sup>

One view limited the references in oaths and vows to specific dedicated items and nothing else, since any extension beyond those objects could lead to slippery slopes and ambiguities.<sup>13</sup> As I said above, our extant Tosefta argues against this view and proclaims in one voice the view Jesus propounds. Vows can be effected through mentioning specific gifted items or else by referring to physical fixtures that might be seen as catch all terms for what is contained

<sup>11</sup> Rabbi Menachem Meiri in his commentary to *b. Qidd.* 54a remarks: If he said “Just like the altar”—lo this is a vow, and likewise “Just like the Temple,” “Just like Jerusalem” which has the import of “just like the things offered in them” but he does not intend to declare “Just like their wood and stone components (physical structures)”. Now even if he omits “Just like” and says . . . “The *Temple* is your food to me”—he is bound (we understand means “Just like the offerings in the Temple are forbidden to me so your food is likewise forbidden.”)

<sup>12</sup> J.A. Fitzmyer’s disdain for using rabbinic sources as parallels to Gospel sources impairs his ability to see their points of commonality. He was militant in his denial that the rabbinic sources could have any value in the understanding of the Gospels. As a result his article “The Aramaic *Qorbān* Inscription from Jebel Ḥallet Et-Ṭūri and Mark 7:11/Matt 15:5” (1997), 60–65 misses the mark. An ossuary inscription using a *qorban* formula for a vow makes perfect sense—the ossuary is set off limits for anyone who reuse it (as the inscription says)—set off by a vow formula. He seems to suggest the ossuary itself had been dedicated to the Temple. Nevertheless, his bibliographical references are very useful.

<sup>13</sup> *B. Qidd.* 54a relates: Rabbi Yehuda says anyone who declares “By Jerusalem . . .” has said nothing (see *m. Ned.* 1:3). Now if you think the reason is because he did not declare “just as Jerusalem” so he said nothing, Rabbi Yehuda explains otherwise: he has to vow explicitly by something offered to God in Jerusalem and leave nothing to ordinary speech.

in them.<sup>14</sup> Jesus uses such an argument to discount the other Pharisaic view (championed by Rabbi Yehudah in the Tosefta), and intimates that the original laws were not in accord with what some Pharisees were now saying. Jesus' argument (minus the invective) is in good scribal form.

### ***Practice What You Preach***

Aside from the tirades against hypocrisy and deception in this chapter and elsewhere, the Gospel states in Matt 5:8, “Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.” It is curious that the mystical traditions of the Talmuds that deal with practicing what one preaches are cited in texts dealing with experiential expositions of the supernal worlds of Ezekiel’s visions of God’s throne. What is preached becomes reality, evoking a vision of the divine.

*T. Hag 2:1* (compare *b. Hag 14b*, *y. Hag 2:1*) praises a rabbi who practices what he preaches and relates this to his drawing down the divine world:

Some expound beautifully but do not practice beautifully. Some practice beautifully but do not expound beautifully. Eleazar ben Arukh expounds beautifully and practices beautifully. Blessed are you, our Patriarch Abraham, for Eleazar ben Arukh, your descendant, knows how to contemplate and to *expound upon the* [details of the] Glory of his Father who is in heaven.

The correct reading here for “expound upon” is “*doresh b'*”, a phrase applicable to matters intended to be kept secret, i.e. mystical understanding intended for the select few. In *m. Hag. 2:1*. Rabbi Eleazar is described as qualified to expound upon such matters because he always practiced what he preached. On the other hand, we hear in these Talmudic passages that ben Azzai did not succeed in his mystical ascensions to the Merkavah; *t. Yebam. 8:7* informs us that he preached the duty to marry but did not do so himself.

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<sup>14</sup> This is the view of the Sages in *m. Ned 1:3* and *T. Ned 1:3*: Jerusalem/ by Jerusalem/ the Temple/ by the Temple/ by the Temple; the altar/ by the altar.... any of these is effective to create a vow but not an oath. And Rabbi Obadiah of Bartenura comments (*m. Ned. 1:3*): *like the altar* = like the sacrifices upon the altar; *like the Temple* = like sacrifices in the Temple; *like Jerusalem* = like the sacrifices in Jerusalem.... And so all of them, even if he did not mention “sacrifice”, lo these are vows by a dint of [understood] comparisons to sacrifices. Rabbi Yehudah: if he did not mention “just as,” he said nothing. The Talmud sees reason to challenge this position (*b. Qidd. 54a*), and this seems to be the position of the opponents of Jesus.

Ben Azzai said: All who do not attempt to procreate are murderers and deface God's image—as Scripture said, "God made man in his image" and then it said, "and you shall be fruitful and procreate." Eleazar ben Azariah said to him: "Ben Azzai, "words are beautiful when they are practiced." Some expound beautifully but do not practice beautifully; some practice beautifully but do not expound beautifully. Ben Azzai expounds beautifully but does not practice beautifully." He never married, claiming he was too attached to God and Torah to have time for a wife and family.

Chapter 23 concludes with the assurance that Jesus will meet his followers in the new kingdom of the future. They will recite "Blessed be he who comes in the name of the Lord." This is a doublet of the scene in chapter 21, when Jesus rode triumphantly into Jerusalem. Then, coming back to "now time," we saw the major theme of Matthew: Jesus versus priests and Pharisees, and now in chapter 23 (after concluding a three chapter long tirade against these authorities), we return to the beginning of chapter 21. This return to the triumph of Jesus closes the dramatic unit with a perfect *inclusio* ("Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord") (Matt 21:9 and 23:39).

### Commentary

*Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to his disciples:* (v. 1)

Until now Jesus has been speaking with authority figures of the Jewish establishment, accusing them of heinous behavior. He now directs his indictments against the Pharisees and Scribes to his disciples and to crowds of ordinary people.

*The Scribes and the Pharisees sat on the seat of Moses.* (v. 2)

Matthew often claims that Jesus recognized Pharisaic authority. Nevertheless, when he tried to help them to more fully realize the implications of their own teachings, they resented his critique. Jesus' recognition of the authority of the Sages/Pharisees and his simultaneous warning to avoid them because of their hypocrisy and hurtful character traits are not as inherently contradictory as some suppose. The same advice to heed teachings of the Sages but to avoid contact with them is also found in *m. Abot* 2:15, as I pointed out in chapter 15. My comparison of it with Jesus' diatribe in Matthew is even clearer in the present context.

Rabbi Eliezer would say: The honor of your fellow should be as precious to you as your own, and do not be quick to anger. Repent one day before your death. Warm yourself by the fire of the Sages, but beware lest you be burned by its embers; for their bite is the bite of a fox, their sting is the sting of a scorpion, their hiss is the hiss a serpent, and all their words are like fiery coals.

The Talmud elsewhere suggests that Rabbi Eliezer had some affinity for the teachings of Jesus and in a few instances the parallels between certain sayings attributed to him and those of Jesus are startling. In the above quotation we discover Eliezer's paraphrase of what we know as Jesus' Golden Rule: Let the honor of your fellow man be as dear to you as your own. Jesus preaches against getting angry, and Eliezer recommends developing character traits so that one is not easily provoked. Like Jesus, Eliezer calls for repentance—and does so in a gentle manner, since no one knows the day of his death. Rabbi Eliezer then launches into an attack on the Sages,<sup>15</sup> the parallel to which we encounter in the Gospel.

There is no reason to think that Matt 23:1–4 provides any indication of having been written by exponents of two viewpoints, one of them pro-Pharisee and the other anti-Pharisee. Nor does Matthew evidence here (although he often does) a pro-Gentile bias. That bias emerges in the passages after v. 4. Much has been written on the term “seat of Moses,” speculating about what it refers to: a synagogue seat of authority (which has some archaeological basis); the seat of the president of the High Court; a figure of speech for judicial power; a chair from which lectures were given and various other guesses. To my mind, this is the High Court in Jerusalem which issued binding decrees (“*ex cathedra*”, speaking anachronistically) in accord with biblical legislation, as I pointed out in the introduction to this chapter.

*Everything, they say to you to observe, keep and practice. But do not do according to their works for they speak and do not practice. (v. 3)*

Now the address temporarily shifts to the disciples. The theme of saying one thing but doing another looms large in Talmudic literature. Each group in antiquity viewed their opponents as hypocrites; Jews and Christians saw one another in the same way. The Rabbis would castigate those who said one thing but did something else.

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<sup>15</sup> The pertinent Talmudic passage discussing Rabbi Eliezer and his associations with followers of Jesus is summarized by J. Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 36–40.

Consider *Abot* 4:6:

Rabbi Yishmael, the son of Rabbi Yossi, used to say: He who studies in order to teach will be enabled both to learn and to teach. But he who learns in order to practice will be enabled to learn, to teach, to observe, and to practice.

The point is further driven home by Rabbi Obadiah of Bartenura in his commentary to *Abot* 1:17: *And the exposition is not key but rather it is the doing that matters.* He explains:

You should be aware that silence can be good. For even if the highest levels of scholarship are evinced through exposition and analysis of deep Torah discussion—still God rewards one only for the doing. As for the one who expounds and does not practice—it would have been better had he been silent and not expounded.

The passage in *Devarim Rabbah*<sup>16</sup> (ed. Lieberman) *Ki tavo* 4 is illuminating:

*To observe, to do all his commandments* (Deut 28:1):

Said Rabbi Shimon ben Halafta, “Anyone who learns Torah and does not practice—his punishment is more severe than one who never learned anything at all. . . . How do I know this? From Isaiah, who said: Let favor be shown to the wicked person who has not learned righteousness (Isa 26:10). On the other hand one who has learned but does not practice deserves no favor. Thus we are told “to observe, to do all my commandments.”

*They tie up heavy loads and lay them upon peoples' shoulders, but they themselves do not wish to move them by so much as a finger.* (v. 4)

Luke 11:46, like Matthew 23:4, has been taken by commentators as figurative:

Jesus replied, “And you experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them.”

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<sup>16</sup> Not the same work as *Deut. Rab.*

The simplest interpretation is that Pharisees heap their own regulations upon the Torah to “safeguard” it. Not only are they unwilling to make exceptions to these safeguards or to offer any recourse when individuals buckle under the weight of their legislation,<sup>17</sup> they neglect the moral virtues, prioritizing ritualistic legalism. Jesus berates them for this in Matt 23:33.

You tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and you leave aside the more serious things of the Torah: judgment, mercy, and faith.

“Finger” is certainly metaphoric for even the most negligible movement conceivable. Thus we hear that “Heaven ordains stubbing the finger”—an expression that all is ordained (*b. Hulin* 7b); of the prohibition on looking at female finger (even that—*b. Ber.* 27a); “he didn’t touch me even with his little finger” (*Abot R. Nat.A*, ch. 2). So the common expression “not lift a finger to help” is self-explanatory.

But another meaning might be considered. The Gospel could be asserting that Pharisees did tie actual bundles (e.g. of hay) and load them onto the shoulders of porters. If one of the porters stumbled beneath the very heavy load, they did not help him, considering menial work, especially in public, to be beneath the dignity of scholars. Nevertheless, some Rabbis did preach that such teachings not be taken literally, and that scholars need to be compassionate and helpful to others.

*Midrash Tannaim* (ed. Hoffman), Deut 22:4:

*You shall not [stand by] and watch the donkey of your brother or his ox [suffer].* This is a negative commandment. How do I know it is also a positive commandment?—Scripture says, “When you see the donkey of your enemy or ox going astray, etc.” (Exod 23:5). *And Scripture says “And can you [can] ignore it.”*—[Indecisive syntax—For some, this is meant to be read as an exclamatory question.) Can you ignore the suffering? [Surely not!]. But for others it is meant to be read as a declaration: You can ignore it. [Surely so!].... This latter reading applies to an elder and dignified sage. [For it would be considered dishonorable for such a one to be seen coming to the aid of an animal.] Nevertheless, if he is a pious *hasid* he will

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<sup>17</sup> The complaint is the opposite of found in *b. Sanh.* 99b–100a: “What good is the power of Sages who have no authority to permit eating birds which Scripture forbids or forbid eating birds the Torah explicitly permits!”

always do more than what is permitted, or less than what is proscribed, by the minimalist reading of the Law. And this is the preferred way for all.

The cultural milieu of a society where sages were revered allowed for the exemption of sages from anything requiring personal investments of time, as in the following episode:

*B. B. Bat. 144a:*

Rav Saphra's father left money in his estate, and Rav Saphra, for business purposes, took it (before matters were executed and without informing his siblings of his intentions to keep the profits). His brothers summoned him before Rabba (demanding a share from the profits). Said Rabba to them: Rav Saphra is a great scholar, and you should have known he would not leave his studies to trouble himself for the sake of others (so the fact he took it unilaterally means he intended to profit from it himself—even if others would have been inclined to share profits with brothers if they had taken it unilaterally).

Self-serving legislation is always a danger and the question of judicial dignity is of some import. We do not expect to find the English lord of the estate unloading broken-down trucks. Judicial officers require *gravitas* in order to gain and hold the respect of the public.

*They do all their works in order to be seen by people; they make their t'fillin broad and their tzitzit large. (v. 5)*

“Works” here refers to acts enjoined by the divine law or Jewish custom. Here the charge is not that Pharisees do not follow the Law, but that they follow it in bombastic and exaggerated ways in order to show off their piety publicly. Talmudic sources lead one to doubt all Jews were fastidious in observing these rituals.<sup>18</sup>

“And you shall bind them as a sign on your arm, and they shall be as frontlets on your head between your eyes” (Deut 6:8).

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<sup>18</sup> *B. Roš Haš. 17a* refers to such people as “sinners of Israel with their bodies,” a term one might suspect includes Jewish born Christians (used sometimes as the equivalent of *minim*).

*T'fillin* and *tzitzit* are ritual items derived from scriptural passages. They are intended to be visible reminders of God's providence and revelation. The *t'fillin* are boxes containing pertinent scriptures, with straps that tie around the head and the upper arm in such a way that the boxes rest on the upper muscle, and on the high forehead midway between the eyes. Both the Rabbis and the Gospels might refer to them as "protective charms" (phylacteries).<sup>19</sup>

Numbers 15:37–39

And the Lord spoke unto Moses, saying,

Speak unto the children of Israel, and you shall tell them that they make themselves fringes (*tzitzit*) in the borders of their garments throughout their generations, and that they put upon the fringe of the borders a strand of blue. And it shall be unto you for a fringe, that you may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of the Lord, and do them; and that you follow not after your own heart and your own eyes, after which you use to go whoring.

Fringes hung from the *toga* or robes of the Jews in accordance with this biblical command. It is not against the wearing of these items that Jesus protests.<sup>20</sup> He objects to the Pharisees wearing them ostentatiously, exaggerated in size, and as an outward show of piety without sincerity. Indeed, *Y. Sotah* 5:5 complains about the (false) Pharisees who deceive by showing off their pious acts.

*They love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and the greetings in the marketplaces, and for people to call them "Rabbi, Rabbi." But you are not to be called "Rabbi" because One is your Master, the Christ, while all of you are brethren. (vv. 6–8)*

I am reminded of some of my professorial colleagues whose egos are everywhere visible at conferences, lecture halls, banquets; the need for recognition has always been and likely always will be part of structures which privilege the elite over the ordinary. The Rabbis imagined that great kings were those who esteemed scholarship over power and would gladly relinquish their own honor in deference to Sages, as in *b. Mak.* 24a:

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<sup>19</sup> J. H. Tigay, "On the Term Phylacteries (Matt 23:5)" (1979), 45–52.

<sup>20</sup> We noted above (Matt 9:20) Jesus wore such tassels.

Jehosaphat, the king of Judah, when he saw a Sage, would rise from his throne and hug and kiss him and declare to him: “[My father my father]<sup>21</sup> Rabbi, Rabbi, Master, Master.”<sup>22</sup>

*And you will not call anyone your father on earth, for you have One Father, who is in Heaven. Neither are you called “master” because One is your Master: the Christ. (vv. 9–10)*

The connection to the previous verses is the notion of humility and declining honor. The equality of the followers of Jesus derives from their being followers of Jesus’ teachings as their primary identity. In Jewish texts, and presumably in real life, servants, slaves, students, children referred to their superiors as “fathers.”

The end of verse 8 above is repeated in verse 10 for emphasis. The list of honorifics has been divided into two parts, each one concluding “there is only One Master.” Verse 8, as in our version of the text, calls [Jesus] the Christ the truly “Unique Master.” If “Christ” is omitted, as some texts have it, the reference would be to human teachers, which would not be blasphemous in a Jewish context. Repeating these very words in a context (v. 10) that now identifies “the truly Unique Father,” who is unquestionably “God,” creates a divine aura around the figure of Jesus within the *inclusio*.

Yet Jesus does not so explicitly refer to himself as “Christ” elsewhere in Matthew. Is the reference to “the Christ” here a scribal insertion, a later addition by someone (perhaps Matthew) to a pre-existing text? Are both v. 8 and v. 10 in Matthew’s pious pericope (in their entirety) addressing the Christian community of readers, as Garland (p. 60) suggests? To my mind, the word “Christ” could be a single word added to an earlier Gospel text. At any rate, by having the two lists end with the same sentence concerning the unique master, the two lists of titles are brought into conjunction such that the “One” Father in Heaven (God) and the “One” Master/Teacher (Jesus) are associated—one below on earth and one above in heaven. I suspect that the Apostolic Church taught this God/Christ *mystery* even before Paul came on the scene. The titles are clearly Jewish. By adding “the Christ” into the text, the association leaves no doubt that Christ is divine.

According to *m. Abot* 4:8, “Do not be a sole judge for there is no sole judge but One.” The expression “but One” can only refer to God, as in: “Know therefore this day and keep in mind that the Lord alone is God in heaven above and on earth below” (Deut 4:39). Matthew’s phrasing (One) looks entirely Jewish;

<sup>21</sup> The manuscripts are divided as to whether or not “father, father” belongs in the text.

<sup>22</sup> See Kister, “Words and Formulae,” 124.

the qualification “the Christ”, however, seems to interrupt the natural flow of the Greek. This is why so many translations add “*even* the Christ.” If they were added by Matthew, then we must include these verses among those which expose Matthew’s pro-Gentile bias in the Gospel, within a theology that would equate the Messiah with God—a divine Jesus.

*But the greatest among you will be your server. (v. 11)*

See above Matt 20: 26–28. Jesus has come to render aid, not for personal glory.

*But whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. (v. 12)*

The paradoxical turn of phrase has some interesting parallels with the words of the Talmudic rabbis, as in *b. Erub. 13b*:

For whoever humbles himself the Holy One exalts him; and whoever exalts himself the Holy One humbles him. Whoever chases glory, glory flees from him; and whoever flees from glory, glory chases him.

The address now returns to the Scribes and Pharisees. What has confused many is that Jesus’ audience shifts without warning from crowds to disciples, then to Scribes and Pharisees.

*Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, stage-actors! Because you close up the kingdom of heaven before people—you do not enter yourselves, nor do you permit those who would enter from going in. (v. 13)*

“Woe to . . .” is a popular literary form frequently found in the Talmuds. Another example can be found in *Kinyan Torah* (known as m. *Abot*, ch 6.) 6:2:

“Every day a Heavenly Voice emanates from Mount Horeb [i.e. Sinai, where God revealed the commandments] and proclaims: “Woe to people for [their] insult to the Torah!” Because anyone who does not perform the Torah is named “degenerate outcast”. This is as Scripture says: Like a gold ring [i.e. the Torah] in a pig’s snout is a beautiful woman [i.e. a scholar] who shows no discretion [i.e. behaves inappropriately]. (Prov 11:22).”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> There is a pun here known as *notorikon*, where certain select letters of the verse in Proverbs spell out “degenerate outcast.”

Another illustrative and illuminating passage (*t. Menah.* 13:21; *b. Pes.* 57a) speaks of the Sadducees:

Abba Yossi son of Yoḥanan of Jerusalem says: Woe to me because of the house of Boethus, woe to me because of their rods; woe to me because of the house of Hanin, woe to me because of their enchantments; woe to me because of the house of Kathros, woe is me because of their pens; woe to me because of the house of Yishmael the son of Faebi, woe to me because of their fists; For they are High Priests, and their sons are its treasurers, and their sons-in-law its overseers, and their employees beat the people with rods.

A remarkably anti-Pharisaic statement, so close in sentiment to Matthew, was attributed to Sadducees by the Rabbis (*'Abot R. Nat.* version A 1:5):

The tradition [of the fathers] in the hands of the Pharisees is such that they torment themselves in this world and have nothing in the next world.<sup>24</sup>

The verse below is absent in some of the better manuscripts, where it is dismissed as a scribe's marginal notation from Mark 12:40 that made its way into some copies of the text.

*Woe unto you, Scribes and Pharisees, stage-actors! for you devour widows' houses, and for a show make long prayer: therefore you shall receive the greater condemnation.* (v. 14)

The verse makes the claim that the Scribes and Pharisees use self-serving guile to deprive the widows of their inheritance. But because they protract their prayers, they appear to be sincere. The term "widows' houses" is akin to the Aramaic expression [*nikhsei*] *de-bei nashei*, literally, "women's houses"—a term for a family estate after the death of a father. I do not know why or how a term used to designate a woman's relatives came to refer to a paternal estate, but that is its meaning in *b. Šabb.* 116 a–b, where a Christian sage, in a complete reversal of roles with that of Gospel's polemic, is shown to be a corrupt hypocrite, siding with whomever provides the higher bribe.

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<sup>24</sup> There are variants here in the reading. This citation as given represents the words of Sadducees in the passage. But it is difficult to fathom them speaking of the Next World, when the passage itself claims Sadducees denied it even existed. In sentiment the citation expresses the disposition of the Gospel.

In the family law system of inheritance known from the *Tannaim*, we know little of earlier practices but may presume they preserved an age old custom that widows and daughters are provided for from a deceased husband's estate, before any distributions to sons and heirs. Curiously, the Talmud preserves our knowledge of a custom that troubled the Sages as they struggled to limit its application. If a husband gifted all of his property to his wife before he died, not just some of it, then the widow inherits nothing. There is no reason given for this, and the Talmud simply accepts it as an atavistic custom that had been made binding at some point, although it was at odds with the principles and practices governing wills and gifts. There were various attempts by commentators to constrict its applicability (see *b. B. Bat.* 144a). Its injustice is not lost on anyone, although various rationales were proffered. (*b. B. Bat.* 131b).

It is possible that another Gospel tradition referred to daughters inheriting even where there were sons, which Pharisees opposed. *B. Šabb.* 116a–b cites an unknown Gospel in Aramaic that shares certain points in common with Matthew (5:17), and which maintains that daughters should inherit equally with sons.

*Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, stage-actors! You travel around the sea and the dry land to make one convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a child of Gehenna as yourselves.* (v. 15)

With regard to the notion that Jews traversed the world to find a single convert, some insight can be gained from the Rabbis' search for contemporary images in the poetry of Song 6:2:

*My beloved has gone down to his garden, to the beds of spices, to roam<sup>25</sup> in the gardens, and to gather the lilies.*

*Y. Ber.* 2:8 interprets the nouns of this verse to fit the verbs.

*My beloved* = the Holy One

has gone down<sup>26</sup> to his *garden* = the world

[to the *beds of spices* = the nation of Israel] (proper placement is at end)

<sup>25</sup> It seems Scripture's *ayin* suggested God to be roaming and involved in human affairs or “descending from the Holy Land” to enter gentile territory. When read as *aleph* (not uncommon in Galilean pronunciation), the idea of “roaming in pastures” is now understood as “seeing.”

<sup>26</sup> Either “descending from the heavens” to become involved in human affairs or “descending from the Holy Land” to enter gentile territory.

to roam *in the gardens* = Gentiles of the World

to gather the lilies = the saints [of the Gentiles] whom He removes from their midst.

to the *beds of spices* = the nation of Israel.

To what can this be compared? To a king who had a very precocious son. What did the king do? He planted an orchard for him. When the son was obedient to his father, he would encircle the whole entire world to see whatever plant was most suitable in the world and plant it in the orchard. Likewise, when Israel obeys the Holy One, He encircles the whole entire world to see whoever is the saint amongst the Gentiles. Then He brings him/her and attaches him to Israel like Jethro and Rahab.

*Woe to you, blind guides who say, “Whoever swears an oath by the Temple, it is nothing, but whoever swears an oath by the gold of the Temple, that one is bound. Blind fools! Because what is greater, the gold or the Temple that consecrates the gold? (vv. 16–17)*

As argued in the introduction to this chapter, the discussions here are best seen as discussing vows even if the word “oath” appears. When Matthew says “he swears by means of (*en*) the Temple,” it implicitly means “like the Temple,” even if that is not stated. *T. Ned. 3:1* must be understood that way.

Here we see the normal form of the “woe” template: “Woe to you because you ignore the obvious argument that the Temple is the very source which sets its gifted gold apart from any personal enjoyment of it. It is God’s gold, not any person’s. The gold became holy because it was at one time separated by vow to be part of the holy Temple, although previously it belonged to an individual. Anything now compared to this gold is made off limits (by your own admission) so certainly anything compared to the Temple (i.e. all its dedicated items) will be marked as off-limits.”

*And, “Whoever swears an oath by the altar, it is nothing, but whoever swears an oath by the offering that is upon it, that one is bound.” Blind ones! Because what is greater, the offering, or the altar that consecrates the offering? (vv. 18–19)*

The reason for the complaint follows, as is typical of a “woe” statement; An explanation, prefaced by *because*, is required to justify the complaint. Here the principle is the same as that in v. 17: a vow stipulating that a piece of cake is forbidden to oneself and/or others, made effective by referencing an item used for sacri-

ficial purposes (and so extending its prohibition for private use), is recognized as binding. How much more so should this cake be forbidden if the altar—the prime locus of sacrificial offerings (*qodshei mizbe'ah*, i.e. offerings of the altar)—is itself designated as the referent of the vow rather than just one sacrifice!

*Whoever swears an oath by the altar swears by it and by everything that is upon it. And whoever swears by the Temple swears by it and by Him that inhabits it.* (vv. 20–21).

I suspect in v. 20 “swears an oath” may mean taking a vow by referring to “the altar” and its sacrifices. Indeed, “and” in this context means “namely” since, by saying “altar,” he/she includes whatever gifts are placed on it. Furthermore, because Jesus goes on to say (v. 21) that one who swears by the Temple takes an oath in the name of God, who dwells in it, thus pronounces a valid oath. It follows that “Temple” is a substitute for “God,” of which mention is requisite for oaths. The Gospel makes that point explicitly. Nevertheless, some, I think, did interpret Jesus as meaning, in his unique view point, one taking an oath also could also refer to the altar, as related in the following commentary:

*Pesiqta deRav Kahana (ed. Mandelbaum), Aharei mot piska 26*

He also rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar, who had made him take an oath in God's name. (2 Chron 36:13)—By what did he make him take an oath? Rabbi Yosi son of Hinnena said, “By the altar they made him take an oath.”

I cannot resist noting that Nebuchadnezzar may at times have been understood to be a code word for Jesus. *Midrash Tanh.* (Buber) *Va'era* 15 comments, “Nebuchadnezzar made himself a God.” Furthermore, he had *Nezer* in his name, which is reminiscent of Nazareth and *Notzri* (Christian). If Nebuchadnezzar is an antecedent or stand-in for Jesus, it makes sense to say he “swore by the altar,” which explains why Rabbi Yosi of Hinnena would be under the impression that in the Gospel, oath actually means “oath” rather than “vow.” He (tongue-in-cheek) therefore finds it fitting that Nebuchadnezzar swore an oath by the altar, which Rabbis did not permit but Jesus did. I have no other way of explaining the question and answer that was posed concerning this oath—the verse explicitly states he took an “oath in God's name”. Perhaps he was alluding to the curious description of a Jesus-like portrayal of Nebuchadnezzar, who intended to make himself a god, in *Isaiah 14:13–14*:

For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the Most High.

In saying they made him take an oath by the altar, the Rabbi alluded to his divine pretensions and so put him in the “Jesus camp”. According to this interpretation, Jesus had claimed one could take an oath by means of invoking the altar. That was Yosi’s understanding of Matt 23:20—and I think the midrash is a snide comment, not to be considered seriously at all.

To my mind “oath” in Matt 23:20 means “vow” as it does in vv. 18–19, although in v. 21 it certainly means “oath” proper. The oath is pronounced by referencing God; Temple = God as Jesus indicates. The Gospel account is well aware of this association between God’s name and certain circumlocutions, like throne, heaven and Temple that are equated with it in oaths.

*Whoever swears by heaven swears by God’s throne and by the one who sits upon it. (v. 22)*

Again “and” seems to mean “namely,” since the intention in invoking heaven is to signify not only God but also His throne and the celestial precincts. The above principle is applied to expanded examples of oaths enunciated in this verse. Unlike a vow, which declares the status of an object to be like something gifted to the Temple, the oath declares the status of the person swearing the oath as being bound to his declaration by the invocation of divine power. No object is affected; instead, the person swearing undertakes an obligation to behave (or not behave) in a certain way. Matthew’s source here seems to contradict Matt 5:34–35, where one is bidden not to swear by heaven, by earth, by the Temple. However, that passage lists common oaths because the author does not want anyone swearing any oath at all. Here the issue is what wordings are effective and binding.

The Gospel declares this “contagion” principle to operate in oaths no less than in vows. Pharisees, and their successors the Rabbis, formally rejected what appears to have been a very widely shared position concerning oaths: they had to be sworn by one of God’s names or metonyms such as the “the Merciful One.” In practice, however, they tolerated oaths on an extension of God such as heaven or the divine throne because they were so well-known and widespread. Jews swore “by heaven” from very early times until well into the Middle Ages; swearing oaths “by heaven” is mentioned in Jewish sources such as Philo (*Special Laws*, 2:2) and Midrash (e.g., *Song Rab.* 11:7). That oaths

which avoided directly using the Divine name were commonplace is attested to by Maimonides (12th c., *Mishneh Torah*, “Laws of Oaths” v: 34–36), who considered oaths taken on the celestial bodies as circumlocutions to avoid saying the Holy Name to be invalid. It seemed too much like idolatry, where celestial bodies were worshipped in their own right. Otherwise, the unofficial formulae were accepted as long as one intended to signify God (the classic oath form) or even just wanted to make a binding declaration (likely the intent of Matt 5:34–35 also: to avoid pronouncing awesome divine-name oaths). The oath formula attracted considerable attention in rabbinic literature, an example of which is found in *M. Šeb.* 4:13:

[One who says] I hold upon an oath, I command upon you, I bind upon you—lo, these are oath obligations. By heaven and by earth—lo, these are not oath obligations...” Taking an oath by...“the Merciful One” or “the Compassionate One”... etc. binds like all epithets so termed by convention.

This passage is discussed in *b. Šeb.* 35b: Saying “by heaven and by earth” should create an oath obligation since one means to say “by the Owner of the heaven and by earth,” so why does it not create an oath?—[Examining the above Mishnah we see:] Taking an oath by “the Merciful One” or “the Compassionate One” clearly refers to the only One who is uniquely so designated [since these are special divine epithets used solely for God] whereas “by heaven and by earth” could refer to the very objects of the heaven and earth [and does not necessarily identify God].

That popular oaths were taken by heaven and by earth is illustrated in the following piece of lore found in *b. Ber.* 32a (discussed previously in Chapter 5):

*Remember Abraham, Isaac and Israel Your servants, to whom You swore by Yourself* (Exod 32:13). What is the meaning of “by Yourself”? Rabbi Eleazar said: Moses said to the Holy One, “Master of the Universe, if You had sworn to them by the heaven and the earth, I would have said, ‘Just as the heaven and earth can pass away, so can Your oath pass also away.’ Now, however, You swore to them by your Great Name. Just as Your Great Name endures for ever and ever, so Your oath endures for ever and ever.”

Ultimately this principle of association, ambiguous as it is, was articulated in the Gospels and debated by the Rabbis and Pharisees in respect to oaths. Its complicated textual history is evident in a surprising tradition concerning things that remind one of God through a chain of association, as in *b. Menah.* 43b:

Rabbi Meir used to say (concerning the *techelet*-blue fringe to be worn on garments—Num 15:38): “What distinguishes the *techelet*-blue from all other colors? *Techelet*-blue is LIKE the sea and the sea is LIKE the sky and the sky is LIKE the Throne of Glory.

*Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, stage-actors! You tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and you leave aside the more serious things of the Torah: judgment, mercy, and faith. It is important to do these, and not to neglect the others.* (v. 23)

A passage in *b. ‘Abod. Zar.* 17b is instructive:

[Blessed are you/woe is me] for you occupied yourself with both Torah study and deeds of loving-kindness, but I occupied myself only with Torah study.

The Talmud and Matthew are in agreement that Pharisees advocated and enacted stringencies that extended biblical rules beyond their original range of applicability. Matthew’s sources do not belittle these scribal enactments; on the contrary, like Jesus they sometimes approved of more rigorous compliance with the spirit of the law than the letter of the law demands. But Matthew also seems to favor the extension of the scope of those enactments that promote justice, mercy and reliance on God. Scribes need to pay as much attention to safeguarding and strengthening the God-given laws governing interpersonal relationships and society as they do to the ritual aspects of relations between God and mankind. The critique of Pharisees and Rabbis in *t. Menah.* 13:22, particularly with regard to tithing, sounds so similar to the Gospel one cannot avoid recognizing their shared sentiments.

Said Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Torta:—Why was the Tabernacle at Shiloh destroyed? Because of lewdness in connection with its sacrifices. Now for Jerusalem: 1st Temple—why was it destroyed? Because of idolatry, sexual sins, and murder that were in its day. And why was the 2nd Temple destroyed? We know for a fact that they studied Torah and were *scrupulous in tithes!* And besides its destruction why were the Jews exiled so cruelly? Because they loved materialism, they acted treacherously to each other. The lesson to be derived here is that God is troubled more by such treachery to each other such that Scripture equated this behavior with the sum evils of idolatry, sexual sins and murder.

The tithing of mint, dill, and cumin was a scribal enactment, not an explicit biblical precept. The Tannaitic tradition was divided as to whether garden herbs were subject to the Torah laws of tithing applicable to grains and produce. The legal midrashim of *Sipre Deut.* to Deut 14:22 *piska* 105 and *Sipra Beḥukotai* exegetically demonstrate why they are. *Y. Ma'as.* 1:1 echoes that argument (the defective text is restored by *P'nei Moshe*), but includes the dissenting view of Issi ben Yehudah (*vars.* ben Akiva or ben Akavia) at the close of the citation that even the tithing of vegetables is a scribal enactment, rather than a biblical requirement.

Matthew 23 considers the tithing of staple vegetables as Torah law, in line with the legal midrashim, but he also is aware that certain vegetables are exempt. Herbs are not eaten by themselves but are consumed as condiments accompanying other foods. Furthermore, they are eaten fresh. Because they would not have been stored when out of season, their leaves would not be subject to biblically mandated tithing, although their stalks and seeds might be.<sup>27</sup> The Babylonian Talmud ('Avod. Zar. 7b citing Mishnah and Tosefta sources) is clear on this issue. *B. Yoma* 83b summarizes the Bavli's view of tithing of vegetables in line with Issi's view: "As for the matter of tithing vegetables—it is a rabbinic ordinance."

Jesus uses the scribal tithing rules of herbal condiments to show how meticulous Scribes could be in legislating minutiae of ritual observances, scrupulously addressing minor issues such as the debatable tithing herbs that cannot be considered as significant as doing justice and mercy. The *Yerushalmi* repeatedly emphasizes (see *y. Ber.* 2:1; *y. Roš Haš.* 1:1; *y. Mo'ed Qat.* 3:7) that what God desires is justice and mercy: "Dearer to me are acts of justice and loving kindness more than all the sacrifices." Yet these Scribes neither stress these commandments in their lengthy legal discussions nor do they enact stringencies and safeguards around them. Jesus' critique is the very one given by the Prophet Jeremiah (e.g. 9:24), calling for *kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight.*<sup>28</sup> Jesus argues that if one is to be stringent about tithing items, gifting them to Levites and Priests even when not required to by the Torah, how much the more must one be stringent about observing societal laws of mercy and kindness to others that are the key teachings of the Torah.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> See *m. Ma'as.* 4:5.

<sup>28</sup> See my introduction to chap. 21.

<sup>29</sup> A decent presentation in English of literary sources discussing tithing practices in the period of the Second Temple period is that of W. Horbury (2003) pp. 233–234. Ch. Albeck's

*Blind guides, who filter out a tiny insect but swallow a camel. (v. 24)*

Anxious to find ways to assure that they avoid inadvertently ingesting a minute insect with grain or produce, the Scribes distract themselves from addressing ever-present social concerns that they ought to be worried about. With this flourish the Gospel closes a unit that prioritizes helping others.

Jesus then proceeds to excoriate the Pharisees and Scribes for their hypocrisy.<sup>30</sup>

*Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, stage-actors! You purify the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of plunder and excess. Blind Pharisee, first purify the inside of the cup, so that its outside may be become pure as well! (vv. 25–26)*

This verse takes up a theme begun in chapter 15, providing examples of Pharisaic hypocrisy, insisting on the outward pretense of blamelessness while inwardly reeking of corruption. Jesus critiques the protective fence legislated by Scribes to extend and enhance requirements of purity that are solely of consequence within their own theoretical and legalistic frameworks. Jesus complains that Pharisaic and scribal attention to fastidious ritual purity did not sufficiently sensitize them to the parallel need for moral purity that the expanded scope of their legislation could have demanded. They might have ruled that once the inside of a vessel is ritually cleansed, the outside follows suit. Their primary concern ought to have been the inside rather than the outside, not just of cups but of people.

Instead the Pharisees are portrayed as oblivious to the connection between, and interdependence of, moral and ritual purities, the former concerned with imperfections of character with consequences for fellow humans, the latter with ritual categories affecting the designated status of objects. This accusation becomes the model for other complaints that must have been added by later editorial hands, since they lack the brilliance of retorts by one versed in scribal laws.

The verses comparing Pharisees to tombs are taunts that anyone could direct against any enemy. They would have been fully intelligible to Gentiles with no understanding of the nuances of the issues involved. I suspect that the original Gospel materials objected to venerating the tombs of prophets and the righ-

Hebrew introduction to his commentary to *Seder Zera'im* Tel Aviv 5735: 217–221, is richer in detail, especially for the rabbinic materials.

<sup>30</sup> See my extensive comments in the introduction to chap. 15.

teous while ignoring their moral teachings. It is their teachings that deserve esteem by being put into practice, rather than their gravestones. This teaching is passed down by Rabbi Shimon ben Gamaliel in *y. Šeqal.* 2:5. “Their teachings are their monuments.” But the Gospel we have before us instead vituperates against all Pharisees, claiming they bear the guilt of all murders for all time (v. 35)—hate-laced vitriol that makes little sense unless we posit an original reading that was later reworked to suit and serve a more hostile agenda.

On the other hand, the details of the legal traditions in this chapter are a perfect fit for materials known to us from the oral documents of rabbinic Sages centuries after Matthew was written. There should be no doubt that both Gospel writers and Sages accurately recorded earlier legal traditions as they had heard them. These legal traditions are obviously earlier than both the Gospels and the Rabbis who drew from them a common legacy.

### *The Art of Story-Telling in the Talmud: “On That Eventful Day”*

The literature of the Sages referring to contrasts between the inner and outer person is epitomized in an illuminating tale in *b. Ber.* 27b (*y. Ber.* 4:1 has a variant of the story lacking the skill of the Babylonian story teller). The demand for outward/inward conformity came to a head, according to Talmudic sources, when Gamaliel, the patriarch of the academy in Yavneh, required that his students be as sterling on the inside as on the outside in order to qualify as a student of the Oral Law in his academy. This provoked massive protests, resulting in the exclusion of those students who might have benefitted most from his teachings. Not all agreed when Rabban Gamaliel insisted upon inner purity as well as outward compliance. We learn from the story about the day Rabban Gamaliel was temporarily deposed from his seat, known as *bo bayom*—“on that eventful day.” The still youthful Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah was seated in his place. Gamaliel had brooked zero tolerance for mismatches between appearance and inner motivation, while Eleazar ben Azariah was as lenient as possible in excusing improper thought as long as outer action was proper. A compromise was found, allowing the aged Gamaliel to alternate the lecture weeks with Eleazar.

Immediately upon assuming Rabban Gamaliel’s seat, the younger rabbi’s hair turned as white as an old sage, creating a disjuncture between Eleazar’s appearance and the reality of his relative youth. Rabbi Joshua, the revered sage of Yavneh, then appeared on the scene, his face blackened from the charcoal he used in his blacksmith shop. Again the story teller points to the disparity between appearance and reality: Rabbi Joshua is pure inside, dark and dirty on the outside. The end of the story provides other references to the event and to the theme of purity of motive found elsewhere.

One of the references is to the well-known story (*t. Soṭah* 7; *Mek. R. Yish. Bo*, 17; *Abot R. Nat.*, ch. 18; *b. Hag.* 3a), “Whose week was it to give the Sabbath lecture?” Rabbi Eleazar explained on a day when it was his turn that, when the king would read the Torah at the end of the sabbatical year, everyone would come to hear it—including children, women and even non-Jewish residents. It made no difference who they were or why they came—the essential thing was for all to hear the instruction of the Law. Education was universal and one’s status, traits or anything else were of no consideration. He derived that lesson from Scripture which commanded that all children and women and men hear the instruction in Deut 31: 10–12:

And Moses commanded them, saying, “At the end of every seven years, in the solemnity of the year of release, in the Feast of Tabernacles, when all Israel is come to appear before the Lord thy God in the place which he shall choose, thou shalt read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Gather the people together, *men and women, and children, and thy stranger* that is within thy gates, that they may *hear, and that they may learn, and fear* the Lord your God, and *observe to do all the words of this law.*”

No better citation can be found for the claim of Matthew’s source claimed in verse 3 above that one not only was required to hear but also to do. However, Rabbi Eleazar and Rabbi Gamaliel undoubtedly understood the point of it differently. Matthew’s source took it to mean some would grow but not all, yet all came. Gamaliel might well have understood that only those who already feared God and would obey the teachings were supposed to come. Eleazar’s point is clearer: the hope is that through instruction one would come to fear God and observe the commandments.

I dwell on this motif here because the Gospel continues to castigate Pharisees for showing an outward commendable character but lacking inner conviction. This motif was indeed a topic for healthy debate in the early period within the rabbinic academies, occasioning unexpected references to it in early teachings. Yet the images of Pharisees that follow in the Gospel are chosen carefully, moving from insincerity and ostentation to vociferous accusations of inner rot, decay and evil. These passages are motivated by deep hatred, evidenced by the vilification of the Pharisees until v. 39. I find it difficult to see any Jew using the tones and images embedded in this hostile rhetoric. The prophetic sounding message of Jerusalem’s destruction and the abandonment of houses holds no hope for the possibility of last minute repentance. No Jewish prophet of doom would have ignored the power of repentance. That message ended at v. 26: purify the inner and the outer will follow.

Given all this, I find v. 39 brings us to the vision of Jesus' coronation in a Jerusalem that has not been destroyed, as glimpsed in chapter 21. I take this to be the resumption of the narrative based upon an early Gospel source, while the intervening venomous passages are later Christian additions. Separating from Judaism post 70 C.E., the Church needed to drive the final wedge between Jews and Christians, dividing forever the damned and the saved. Nor did those later editors refrain from adding epithets such as "children of hell" into the Gospel. The power of these images has been a topic of recent study, becoming known as "teachings of contempt". It is a singular challenge to the Churches to decide how they are going to deal with these passages.

*Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, stage-actors! You are exactly like white-washed tombs, which appear beautiful on the outside, but inside are full of dead bones and every impurity. So also you appear to people to be righteous on the outside, but inside you are full of stage acting and lawlessness.*  
(vv. 27–28)

The invective here lacks any basis in Jewish doctrine. It extends the claim of inner rot expounded in the "impure vessel" complaint—"purify the inside!"—in a crude manner. Unlike the earlier attack which speaks of cultivating inner purity as a corrective for hypocrisy, the image of beautified graves with inner filth borders on the pornographic. Yet Talmudic literature also said some of these things about Christians (*b. Šabb.* 116a-b): they hide behind the door of Scriptural citations as if they were righteous but inside they harbor idolatrous schemes. According to José Faur, they are *minim*. The Rabbis cited Isa 57:8 and claimed it meant that Judeo-Christians use the *mezuzah*—a sacred Jewish object—to package inside it their idolatrous doctrines. The manifest reliance of the *minim* on the Torah and their use of Jewish values are a ploy to deceive and corrupt the dull-witted. Furthermore, per Faur, they see the Torah and its teachers as dead but also deadly. Faur claims the *min* exhibits a morbid pathology. Perhaps Faur has somewhat over-stated matters, perhaps not.<sup>31</sup>

While one might speak of lime painted ossuaries and markings for graves within a Jewish context, the passage fails to give any cogent reason for not whitewashing tombs. As a metaphor for hypocrisy—the pure veneer on the face versus the corrupt heart—the symbol of the grave adds little to what has already been said more elegantly. It is not difficult to detect a change in style here that may well come from a Gentile writer, who may even be Matthew

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31 José Faur, "Don Quixote: Talmudist and Mucho Más." In *Judaism and Christianity: New Directions for Dialogue and Understanding* (Avery-Peck and Neusner 2009), 201.

himself. The venom runs over the top, and can in no way be compared to the Hebrew prophets castigating wayward Israel in an effort to spare them grief. Further on in the chapter, a more sympathetic voice emerges, in laments reminiscent of Jeremiah.

*Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, stage-actors! You build the prophets' tombs, and set in order the tombs of the righteous; (v. 29)*

This makes sense in a Jewish context describing hypocrisy but needs to be separated from the following verse, which redirects it and makes it appear to be saying something it does not. Verse 29 objects to making tombs of holy people icons and objects of veneration, rather than the powerful moral messages these holy men preached and practiced. No one knows where Moses was buried because his life, law and prophecies are to be revered, not his tomb.

Deut 34:6 and 9

He [God] buried him in Moab, in the valley opposite Beth Peor, but to this day no one knows where his grave is. .... Now Joshua son of Nun was filled with the spirit of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands on him. So the Israelites listened to him and did what the Lord had commanded Moses.

Teaching that prayer at tombs is praiseworthy and turning graves into beautiful shrines can encourage dwelling on externals at the expense of internals. If this is indeed what is intended here, the message is a polemic against pilgrimages, and disparages the beautification of tombs as an act of hypocrisy. The proper way to venerate the deceased prophets and scholars is by obeying their instructions and following their examples.

*You say, "If we were in the times of our ancestors, we would not have shared with them in the prophets' blood." (v. 30)*

The structure of this statement is superficially akin to statements found in the Mishnah, e.g. *m. Mak. 1:10*:

Rabbi Tarfon and Rabbi Akiva say: "If [in earlier times] we were members of the Sanhedrin, no person would have been put to death."

*B. Sanh. 102b* records Rav Ashi declaring that, had he lived in the time of King Manasseh, who instituted rampant idolatry, he himself would not have

worshipped idols. Manasseh then informs the Rabbi in a vision that he indeed would have practiced idol worship just like any other Israelite of that period.

But I think that the Gospel is using an argument here to lay blame on the Jews, who are about to reenact the crime of propheticide. Although the Jews claim that they would not have shed the blood of prophets in bygone eras had they lived in the past, they, and all Jews, will soon be accused of deicide and declared guilty of murdering Jesus. Verheyden observes:

One cannot escape noticing how Matthew and Luke, without any difficulty, pass from the long litany of accusations and charges against the Pharisees to accusing the whole of ‘this generation’ and through them all generations that had preceded it . . . For now innocent Jesus is depicted as bursting out in an endless litany of insults and charges against his opponents to the point of condemning the whole of his people to death and divine judgment.<sup>32</sup>

While this is patently true, the continuation of Verheyden’s observation is only wishful thinking.

Hyperbole there is in all of this, of course, but it is hyperbole up to and indeed beyond the limits of what is bearable to a modern reader, and I guess to the ancient as well.

The whole plan of Matthew’s Gospel is to demonstrate that the promises made to the Jews in their Holy Scriptures will instead be fulfilled for Gentiles. The Jews will have no future in the Coming Kingdom. When Jesus was named in Matt 1:18–25—*You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins*—“his people” can only refer to Israel, as I argued in chapter one. The name itself betrays the fact the written Gospels we have are not completely dependent on early material but introduced a new agenda, excluding the Jews, after the Jewish-Christian divide in the latter half of the first century.

*So you testify about yourself that you are the descendants of the prophets' murderers.* (v. 31)

Murdering a prophet (1 Kgs. 18:4–19; Jer 26:20–25; 2Chron 24:20–25) was a heinous crime (*y. Ta'an.* 4:5). But the reference here is not really to ancient prophets; it is a code phrase that transparently blames Jews for the murder of

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<sup>32</sup> Joseph Verheyden, “Some Comments on the Earliest Evidence for the Reception of the Book of Chronicles in Christian Tradition” (2013), 62.

Jesus. While future generations of Jews might claim they did not crucify Jesus and that they would never have done so, they do admit their ancestors had put prophets to death. The Gospel veils its condemnation of the Jews by having Jesus castigate the Jews of his generation for the crimes of their ancestors. A quasi-racist argument condemns all their descendants, who carry the “genes” of those murderers, for all time.

*Now fill up the measure of your ancestors. (v. 32)*

The imagery of a bushel basket that members of a group fill with their sins can be found in the Bible and Midrash. Once it is full, the proverbial camel's back can be broken with a single straw, and severe punishment will ensue, as in *Eccl. Rab. 1:13*:

Rabbi Abba said in the name of Rabbi Yohanan,—[Hear] the parable of the bushel-measure full of sins—Which sin brings punishment to its owner above all others? It is theft.

*Midrash Sekhel Tov* (ed. Buber), *Bereishit* 15:16 explains:

“The fourth generation will return here” (Gen 15:16): We count 1) Kehath, 2) Amram, 3) Moses . . . 4) Moses’ sons Gershom and Eliezer entered the [Holy] land. Until then *the sin of the Amorites was not completed* as was not that of the seven nations of Canaan. [As Scripture says:] “*for their measure was not yet complete*” (Gen 15:16). Until that point they were known for the perversions that they were bringing through sin and pollution to the land until it eventually vomited them out. God did not bring to fruition the decree that they would be destroyed until their measure was full.

Punishment occurs only after the accumulation of the full measure of sin over the span of many generations. The Jews will add to the list of their ancestors’ sins the persecution and murder of Jesus, and resistance to the message of the post-Jesus Christian missionaries.

*Snakes! Offspring of poisonous vipers! How will you flee the judgment of Gehenna? (v. 33)*

The passage is likely modeled on Prov 23: 29–32.

"Who gets woe? Who has sorrow? Who has contentions? Who babbles? Who has wounds without cause? Who gets redness of eyes? They that tarry long at the wine; they that go to seek mixed wine. Do not gaze at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup, when it goes down smoothly! In the end like a snake it bites and like a viper—*yaphrish*."

*Yaphrish* is derived from the Hebrew root *p-r-š*, which also contains the same letters as the root of the Hebrew word for Pharisee. The point of the passage is that red wine looks deceptively enticing, but in the end it bites and poisons, as do snakes and vipers. Those who are deceived will have nothing but woe. The words of Pharisees, however wise they may be, are capable of inflicting untold harm. Nevertheless, the Talmud recommends that even though Sages behave like dangerous snakes, one should cling to them. *B. Šabb.* 63a states:

And Rabbi Abba said in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Laqish: If there is a scholar, albeit one who seeks redress and recalls ill-will—gird him about your loins. If there is an unlearned person, albeit of scrupulous piety (*hasid*)—do not live in his neighborhood.

Apparently, according to this point of view, scholarly authority counts for everything and the piety of the untutored peasant counts for nothing. The late 18th Hasidic movement rejected this idea, and promoted the simple faith of the pious peasant. Although separated by 1700 years, Jesus seems to share some aspects of the outlook of the early Hasidim.

*Therefore I am sending to you prophets, sages, and scribes. You will kill and crucify some of them, and some of them you will whip in your assemblies, and chase from city to city.* (v. 34)

The author indeed suggests that such occurrences are likely, given the wickedness of the Jews and their ancestors, and may know of some specific incidents. Quite possibly the author knows of Paul, who was scourged (2 Cor 11:24), and includes him among the "scribes of Christ," and of Stephen, who was killed (Acts 7:55–59), to whom he may be referring as a "sage of Christ." The crucified prophet most likely is Jesus himself.

*So that all the righteous blood poured upon the earth may come upon you, from the blood of Abel the righteous up to the blood of Zechariah the son of*

*Barachaia, whom you murdered between the Temple and the altar. Amen, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.*<sup>33</sup> (vv. 35–6)

The one who completes the act of murder bears the guilt of all. *B. B. Qam.* 10a tells us that the last one in a series, who adds the final act to bring about death, bears the entire guilt of the past ones. Those murders for which no one was put to death have troubled the earth which now demands its punishment. In Gen 4:10–11 we are told how Abel's blood cried for retribution from the ground, forcing Cain into exile, wandering the earth. God cannot abide where the murderer of innocents has occurred. But then we are told that only by the death of the murderer can the world be restored. If the land is polluted by killing, it must be purified by the blood of the perpetrators.

Num 35:33–34:

Do not pollute the land where you are. Bloodshed pollutes the land, and atonement cannot be made for the land on which blood has been shed, except by the blood of the one who shed it. Do not defile the land where you live and where I dwell, for I, the Lord, dwell among the Israelites.

The Gospel narrator sees Jesus as a type of Jeremiah/Zechariah. As I pointed out in the introduction to Matt 21, Jeremiah was imprisoned and almost executed for his complaints about Temple cult, priests, scribes and false prophets. Zechariah (ben Berachiah ben Iddo, Zech 1:1, or just ben Iddo, Ezra 5:1) was the prophet foretelling the purification of the Temple whose end Matthew somehow identifies with the murder of the priestly prophet Zechariah (ben Yehodiah, 2Chron 24:20–21).<sup>34</sup>

33 A Jewish prophet condemns but consoles too: Jer 34:18: Thus saith the Lord, “Behold, I will turn the captivity of Jacob’s tents, and have compassion on his dwelling-places; and the city shall be built upon her own mound, and the palace shall be inhabited upon its habitual place.”

34 The traditions of *Sipra Behukotai parasha 2* concerning Lam 2:20 “priest and prophet” refer to a single man who was both priest and prophet. Zechariah ben Yehodiah accords with all commentaries and Talmudic tradition. On the other hand, *Tg. Lam* 2:20 provides Zechariah ben (Berachiah ben) Iddo who is arguably the same person as Matthew’s Zechariah son of Berachiah (Matt 23:35). Since the Targum and Matthew share what is best seen as a common error, we have to posit one of three scenarios. Perhaps one copied from the other, they are both heir and err from a more ancient written sources that gave way to corrupt readings. Verheyden (“Some Comments on the Earliest Evidence,” 60) doubts there was a purpose, now obscured, behind a midrashic identification of the

*Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I wished to gather your children together, in the way a mother bird gathers together her young under her wings, and you did not wish to! Look, your House is being abandoned to you—desolated.* (vv. 37–8)

I suggest we have a lament used by Jews after the destruction of the Temple in the year 70 C.E., which was modeled on verses in Jeremiah that spoke of the impending destruction of the First Temple in 586 B.C.E.<sup>35</sup> It is likely, although not certain, that the phrase “who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it” is a Gospel editor’s insertion, referring specifically to some Christian martyrs. Some commentators draw our attention to the events described by Josephus.<sup>36</sup>

The above passage in Matthew speaks after the fact, as though it were prior to the event: your Temple is [surely to be] destroyed—God will abandon it because of your sins. The date of composition seems to be after 70 C.E., when Rome destroyed Jerusalem and burned the Temple. These laments offer evidence that the pericope about Jesus’ cleansing of the Temple in chapter 21 was a pro-Temple act. Jesus wants to purify the Temple in preparation for the advent of the Messiah. The author depicts Jesus, like Jeremiah, doing whatever he could to save Jerusalem, the Temple and the Jews. The Jews refused to listen, as they had had refused to heed Jeremiah’s warning, resulting in disaster. The author incorporates a lament in the literary style of *kinot*—medieval Jewish

two Zechariahs and fittingly observes, “*Quandoque bonus domitat Homerus*” (even good Homer could fall asleep at the wheel)—humans do err.

35 See Jer 6:8: “Take warning, O Jerusalem, or I will turn away from you and make your land desolate so no one can live in it.”

36 *Ant. 20: 164–166:*

“Certain of these robbers went up to the city, as if they were going to worship God. While they had daggers under their garments; and, by thus mingling themselves among the multitude around Jonathan, they slew him [he was the high priest]. And as this murder was never avenged, the robbers went up with the greatest security at the festivals after this time; and having weapons concealed in like manner as before. And mingling themselves among the multitude, they slew certain of their own enemies, and others because they were paid money. They committed these murders not only in remote parts of the city, but even in the Temple itself also; for they had the boldness to murder men there, without thinking of the impiety of which they were guilty.

And this seems to me to have been the reason why God, out of his hatred to these men’s wickedness, *rejected our city; and as for the Temple, he no longer esteemed it sufficiently pure for him to inhabit therein*, but brought the Romans upon us, and threw a fire upon the city to purge it; and brought upon us, our wives, and children, slavery—wishing to chasten us by our calamities.”

dirges bewailing the destruction of Jerusalem—that are still recited to this day. The Talmud also contains such laments in which God himself mourns the raz-ing of the Temple and the dispersion of the Jews, e.g., *b. Ber.* 3a:

Woe to my children for whose sins I destroyed my house and burned my Temple and exiled them among the nations of the world.

*I say to you, you will not see me again until you say, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”* (v. 39)

The entry into Jerusalem prefigures the anointment of Jesus as Messiah. Matthew's ingenious literary device takes a seemingly mundane event—Jesus riding into Jerusalem—and elevates it into a new dimension: Jesus victoriously entering Jerusalem as its messianic king. We have already glimpsed that very day in Matt 21:9, where the recitation of the royal Psalm "*Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!*" [Ps 118.26]. *Hosanna to the highest place!*"

This tells us two things. One is that the author, writing post 70 C.E., did not envision the permanent destruction of Jerusalem, but rather believed the new divine Kingdom would be revealed to Jesus' followers with an eternal Jerusalem in its center. The other is that the author was certain that Jesus would soon enter this eternal Jerusalem in triumph. Nonetheless, the Temple, in the days of the Gospel's author, lies in ruins, forsaken by God.<sup>37</sup>

Foreseeing the future, Jesus grieves that he cannot shelter Israel under the protective wings of God. There was indeed a time when "As birds flying so will the Lord of Hosts protect Jerusalem" (Isa 31:5), but Matthew now tells us that option no longer exists. The Pharisees, if not most Jews, lack the essentials of loving-kindness, the essential message of chapters 23–25, and faith in Jesus, the divine messenger. The excursus on the tragic wickedness of the Pharisees and the Jews between v. 13 and v. 39 ends the chapter with a message of their doom and destruction. For them it is too late.

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37 Cf. Jer 12:7.

# Chapter 24

## Introduction

Another transition sets the stage for the realization of the message of Jesus' parables. The focus now shifts to prophetic apocalypse. It may well be that this current ran through the earliest streams of Jesus stories, as evidenced earlier in Matthew by the reference in 1:17 to the waning of the moon. A new creation will emerge from the darkness that covers the earth and the collapse into chaos. The image of the Temple, its Glory dimmed to the point of disappearance, will ultimately be replaced by God's eternal light, shining in perpetual fullness. Only then will the mourning for the Temple finally cease. The eschatological imagery depicts the terror that will link the primordial darkness at outset of Creation with Redemption at the end of time.

The source for the poetic mysticism underlying the Gospel could be either Christian or Jewish. Most commentaries on Matthew offer a plethora of examples and adequate analyses of Jewish apocalyptic literature to make belaboring this point unnecessary here.<sup>1</sup> However, the prophetic books of Isaiah and Jeremiah provide a few examples that are paradigmatic and essential for understanding Matthew's apocalyptic references.

Isaiah 60:2; 20:

See, darkness covers the earth  
and thick darkness is over the peoples,  
but the Lord rises upon you  
and his glory appears over you.  
Your sun will never set again,  
and your moon will wane no more;  
the Lord will be your everlasting light,  
and your days of sorrow will end.

However within the Gospel setting the apocalyptic scenarios allude to the trials and tribulations to come. Then the resurrected Jesus will himself fulfill the functions of the Temple, and there will be an outpouring of God's manifest Glory upon Jesus, Israel and the nations.

<sup>1</sup> See Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: a Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (2000), 243–248 and James L. Price, *Interpreting the New Testament* (1961) 1, 72–81.

Rabbinic literature speaks of twelve months of unparalleled suffering just before the Messiah appears.<sup>2</sup> The wars of Gog and Magog take place during this period (Ezek chapters 37–38), in a confrontation whose horrors are vividly depicted in Revelation 20:7–9:

And when the thousand years are finished, Satan shall be loosed out of his prison, and shall come forth to deceive the nations which are in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together to the war: the number of whom is as the sand of the sea. And they went up over the breadth of the earth, and compassed the camp of the saints about, and the beloved city: and fire came down out of heaven, and devoured them.

Such apocalyptic speculations also flourished among Jews, as we see in *b. Sanh.* 97a (Soncino ed.):

So has Rabbi Yoḥanan proclaimed: in the generation when the son of David will come, Sages will be few in number, and furthermore their eyes will weaken through sorrow and grief. Many troubles and evil decrees will be newly enacted, each new trouble arriving quickly before the other has ended.

Our Rabbis taught: in the seven year cycle, at the conclusion, the son of David will come: In the first year will be fulfilled: “And I will cause it to rain upon one city and cause it not to rain upon another city” [Amos 4:7]; in the second, the arrows of hunger will be sent forth; in the third, a great famine, in the course of which men, women, and children, pious men and saints will die, and the Torah will be forgotten by its students; in the fourth, partial plenty; in the fifth, great plenty, when men will eat, drink and be merry, and the Torah will return to its students; in the sixth, rumors (of war and upheaval); in the seventh, wars; and at the conclusion of the seven year cycle the son of David will come...

It has been taught, R. Judah said: in the generation when the son of David comes, the synagogue will be for harlots, Galilee will be in ruins, Gablan will lie desolate, the border town dweller go from city to city, receiving no hospitality, the wisdom of scribes is made loathsome, God-fearing men hated, the generation will have the face of a dog, and truth will be absent, as it is written, “Yea, truth faileth, and he that departeth from evil maketh himself a prey” (Isa 59:15)....

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<sup>2</sup> See *m. Ed.* 2:10; *t. Ber.* 1:13; *b. Šabb.* 118a. Also *Mek. R. Yish. Beshalah* 4, *Sip. Num.* 76, *Sip. Deut.* 43.

It has been taught, R. Nehemiah said: in the generation of Messiah's coming, impudence will increase, esteem be perverted, the vine yield its fruit yet shall wine be dear, and the [Roman] Kingdom will be converted to heresy with none to rebuke them. This supports R. Isaac, who said: the son of David will not come until the whole world is converted to the belief of the heretics [Christians] ...

The continuation of *B. Sanh.* 98a, abbreviated here, provides the exegetical foundations for the various viewpoints of those calculating the duration of the suffering associated with the “birth pangs of the messiah”:

We have learned, Rabbi Eliezer said: The days of the messiah [and its pangs] last 40 years. as it says [Ps 95]: “Forty years I will show anger to that generation.” Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah said: 70 years, as it says Isa 23:15 “On that day Tyre will be forgotten for seventy years, like the days [of the pangs] of the singular king.” —Who is this “singular king”?— I should say it means *the messiah*.

A plethora of other signs of the impending arrival of the messiah are supported by numerous biblical proof-texts that foretell famine and persecution (Deut 8:15 and Gen 15:13), seeing evil (Ps 90:15), the “day of vengeance” (Isa 63:3–4) and the torture of the suffering servant (Isa 53:5).

The first century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (*War* 2.433–434) recounts the actions and fate of Menachem ben Judah, an insurgent who had proclaimed himself King of the Jews. Josephus says Menachem was the son of Judas the Galilean, although the text is generally emended by modern scholars to read “grandson”:

In the meantime, one Menachem, the son of that Judas, who was called the Galilean [...] took his intimate friends with him, and retired to Masada, where he broke open King Herod's armory, and gave arms not only to his own people, but to other robbers also. Then with these men for a guard, he returned in the state of a king to Jerusalem; he became the leader of the sedition....

After fleeing and going into hiding, Menachem (for whom evidently Josephus had little sympathy) was eventually captured and tortured (*War* 2.442–448):

But the reduction of the strongholds and the murder of the high priest Ananias inflated and brutalized Menachem to such an extent he believed

himself without rival in the conduct of affairs and became an insufferable tyrant. However, the partisans of the high priest, Eleasar, was the leader of the temple guard and Menachem's deadly enemy... they fled every which way one was able; those that were caught were slain, and those that hid themselves were hunted. A few of them escaped by stealth to Masada.... As for Menachem himself, he ran away to the place called Ophla, and there ignominiously concealed himself. But they caught him alive, and drew him in the open; they then tortured him with many sorts of torments, and after all slew him.

The first century was not the best of times for the numerous messianic claimants who rebelled against the power of Rome, seeking to restore Jewish sovereignty in Judea. All were done away with violently.

The repressive retaliatory measures taken by Roman authorities against political rebels had implications for much of the population of Judea. They appeared to many Jews to fulfill the longstanding prophecies of horrific suffering preceding the messianic era. But Matt 26:6 cautions that what is about to happen is just the beginning, and that there is much worse still to come:

You are about to hear about wars and reports of wars. Look out so that you do not panic. It must happen, but the End is not yet: For nation will be raised against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes from place to place.

These motifs are those found in Jewish sources. Consider, for example, the literary progressions of Deut 32:15–25:

Jeshurun grew fat and kicked;  
filled with food, they became heavy and sleek.  
I will heap calamities on them  
and spend my arrows against them.  
I will send wasting famine against them,  
consuming pestilence and deadly plague;  
I will send against them the fangs of wild beasts,  
the venom of vipers that glide in the dust.  
In the street the sword will make them childless;  
in their rooms terror will reign.  
The young men and young women will perish,  
the infants and those with gray hair.

The Gospel's descriptions most likely were written by an observer around the year 71, reflecting firsthand knowledge of the brutal outcome of the Jewish war with Rome. This chapter is devoted to signs of redemption, with allusions to poetical traditions that were interpreted by Jews as referring to the political and religious salvation of Israel in the wake of the Temple's destruction. Passages may have been excerpted from a Jewish Apocalypse with Gentile Christian interpolations, since both communities anticipated messianic redemption, although of different kinds. The midrashic interpretation of Song 2:11–13 in *Pesiq. Rab. 15 (Hahodesh)* understood the time of spring blossoming as pointing to the Kingdom of Heaven being revealed: "when God will be King over all the earth." But the apocalyptic voice in Matthew said that the time of redemption had not yet arrived. It seems most likely that the verses in Matthew 24 referring to "my name" are from a Christian hand.

### Commentary

*Jesus left the Temple going on his way, and his disciples came forward to fix his gaze upon the buildings of the Temple. (v. 1)*

I have taken a minor liberty in translating this verse as I understand it, which conventionally has the disciples showing, pointing out or otherwise drawing Jesus' attention to the Temple structure. My translation emphasizes their establishing a visual connection between Jesus and the Temple. A prophet's gaze has the power to transmit both blessings and curses. The disciples undoubtedly want Jesus to feel the awe and sense of the holy majesty of the Temple that they do, as Mark 13:1 makes clearer in describing this same scene:

As he came out of the Temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!"

What the students are unwittingly doing is akin to Balaam's attempt to curse Israel by fixing his gaze upon them (Num 24). However, Balaam's curse is transformed into a blessing of Israel and its sanctuaries. Jesus however, reveals to his disciples his prophetic vision of the Temple's destruction. In so doing, rather than blessing the Temple he curses it, the reverse of the Balaam story.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Connections between Jesus and Balaam, rightly or wrongly, have attracted much discussion. See Hendrik van der Loos, *The Miracles of Jesus* (1965) 161–3.

The destruction of the Temple in the works of the Hebrew prophets is a consequence of atonement for sin—in which the Temple sacrificial ritual played a crucial role—without sincere repentance. In contrast, the authors of the sections of the Gospel intimate that God's glory will depart from Jerusalem and reside with another people in another place. Jesus' harsh reply, undermining the disciples' awe at the grandeur of the Herodian Temple, is typical of Jesus' retorts to Pharisees.<sup>4</sup> Typically Pharisees approach Jesus civilly and ask him why he is doing something at odds with common practice. In response Jesus bombards them with tirades laced with vitriol and insult. They ask in Matt 21:23, "By what authority do you do these things? Who gave you this authority?" They do not tell him outright that he must leave. Jesus replies to his questioners with invective that reaches its crescendo in v. 43: "This is why I tell you that the Kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation that makes its fruits."

*He replied to them, "Don't you see all these? Amen, I say to you, a stone will not be left upon another stone here—which shall not be thrown down." (v. 2)*

No explanation is given for Jesus' harsh response in either Matthew or Mark. One is hard put to assign this Gospel statement to any date prior to the Temple's destruction in the year 70 C.E. Be that as it may, in the Gospel's narrative Jesus proclaims in prophetic style that the grandeur of Zion and Jerusalem will soon be lost. We do not know whether we are to understand that he says this in vindictive joy or as a truly sad lament. Nevertheless, just as Jeremiah proclaimed destruction and exile but prophesied there would be consolation, restoration and redemption, so too in v. 31 Jesus promises eternal redemption depicted in messianic imagery. Mark leaves open the possibility that Jews will not be excluded from this era of salvation, but Matthew says otherwise (v. 24) and interpolates parables into these chapters implying their exclusion.

*When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives, his students came to him by themselves: "Tell us, when will these things happen, and what will the sign of your coming and the End of the Age?" (v. 3)*

Since in the first two verses Jesus was already alone with his disciples, why the need to say they came by themselves? I wonder whether v. 3 might originally have followed 23:39, which speaks of the End of the Age when Jesus would

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<sup>4</sup> *B. Sukkah* 51b states, Our Rabbis taught: whoever has not seen the Temple in its built state has never seen a beautiful structure.

enter Jerusalem in triumph. In that case, the disciples would not be inquiring about the Temple's destruction as they are here, but rather asking about Jesus' ushering in the New Kingdom. The reference to End of the Age seems to reflect Daniel 12:13: "But you, go, until *the predetermined time*, and you will rest and will stand in your allotted place at *the end of days*."

As I pointed out in my introduction to the first chapter, Matthew identifies the signs that indicate that Jesus is the long-awaited redeemer. But the disciples are asking another question: granted that Jesus is the "Expected One," when will the final end of the old age, and the arrival of the new age, place? Seeking to convince his audience that Jesus is the expected Messiah and Savior, Matthew attempts to demonstrate, by way of a theory of cyclical chronological patterns in Israel's religious history, that the years of Jesus marked the concluding episode of that pattern. That demonstration, although necessary, is insufficient in and of itself, to prove beyond doubt that Jesus was himself the Messiah—just that someone, in those days, must have been. To prove that Jesus was the very Messiah and Savior that Israel was waiting for, Matthew explains how certain prophetic signs at the time of his birth and throughout his life fulfilled ancient prophecies, revealed that Jesus was indeed the divine messianic redeemer.

*Jesus replied to them, "Look out so that no one misleads you! For many will come in my name saying, 'I am the Messiah,' and they will lead many astray." (vv. 4–5)*

The history of Israel is replete with false prophets and pseudo-messianic saviors.<sup>5</sup> Beyond the historical and prophetic books of the Bible, Josephus provides an account of some of those who emerged during the first century (*War* 2.259–63; 6.285–88; *Ant.* 20.97–98). The palpable signs pointed to the impending onset of the messianic era, but worse travails would of necessity have to occur before the glory of new Kingdom could manifest itself, as in v. 11:

*You are about to hear about wars and reports of wars. Look out so that you do not panic. It must happen, but the End is not yet: For nation will be raised against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes from place to place. (vv. 6–7)*

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<sup>5</sup> For some insight into the phenomenon of false messiahs, see Harris Lenowitz, *The Jewish Messiahs from the Galilee to Crown Heights* (1998).

The source of this appears to be Jer 29:17–18:

Yes, this is what the Lord Almighty says: “I will send the sword, famine and plague against them and I will make them like poor figs that are so bad they cannot be eaten. I will pursue them with the sword, famine and plague and will make them abhorrent to all the kingdoms of the earth and an object of cursing and horror, of scorn and reproach, among all the nations where I drive them.”

As noted in the Introduction to this chapter, *b. Sanh.* 97a mentions the prediction that “at the conclusion of the seven year cycle the son of David will come” and the commentary on this passage in *b. Meg.* 17b states, “Even war is the [sign of] the beginning of the redemption.”

*All these things are the beginnings of the Labor Pains. (v. 8)*

These labor pains signal the birth pangs of the Messianic era. *Tanh. Noah* 3 explicates the term “labor pains” in Micah 4:10: “Writhe in agony, Daughter Zion, *like a woman in labor*, for now you must leave the city to camp in the open field.”

*Mek. R. Yish. Beshalah, masekhta Vayisa* 4:

Rabbi Eliezer says: if you merit observing the Sabbath you will be saved from three tribulations (at the End)—the Day of Gog and Magog, from the Labor Pains of Messiah, and from the Day of the Great Judgment.

Jesus also predicts the persecution of Christians at the hands of the Romans at the end of the first century.

*Then they will hand you over to torture and they will kill you, and you will be hated by all peoples on account of my name. And then many will grievously stumble and they will hand each other over, and hate each other. (vv. 9–10)*

The theme of persecution of Jesus’ followers was broached in Matt 10:22: “You will be hated by all on account of my name, but he who endures to the end, this one will be saved.” (Matt 10:22). As my commentary on that verse observed, the presence of underlying motifs from Isaiah 51–52 does not mean that, for Matthew, the prophecies of the Second Isaiah are currently being fulfilled. Nor does Matthew give any check list of events which must come to pass before the end-time can begin. Instead, he describes the degenerate nature of the era just

before the end using the art of a storyteller, with the motifs from Isaiah functioning as background music in a film does, setting the tone and enhancing the mood of the scene. Underlying this, and perhaps the next verse as well, is Isa 52:5: “Now therefore, what have I here,” says the Lord, ‘that My people are taken away for nothing? They that rule over them make them to howl,” says the Lord, ‘and My name continually every day is blasphemed.’”

*And many false prophets will arise and they will mislead many. (v. 11)*

Scholars often connect Josephus (*Ant.* 20:167–172) to Matthew’s mention of false prophets. However, the ancient biblical prophets seem quite familiar with the prevarications of soothsayers and prophetic charlatans, as in Jeremiah 29:8–9:

Yes, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: “Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. They are prophesying lies to you in My name. I have not sent them,” declares the Lord.

*Because of the increasing lawlessness, the love of the multitudes will grow cold. (v. 12)*

The harsh and murderous actions of Rome will engender friction among the masses. Any semblance of social cohesion will break down. Hatred and suspicion will be rampant.

Deuteronomy 28:47–57:

Because of the suffering that your enemy will inflict on you during the siege, you will eat the fruit of the womb, the flesh of the sons and daughters the Lord your God has given you. Even the most gentle and sensitive man among you will have no compassion on his own brother or the wife he loves or his surviving children, and he will not give to one of them any of the flesh of his children that he is eating. It will be all he has left because of the suffering your enemy will inflict on you during the siege of all your cities. The most gentle and sensitive woman among you—so sensitive and gentle that she would not venture to touch the ground with the sole of her foot—will begrudge the husband she loves and her own son or daughter the afterbirth from her womb and the children she bears.

*But he who endures to the End-time, this one will be saved.” (v. 13)*

The Hebrew word for temporal “end” is *qetz*. In this chapter of Matthew the time and signs of the End are as yet unknown. The term *qetz* has eschatological connotations in the prophetic books of the Bible (as I pointed out in my introduction to chapter 1). In Amos 8:2, Lamentations 4:18, and Ezekiel 7:2, it refers to the end of Israel’s suffering and to the day of tribulation for Israel’s enemies. In Daniel 9:21, 11:16, 12:11 and 14:24, it is understood to be the endpoint of a predetermined period of time, which will be followed by the beginning and the conclusion of another period of time. LXX Dan 12:4 points us to the “time of the end,” the *Testament of Levi* 10 to the “end of the age.”

As Jesus had not returned in the decades after his death, some Christians may have begun to doubt he would return. The Letter of Hebrews (10:35–39) addresses such doubts:

Do not, therefore, abandon that confidence of yours, it brings a great reward. For you need endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised. For yet in a very little while, the one who is coming will come and will not delay; but my righteous one will live by faith. My soul takes no pleasure in anyone who shrinks back. But we are not among those who shrink back and so are lost, but are among those who have faith and so are saved.

We do not know whether Hebrews was composed before or after Matthew but the issue is the same.

*This good news about the Kingdom will be proclaimed to the whole Empire as a testimony to all the Gentiles, and then the End will come. (v. 14)*

Eventually salvation will come to the world when the set time approaches.

*When you see the Abomination of Desolation, the one spoken of through Daniel the Prophet, standing in the holy place—the reader will understand. (v. 15)*

LXX Dan 9:27 reads:

He will confirm a covenant with many for one seven [year] period; In the middle of the seven period he will put an end to sacrifice and offering and upon the Temple there shall be the *Abomination of Desolation* until the end that is decreed is poured out on him.

The verse from Daniel foresees an evil power who will make alliances with other princes. After ten and a half years, something or someone will be seen standing in the Temple, perhaps an idol, perhaps the Destroyer. When the reader sees these things transpiring, he will understand that this is the fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy. Josephus points out to his readers that there are secrets in Daniel that have yet to unfold and invites them to read the texts for themselves (*Ant.* 10:210). They will then realize that only a portion of Daniel's prophecy has thus far come to pass, not all of it. More is to unfold.

At this point in Matthew we have the dire warnings of the prophet of doom, in poetry so powerful that commentary would only ruin it. The following verses might be thought of as "the synoptic apocalypse":

*Then let those in Judea flee to the mountains. (v. 16)*

This evokes Zechariah 14:5: "And you shall flee to the valley of my mountains."

*Let the one on the rooftops not go down to take up the things from his house. Let the one in the field not turn back to take up his cloak. Woe to those women who are pregnant and to those who are nursing in those days. Pray that your escape will not be in the winter nor on the Sabbath! (vv. 17–20)*

The images convey a sense of urgency and haste. Although in times of danger the Sabbath laws could be set aside, the prospect of desecrating the Sabbath was nonetheless troubling and worrisome:

The Sages said, it once happened that evil decrees were enacted by the [Roman] Empire against the Great Men of Sepphoris and they came to ask Rabbi Eliezer ben Porta. They told him, "Evil decrees have come upon us from the Empire. Will you tell us to flee? But he was hesitant about telling them explicitly to flee on the Sabbath. He said: "Why do you ask me? Go ask Jacob, Moses and David [who fled from pursuers—i.e. if to save your life the Sabbath can be pushed away]!"<sup>6</sup>

Fleeing in the rainy winter season is particularly difficult. Hardship is unavoidable, and there is no use praying one will be spared it.

The next verses of Matthew are in a different tone, one of commentary, explaining the intensity of the pain and suffering to come, although it will soon be mitigated with some consolation that the chosen ones can survive.

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6 *Midrash Tanh.* (ed. Buber) *Parsha masei*: 1.

*At that time there will be great affliction, of a sort that has never occurred from the beginning of the world until now, nor will ever occur again. (v. 21)*

The phrase “nor will ever occur again” implies that there may be future afflictions, just not as great in extent or as horrific. Daniel 12:1 also predicts:

At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of affliction such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered.

The names written in the hidden book are those chosen to be saved. Since that time has not yet arrived, people will look in vain for the Messiah.

*If those days had not been reduced in number, no flesh at all would be saved, but on account of the Chosen those days will be reduced in number. (v. 22)*

This point of view has much in common with *Midrash Sekhel Tov* (Buber), Gen. 41:18: “In order not to make an end of Jacob and his sons through famine, the Holy One canceled 35 years from the original decree, leaving seven.” It can also be found in *Midrash Psalms* (ed. Buber) to Ps 99:5:

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: everywhere it says “if not” means redemption through the merit of the Patriarchs, as Scripture states: “if not for” the God of my father, the God of Abraham...

The “chosen ones” in Jewish sources are those saved by grace on account of the deeds of the forefathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It seems, however, that the Gospel writers understand the source of grace to be the Christian Jesus. Our understanding of these references depends greatly on whether we view this section of chapter 24 as part of the early Jewish layer of the Gospels or as part of the later Gentile layers.

*At that time, if anyone should say to you, “Look, here is the Messiah!, or “There he is!”, do not trust it. For false messiahs and false prophets will be raised up and they will do great signs and marvels, so that they will mislead, if it is possible, even the Chosen. (vv. 23–24)*

As he did in v. 5 above and in Matt 7:15, Jesus foretells that there will be false prophets and pseudo-messiahs. Even the chosen ones are vulnerable to being duped and led astray. Josephus recounts in Jewish War 6:285–287:

They owed their destruction to a false prophet, who had on that day made a public proclamation in the city that very day that God commanded them to go up to the Temple court, and that there they should receive miraculous signs of their deliverance. Now there were then a great number of false prophets suborned by the tyrants to delude the people, saying that they should wait for deliverance from God; and this was in order to keep them from deserting, and that they might be buoyed up above fear and care by such hopes.

*Look, I told you in advance. So if they say to you, ‘Look, he is in the desert!’,—don’t go. ‘Look he is in the back rooms!’—don’t believe it. (vv. 25–26)*

Song of Songs 3:4–6 employs similar images:

Then I took him to my mother’s house.\ It was *the room* where I was born.\ Women of Jerusalem, make a promise to me.\ Think about the wild gazelles and deer as you make this promise.\ Do not think about love until the right time.\ Somebody is coming from *the desert*.\\ And men are coming with clouds of smoke.\ They come with myrrh and incense.\ They have a wonderful smell.

The Rabbis use this passage to argue that redemption cannot be forcefully accomplished, but must await the appearance of the authentic Messiah.

These three promises—what are they? First, that Israel should not rise up in wall formation. Second, the Holy One made Israel promise not to rebel against the Nations of the World. Third, the Holy One made the Nations promise that they would not oppress Israel too much.<sup>7</sup>

Josephus describes the messianic expectation that was rife in first century Judea (echoed by Suetonius in *Vesp.* 4:5) in *War* 6:311–314:

But now, what did most elevate [the Jews] in undertaking this war was an ambiguous oracle that was also found in their sacred writings, how about that time, one from their own country should become ruler of the world. They took this prediction to belong to themselves in particular, and many of the wise men were thereby deceived in their interpretation.

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<sup>7</sup> b. *Ket.* 110b–111a.

Josephus (*War* 6:310) explains that a prophecy concerning arrival of the end time had been widely misunderstood, and was responsible for provoking the Judean rebellion that challenged the power of the Roman Empire, and the bloody war that ensued. Talmudic speculation would multiply the number of signs and expand the sequence of unpleasant events that were to precede the Messiah's coming. These are found in some fifteen Talmudic sources, of which the following is an example:

Minor tractate *Derekh Eretz of Rabbi Shimon*, sec. 1 foresees:

The seven year period when *ben* [son of] *David* comes will be such that in the first, on one city it will rain and on another it will not rain; the second will see partial famine; the third will be full famine and many men, women and children will die, pious people and saints will decrease and Torah will be orphaned of its leaders; the fourth will be somewhat prosperous; the fifth will be fully prosperous with eating drinking and merrymaking. The sixth hear the noise of impending wars, and in the seventh there will be wars. And the next year the son of David will come. Rabban Gamaliel says when the son of David comes, the council house will be a den of prostitutes, the Galilee will be razed, and the inhabitants of the Galilee will be wanderers from city to city who will never settle; the wisdom of the scribes will be counted as putrid and the fearers of the Lord will be made odious; the face of the generation will be as the face of a dog, truth will absent and the turning from evil will be mocked. Rabbi Nehorai says the period when the son of David comes will see the young shaming the elders....

*For just as the lightning comes out from the east and shines toward the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.* (v. 27)

A lightning bolt has a very specific point of origin but it lights up the entire sky. The advent of the Son of Man will be seen from afar although he emerges at a specific location.

*Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will be gathered.* (v. 28)

LXX Job 39:27–30:

[A]nd the vulture remains sitting at his nest...his eyes observe from afar...where the carcasses are, immediately they are found.

This metaphor reinforces the Gospel's idea that a symbolic or supernatural event of great consequence can be observed from numerous faraway places. The presence of carrion at specific site can be detected by vultures at a distance. Likewise the appearance of the Son of Man will be able to be viewed from afar (see v. 31).

*Right after the torture of those days, “The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its luster, the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken” [Isa 13:10]. (v. 29)*

Many passages in Joel, Ezekiel and Isaiah describe the darkness on the day that the Lord judges the earth, for example, Isa 13:9–10:

See, the day of the Lord is coming, a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the land desolate and destroy the sinners within it. The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light. The sun [even] as it comes out will be darkened and the moon will not give its light.

*Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will lament,<sup>8</sup> and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. (v. 30)*

While Daniel 7:13 envisions one who is “like the Son of Man,” we are told by Matthew that a sign will precede great fear and lamentation. Only then will everyone see who the Son of Man is and how esteemed he is in heaven.

*Pesiq. Rab.* ch. 36 cites Isa 60:1–2: “Arise, shine for your Light is coming and the Glory of the Lord shines upon you. For look, the *darkness covers the earth and dense gloom the nations*, and upon you shines the Lord, and his glory shall be seen upon you,” commenting that the light signifies the light of the Messiah. Isa 60 includes the pre-messianic sign—the darkness of the nations and the earth—to be followed by the appearance of the glory of the Messiah.

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<sup>8</sup> A Christian [*min* in context a Christian] asked Rabbi Abbahu when the Messiah would appear. He replied, “When darkness covers people [like you]”. The other one asked if he was cursing him. He replied: [Not me] I am merely citing a biblical verse: *See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples [but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you]*. (Isa 60:2).

*He will send his angels with a great trumpet, and they will gather his chosen from the four winds, from one of the boundaries of heaven to the other.*  
(v. 31)

Isaiah 27:13 foretells:

And it shall come to pass in that day, that the great trumpet shall be sounded, and they shall come which were scattered in the land of Assyria, and the outcasts in the land of Egypt, and shall bow down to the Lord at the holy mount at Jerusalem.

Palestinian Jewish tradition saw God as personally announcing the Eschaton. One of the eighteen benedictions of the *Amidah* prayer says, “Sound the great trumpet for our freedom and raise the banner of our redemption. Gather us from the four corners of the world to our land...” The “chosen” in Matthew most likely referred to the Jews before the poetical passage was adapted so as to make the followers of Jesus the chosen ones.

*Understand the parable of the fig tree. Whenever its branch becomes tender and it puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near.* (v. 32)

The parable alludes to Song of Songs, where the fig tree heralds the arrival of the warm and redemptive summer. Moreover, these verses portray the blossoming of many first fruits as redemptive symbolism, as Midrash and medieval commentators note. A wide phenomenon in Gospels and Jewish literature is Nature providing signs of events that are about to transpire, as coming natural events. The same is true of the cosmos—cataclysms and upheavals signal the coming day of redemption. While experience teaches the signs of nature, prophetic revelation and its poetry teach the signs of unique historical events, as in Song 2:11–13:

For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone; The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land; The fig tree putteth forth her green figs, and the vines with the tender grape give a good smell. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.

Rashi to 2:12 paraphrases Scripture’s poetry, “*the days of summer draw near when the trees send out their buds* and travelers delight to see them.” And to 2:13 he comments upon the symbolism: “The time of offering first ripe fruits has

arrived when you are to enter the land." Rashi's understanding of these verses helps us interpret Jesus' words: *Whenever its branch becomes tender and it puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near.* It is a remarkable how Rashi's words and those attributed to Jesus, although separated by a thousand years, are so compatible.

To summarize: The ancient midrashic tradition drawn upon by Rashi in his commentary to this verse understood the symbolism of figs ripening to refer to the redemption of Israel and the entrance of the Jewish people into the Promised Land. The Midrash *Song Rab.* 2:12 reads, "Israel's time of redemption had arrived." In *Pesiqta Rab.* 15 (*HaHodesh*), Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba cites Song 2:13 and remarks, "In the days of the Messiah a great thing will come to be for all the wicked shall perish." The midrash continues, "*The fig tree putteth forth her green figs* (Song 2:13) which symbolizes the baskets of first fruits. The Israelites were told that upon entering the Land they were to bring the first fruits, the ripenings, to the Temple (Deut 26:1)." The bringing of these fruits occasioned the recital of the trials and tribulations they had endured until God rescued them and brought them into their Land.<sup>9</sup>

This then is the message of the Jesus' fig parable, which not only is suggestive of redemption, with the world standing on the brink of the entrance into the Kingdom. The "first fruit" as in Solomon's Song, is the fig as it prepares to ripen, symbolizing the final redemption that will soon occur but as of yet has not begun. The disciples asked about the signs of the *Eschaton* and in reply Jesus spells them out, through references to poetic images in the Scriptures and their midrashic allusions. None of this is intelligible without reference to—and understanding of—Jewish literary sources and interpretive traditions. With this understanding in mind, we can see that the barren fig tree Jesus cursed in chapter 21 must have shown him that the signs of the Cosmic Redemption that he was expecting were not in place.

Some scholars suggest that this Apocalyptic section of Gospel was added after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. and its attendant horrors, so that the audience might be primed to expect the *Eschaton* imminently. Some argue the final *Eschaton* was always understood to follow periods of mass destruction and upheaval. That is what Second Temple "Apocalyptic" had always taught.

*So also you, when you see all these things, will know that it is near, right at the door. Amen, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things happen. (vv. 33–34)*

<sup>9</sup> The verse is taken to mean by the Rabbis that the fruits were to be brought once the land had been conquered and settled.

The audience is the disciples so the Gospel, regardless of whether of pre-70 or post-70 C.E. composition, conveys the expectation that the audience will witness signs of the impending events and should start praying immediately to be saved.

*The heaven and the earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.*  
(v. 35)

Compare this with Matthew 5:18:

Amen, I say to you, until the heaven and the earth pass away, not one iota or one flourish will disappear from the Torah, until all things occur.

However, Matt 24:18 is in accord with Pauline theology—what was said about the words of the Torah is now said of Jesus' words: Not the least of his words will ever be rendered futile. Jesus will have replaced the Torah; Gentiles will have replaced Israel.

*No one knows the day and the hour, neither the angels of the heavens nor the Son, but only the Father.* (v. 36)

See my comments in the introduction to chapter 1 on *t. Ed.* 1:14: “Even though the days and hours are reckoned by God with hair like precision, in point of fact he counts (i.e. he reveals) [the *qetz*] by generations.” Jesus himself does not know the precise day or hour. Here begins what appears to be a poem whose theme is not God’s glory but fear of retribution:

*Just as in the days of Noah, /so will be coming of the Son of Man. // For as in the days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and being acquired in marriage,/ until the day that Noah entered the ark.// They did not know until the flood came, and everything was destroyed;/so also will be the coming of the Son of Man//.* (vv. 37–39)

A poetic exhortation follows the poem:

*So stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.// Know this: If the householder had known in what watch the thief was coming,/ he would have stayed awake and not allowed his house to be broken into.// So be ready, for you do not know the hour when the Son of Man is coming.*  
(vv. 40–44)

“Your Lord” is identified here with the Son of Man, something we will need to keep in mind as we read further. The disciples are compared to the faithful slave who keeps vigilant watch. There needs to be expectation and watchfulness; people keep watch when they anticipate that something is about to happen to them. When they do not, then someone else must constantly be extra vigilant. Although the Son of Man is not compared to a thief, vigilance is praised by reference to a thief. Forgetfulness and slothfulness are the thieves that the watcher defeats as he awaits the dawn.

*Midrash Psalms* (ed. Buber) Psalm 40:1:

For the director of music—of David a psalm. *I watched for the Lord; he turned to me and heard my cry* (Ps 40:1), which is explained by the verse: “and he says on that day, look this [is] our God, the one whom we watched for, that He may save us” (Isa 25:9). There is nothing in the hand of Israel but to keep watch that the Holy One will redeem them. As a reward for “I watched for the Lord” is the fulfillment of the verse “God is good to those who watch for him” (Lam 3:25) and also the verse explains, “Return to your fortress, you prisoners of watchfulness” (Zech 9:12). If you wonder that the harvest has passed the summer is gone so we will not be redeemed (Jer 8:20)—then watch for the Lord and strengthen your heart (Ps 27:14)—Watch for the Lord! Watch for the Lord! Watchfulness after watchfulness, be strong and have an optimistic heart. If you have watched and you are not saved, keep watching and again keep watching. And if you wonder how long shall we watch, it is written elsewhere, “Israel will wait for the Lord from now until ever more” (Ps 131:3). . . . and it is written “Those who watch for the Lord, they shall inherit the earth.”

*Who, then, is the trustworthy and prudent slave whom the Lord places over his household, to give them their food at the right time? (v. 45)*

The image suggests Numbers 12:7: “Not so is Moses my slave; over all My household he is trustworthy.”

*Blessed is that slave, whom the Lord finds so doing when he comes. Amen, I say to you, he places him over everything he has. But if (that) a wicked slave should say in his heart, “My Lord has been gone for a long time,” and he begins to beat his fellow slaves, and eats and drinks with drunkards, the Lord of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him, and in an*

*hour which he doesn't know. He will cut him in two, and put his part with the stage-actors, and there will be wailing and the grinding of teeth.* (vv. 46–51)

This motif was used by the Rabbis to describe the sons of Aaron, who offered a “strange fire before the Lord” because they were intoxicated (according to the view of Rabbi Yishmael).

Rabbi Menachem said in the name of Rabbi Levi concerning the view of Rabbi Yishmael: [this is like the parable] of a king who appointed a trustworthy slave [over his food stores] and his watchman stood at the gateway of his [wine] stores. The latter chopped off the former's head quietly and [the king] appointed another in his place. We have no idea why the first one was killed but we can fathom it from what the king told the second slave: “Do not enter the [wine] stores”.... similarly God commanded Aaron: “Do not drink wine and beer.” (Lev 10:9).<sup>10</sup>

Matthew ends his words with a flourish we have heard before—who are the bad slaves? The Pharisees and the Jews whom Matthew dubs “stage actors” or “hypocrites” will be tossed out and tortured. Matthew has stated this before:

“But the children of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be wailing and the grinding of teeth.” (Matt 8:12)

“The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect from his Kingdom all the offenses and all who do lawlessness, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and the grinding of teeth.” (Matt 13:41–42)

Matthew’s hostility toward Jews is becoming increasingly apparent. It is clear that the wicked slave is none other than the Jews, and particularly Pharisees.

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<sup>10</sup> *Lev. Rab.* (ed. Margolioth), *parasha Shemini* 12.

# Chapter 25

## Introduction

The narrative now begins to intensify the theme of the faithful being fully prepared for the future glory of the next world, envisioned as a wedding. This is not to be confused with watching for the signs of impending tribulation which was the subject of Matthew 24. As explained in my commentary to chapter 9, which speaks of Jesus as the “bridegroom” and refers to the “members (or sons) of the bridal chamber” (Matt 9:15), the wedding refers to the unification of the Son of Man from below with Wisdom (Sophia) from above, a mystical, mythic marriage of two hypostatic emanations of the Godhead. The chapter’s imagery sets the scene for the conclusion of the divine drama of Jesus, Son of Man/Messiah, divine bridegroom, and kingly judge, woven into a tapestry of parables. One detects the hand of Matthew deftly foreshadowing the details of events yet to come, lest the reader be tempted to leave the drama before the ultimate climax.

The chapter begins by making clear the necessity for preparing for the Next World, but says little of what the preparation consists of. The opening parable employs the allegory of having at hand the oil and wicks with which to light lamps, in anticipation of a wedding whose exact time is not known, but for which being ready is requisite. At chapter’s end we hear of those welcomed in the Kingdom because they treated the stranger with compassion. Perhaps the oil and wicks are deeds of compassion which one needs to cultivate in order to have a place in the coming Kingdom. As we shall see, this interpretation is not without its difficulties. The Gospel’s themes of dividing people into right and left, and of giving charity to others as one gives gifts to God, find their origins in Jewish exegesis of biblical verses in midrash.

## Commentary

*Then the heavenly Kingdom will be compared to ten virgins. (v. 1)*

The parable at beginning of the chapter compares the process of the Kingdom’s manifestation to ten virgins who have been told by the bridegroom to prepare oil lamps that they must bring with them to his wedding. R.T. France and others vainly look for precedents in Jewish wedding customs involving oil lamps as the background for the parable. However, Jesus’ parables may not refer to

Jewish customs at all. The parables concerning kings, householders, feasts and weddings are most likely rooted in Hellenistic settings, not Jewish ones. There is nothing to learn about Jewish wedding customs from this parable, nor do Jewish wedding customs provide any insight into the parable's lesson. The reason these virgins had been told to prepare oil lamps prior to the wedding is of no concern. Many commentaries speculate on the *realia* of details behind the story. Yet, it is the story alone that commands attention. What matters is that they were instructed to prepare. Some of them did, others did not.

*Five of them were foolish, and five of them were prudent. The foolish ones took their lamps, but they did not take olive oil with them. (vv. 2–3)*

Five of them understood that lamps require oil. Wicks alone are insufficient. A lamp's exterior is not a source of light if no flame burns inside. Likewise a person who goes through solely outward manifestations of piety is not sufficiently prepared for the Kingdom. Without oil a wick cannot sustain a flame, and a lamp without a flame gives off no light.

*The prudent ones took olive oil in containers with their lamps. (v. 4)*

The wise five not only brought lamps with them but also a sufficient supply of oil to keep them lit.

*When the bridegroom was gone a long time, they all became sleepy and lay down. (v. 5)*

The bridegroom had evidently been there earlier in the evening and had promised to return when the wedding was about to commence. He expected the virgins to have the necessary supplies at hand when he did. They seem to have expected him to come back sooner than he did. When he did not, they all went to sleep, intent on setting their lamps in order as soon as he arrived. Putting oil into the lamps in advance might saturate the wicks and not provide as pure a light as would a freshly trimmed wick that had not been immersed in oil.

*In the middle of the night, there was a shout. "Look, the bridegroom! Come out to greet him!" (v. 6)*

The bridegroom's herald announced his impending arrival.

*All those virgins got up and set their lamps in order. (v. 7)*

Having trimmed the wicks, cleaned out the old oil, removed oil accretions from the inside of the lamps and polished the exteriors, half of them put in the fresh oil they had brought with them, and were ready for the wedding.

*But the foolish ones said to the prudent, “Give us some of your olive oil, for our lamps are going out.” (v. 8)*

The oil in the lamps would need to be replenished. The prudent virgins had brought oil with which to refill their lamps; the foolish ones had not. Those without fresh oil would not be able to greet the bridegroom.

*The prudent ones answered, “No, there isn’t enough for us and for you. Go instead to the merchants and buy some for yourselves.” (v. 9)*

Not being adequately prepared will delay the virgins who had not thought to bring oil to refill their lamps, and they will forfeit the opportunity to attend the wedding. Nor is the message of this parable that those who brought the needed oil along should share with those who did not.

*While they were going to buy it (i.e. the oil), the bridegroom came, and the ones who were ready went in with him to the wedding, and the door was closed. (v. 10)*

We have already had occasion to cite *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 9 as a rabbinic parallel to watchfulness parables in Matt 22, and now suggest that these parallels are even more striking here in the context of preparedness. The wise guests who were invited to a meal by the king bathed, anointed themselves and dressed in fresh clothing, and then stood at the door of the royal palace until they were invited in, rather than keep the king waiting. The foolish invitees remained working at their occupations, assuming they would have ample time to change their clothing and get ready once they received word that the meal was ready. When they received the king’s command to come to the palace sooner than they had expected, they were forced to come before the king in their work clothes, angering him with their lack of respect and he would not let them eat. The king was pleased by the wise ones who obeyed his command; and they enjoyed partaking of the king’s hospitality. The others were forced to stand and watch, receiving nothing to eat. “So likewise, in the future World to Come the words of Isaiah 65:13 will be fulfilled: ‘Behold my servants will eat and you will starve.’”

*Later the rest of the virgins came and said, “Master, master, open the door for us!” But he answered, Amen, I say to you, I do not know you.” (vv. 11–12)*

We might feel some sympathy for these maidens. But “better late than never” does not apply here. The clear implication is that their being shut out was a consequence of their not thinking sufficiently far ahead, and failing to take the time and effort necessary to prepare for such an important occasion. Decoded, the message relates that advance preparation is necessary for salvation and to gain entrance into the Kingdom. To delay and procrastinate, and not be ready for the moment when it arrives, will be disastrous.

The Rabbis spoke of preparedness in their own cultural terms, as in *b. ‘Abod. Zar. 3a*:

He who busies himself preparing for the Sabbath on the Sabbath Eve will dine on the Sabbath. He who did not busy himself on the Sabbath Eve, from where could he expect to eat on the Sabbath?<sup>1</sup>

Since the Sabbath represents in rabbinic tradition the foretaste and the essence of the World to Come, it is not a stretch to see here the message that those who are not prepared will not enter the Kingdom.

*So keep watch, because you know neither the day nor the hour. (v.13)*

It might appear that a scribe might have added this in an attempt to insert an exhortation about watchfulness and alertness, even though there is no obvious way at all to fit that into the parable of the ten virgins. Wakefulness and watchfulness do not seem to be the admonition in this particular parable, since all of the maidens went to sleep while they waited for the bridegroom’s return, to which he raised no objection. Advance preparation and being ready is the parable’s message, not remaining awake and vigilant.

However, we also note that Matt 26:40 relates: “Then he [Jesus] returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. ‘Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?’ he asked Peter. While the importance of staying awake has no referent in the parable of the ten virgins, it does foreshadow a coming trope in the narrative of the Last Supper and its aftermath. This is why most scholars think Matt 25:13 is a gloss that was added, either inadvertently by a copyist or perhaps even intentionally. Most likely Matthew’s editor was attempting to

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<sup>1</sup> I thank Jacob Basser for the insight connecting this Talmudic passage to the parable.

make the parable fit into his literary scheme wherein a subsequent narrative unlocks a parable. Since the Gospel narrative shows the disciples falling asleep after being warned not to, Matthew, perhaps inadvertently, would have this as the upshot of the parable of the virgins even if not its precise point. The words in Greek might support a secondary meaning of “alertness” even if the setting argues against it. Nonetheless Matthew seems to be trying to connect the parable of the ten virgins to the narrative of the sleepy disciples. Otherwise the insertion of verse 13 at this point in the text makes little sense.

The introduction to chapter 13 noted that the interpretive key to Jesus’ parables is the distinction and opposition between the worthy and the unworthy. We see this in the next parable concerning the differences in the dedication of slaves to the best interests of their absent master.

*Just as a person leaving on a journey called his own slaves and hands over to them his things. (v. 14)*

Jesus tells of a householder who leaves his wealth and possessions in the care of the slaves who manage his financial affairs when he is away. The underlying assumptions of the parable accord equally well in Jewish or Roman law. It was not uncommon for slaves to be charged with overseeing their owners’ estates, as Joseph was in Gen 39:4. Slaves owned no property in their own right: “Whatever a slave has is the possession of the master” (*y. Qidd. 1:3*). Gaius’ second century code of slavery, based on the earlier *Lex Aelia Sentia* code from 4 C.E., states that “whatever is acquired by a slave is acquired on behalf of his owner.” Therefore the profits of a slave’s investment on the owner’s behalf would belong to the owner.

The parable assumes that “handing over” the assets in question was performed on condition that the slave would be permitted to invest the master’s money. Otherwise the slaves would have been reprimanded and punished for conducting unauthorized transactions with the owner’s funds.<sup>2</sup> In the parable, however, the slave owner distributed a portion of his finances among several slaves, based upon his assessment of each one’s investment acumen.

*To one he gave five talents, and to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability, and he left on a journey right away. When he left, the one who took the five talents did business with them and gained another five. (vv. 15–16)*

<sup>2</sup> See Luke 19:13. Here it is virtually impossible to say if the householder is a Jew or a Roman. However, expressions easily comport to Hebrew and of course are found in Greek in the Gospel.

The point must be that while the devoted slave did not risk his master's capital, he nonetheless bought and sold merchandise at a handsome profit for his master's benefit. He did not leave the money sitting idle.

*Likewise, the one who received the two gained another two. (v. 17)*

It is not clear whether the first slave shows himself to be superior to the second; he was given five talents as initial investment capital and he doubled it, as did the slave who was given two and also doubled it. The profit of the first was higher in absolute terms because his initial investment was proportionately higher. But the first two both showed 100% profit and, in relative terms, seem to have achieved equal success in enriching the master. The parable shows these slaves to be faithful and loyal to their master, obedient to his directives and seeking his well-being. Nevertheless, since the point is that the first had been given more money to invest, he was able to achieve more than the others concerning the absolute increase of his master's wealth. Since he had proven particularly diligent in the responsibilities he had been given, he is rewarded by being given more responsibilities. The others were tested with less money and so should not have been expected to have the same returns. The point of the parable is somewhat therefore unclear.

*The one who took the one [talent] went out and dug in the ground and hid his master's silver. (v. 18)*

A talent was a vast sum. The third slave, who had been given only one talent, neither abused the sum with which he had been entrusted nor did he take any risks with it. Instead of investing it, he simply guarded it so it could be returned intact. But according to the parable, this was a mistake, as we shall see in vv. 24–27.

*After a long time, the master of those slaves came and settled the account with them. (v. 19)*

In all of these parables the master, like the bridegroom, stayed away longer than expected.

*The one who took the five talents came and brought him another five talents: "Master, you handed five talents over to me. Look, I have gained another five talents." (v. 20)*

The point of this parable is apparently not watchfulness or preparedness but being a faithful servant, who emulates the master and seeks to increase his assets. While the mustard seed parable showed what was possible in the way of increase in the World to Come, this one demonstrates how one might prove worthy of entering that world by pleasing the master. While it did not advance the first slave's own interests to increase the master's wealth, this slave cared for it by increasing it.

*His master said to him, “Well done, good and faithful slave! You have been faithful in a few matters; I shall put you in charge of many [matters]. Enter into your master’s joy.” (v. 21)*

There was a 100% increase in the assets entrusted to the slave, and the master sees he is indeed a wise supervisor. He is therefore allowed to supervise others on the estate and to enjoy the master's beneficence. The true disciple is dedicated to the master. This slave is ultimately allowed to benefit from his investment. Decoded, the reward for such devoted service is that the disciple will be given entrance to the Kingdom.

*The one who took the two talents said, “Master, you gave over to me two talents. Look, I have gained another two talents.” (v. 22)*

As pointed out earlier, this one also doubled the amount of money with which he had been entrusted.

*The master said to him, “Well done, good and faithful slave. You have been faithful in a few matters, I shall put you in charge of many. Enter into your master’s joy.” (v. 23)*

Decoded, this means he too will be admitted into the Kingdom.

*The one who had taken the one talent came: “Master, I know that you are a hard person, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not plant seed.” (v. 24)*

The image reflects a tough, perhaps even ruthless businessman investing money in ventures where loss might be the outcome as well as gain. The profits he expects are based on nothing more than high interest returns that did not fall under the prohibition of “taking interest.”

*“Being afraid, I went out and hid your talent in the earth. Look, you have what is yours.” (v. 25)*

Being risk averse, this slave was cautious—apparently overly so—since he chose to safeguard his master’s principal, rather than taking any risks to increase his holdings. He was not being irresponsible, as we see in a passage in *b. B. Meṣi‘a* 42a, which recommends prudence to someone entrusted with someone else’s money: “Samuel said: money can only be guarded by [hiding it] in the ground.” And *m. B. Qam.* 9:2 quotes Rabbi Meir who said that one need only return stolen slaves, who had aged since the time of theft, in their present condition, with no need to compensate the owner for their loss of ability since the day the theft occurred, and inform the owner “[take] before you what is yours!” The point of the expression “[take] before you what is yours!” is that the obligation of returning an item by an entrusted party to its rightful owner is met by returning it in its current state, regardless of whether it might have been worth more or less when it was lost or stolen. Returning the very item fulfills his obligation, regardless of any fluctuation in its value.

*His master answered him: “Wicked and lazy slave! Did you not know that I reap where I did not sow, and I gather where I did not plant seed?” (v. 26)*

Apparently the master is always looking for maximum return on his capital and expected his slaves to emulate him in this regard by being no less diligent than their master in seeking profit. Indeed the master corroborates the slave’s appraisal of him as a tough person and uses this against the slave he regards as indolent. The slave’s own words indict him for knowing his master’s nature and yet not acting as the master would have. Although acting responsibly, according to the parable, he did not act appropriately.

*You should have placed my silver with the bankers, and when I came I would have obtained what is mine with a profit. Take his talent from him, and give it to the one who has the ten talents! (vv. 27–28)*

In the end the prudent slave gets nothing, and his portion is given to the faithful servant who emulated his master and produced the most profit. The servant is blamed for not showing the same alacrity as the other two, not earning another talent for the master that he might otherwise have had. He will be punished while the industrious slaves will be rewarded.

It is difficult to place the scenario in any real setting since slaves had no rights to own personal property.

*For to everyone who has it will be given, and it will be given in abundance, and to the one who does not have, it will be taken from them.* (v. 29)

The statement of v. 29 fits a genre of paradoxical and counterintuitive riddles that were common in the academies of Jewish scholarship. Minor tractate 'Avot R. Natan A, chapter 12, lists four such pithy but enigmatic remarks in Babylonian Aramaic:

Whoever prolongs the name destroys his name, whoever does not attend to the wise deserves death, whoever does not add subtracts, whoever makes use of the crown gradually perishes.

It was not uncommon in these ancient schools for a master to teach in riddles. The disciples would often have to turn to other sages to unravel the secret. *B. Šabb.* 137a shows us a master uttering pithy enigmas and, after stumping the students, he proceeded to explain them. Exactly how this enigmatic saying of Jesus applies to the slave parable or what it might mean is left a mystery. Here the analogy drives home its harsh message. It appears from the context that the “riches” here is faith. The point is that whoever has faith in Jesus will be rewarded with greater faith, while those whose faith is limited to what they already believed before his coming will lose even that. Suffice it to say that v. 29 echoes a common refrain, also found in other Gospel parables, that casts out Jews (who have not secured ample preparations) into the outermost limits as we now see.

*Throw the worthless slave into the outer darkness. There will be wailing and the grinding of teeth.* (v. 30)

The essence of this verse appears five times in the Gospel, here and in Matt 8:11–12; 13:41–42; 13:49–50; 24:50–51, where gruesome torture is stated, followed by “wailing and grinding of teeth.” Although not evident at this point, we will soon see that it is loosely related to the theme of not helping the master. The phrase “grinding of teeth” is usually used in conjunction with the grief of the Jews when they discover they are inheriting outer darkness, not the primordial light reserved for those in the inner circle of the saved who are worthy of it.

*When the Son of Man comes in his Glory and all the Angels with him, then he will sit on the Throne of his Glory. There will be gathered before him all the nations, and he will separate them from each other—Just as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats—[so] he will place the sheep on his*

*right side, and the goats on his left—Then the King will say to the ones at his right side, “Come, blessed ones of my Father, inherit the Kingdom that has been prepared for you from the Creation of the World.” (vv. 31–34)*

The imagery intimates fulfillment of Zechariah 14:5: “Then the Lord my God will come, and all the holy ones with him,” and Daniel 7:13–14:

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a Son of Man, coming with the Clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his Kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

The “Throne of His Glory” is a major theme in Jewish mystical tradition that would become popular in *Heikhalot/Merkava* hymns, later *midrash* and liturgy. Sometimes the Hebrew phrase *kisei kevodo* is used and sometimes *moshav yekaro* is used. The Merkabah *Aleinu* prayer of Rosh Hashanah’s *Musaf* that presently concludes every Jewish prayer service, affirms God’s transcendent power in the highest heavens. God’s special light has been stored for the *Eschaton* since the dawn of creation and those whom it serves are the righteous of all generations. So it is that God calls forth the generations into judgment. According to *Midrash Psalms* (Buber) Ps 99:1,2, when God appears in *His Glory*, it is to announce the building of Zion. It is precisely then that God appears as a just King. How does the King judge? We find an answer in *Tanh Exod., Mishpatim* 15:

When people sin, God sits in judgment to say what the sentence will be . . . and so Micah said, “I saw God sitting on his Throne and all the hosts of heaven attended him on his right and on his left (1 Kgs 22:19). . . .” What does “on His right and on His left” mean? Those angels who can find virtue are referred to as being “on the right” while those who find guilt are referred to as “being on the left.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This comment begins a unit of *Midrash Tanhuma*. It actually is parallel to the close of this chapter of Matthew (vv. 35–46). It may have been the original sequel to the midrash (in lieu of what I cited in the comments to vv. 31–34) rather than the introduction to the midrashic periscope as it now stands. By reversing the opening and beginning sections, the continuity in the midrash, not only is more apparent, it also conforms to Matthew’s order.

Jesus compares God's separation of people into "left" and "right" to a shepherd separating sheep and goats; mingled flocks are sorted by species. Those who have merit partake of the Kingdom, their place reserved from the days of Creation. I do not think one needs to find some virtue in sheep and flaw in goats for the parable to effectively make its point, which is the reality of their separation, not the reason for it.

The Rabbis looked at the primordial act of creation—the separation in Genesis of light and darkness, of Heaven and earth--as setting the stage for what will reoccur at the end of history, as in *Gen. Rab.* 3:6:

God hid the [primordial light of creation] for the righteous for the future to come—the light for the righteous will shine and the light for the wicked will go out. (*Prov 13:9*).

*"I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you gathered me in. I was naked and you clothed me; I was weak and you visited me; I was in prison and you came to me." Then the righteous will answer him: "Master, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see that you were a stranger gather you in, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you weak or in prison and come to you?" The king answered them, "Amen, I say to you, as you did to one of the least of my brothers and sisters, you did so to me."* (vv. 35–40)

The order here is offering food and beverage to the hungry and thirsty, hospitality to the stranger, garments for those in need of them, showing compassion for the powerless. It closely adheres to priorities in Jewish tradition, and one suspects a common cultural or literary link between these passages:<sup>4</sup> We see this in *Midrash Psalms* (ed. Buber) 118:17:

*Open for me the gates of righteousness* (*Ps 117:17*): In the Coming World a person will be asked, "What was your constant occupation?" And [if] he replies, "I was a feeder of the hungry," then he is told—This is [your] gate to [praise] the Lord, O' feeder of the hungry, enter it! [Likewise] "I was a giver of drink to the thirsty," then he is told—This is [your] gate to the Lord, O' giver of drink to the thirsty, enter it! [Likewise] "I was one who clothed the naked," then he is told—This is [your] gate to the Lord, O'

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<sup>4</sup> Lachs, *Rabbinic Commentary*, 394, was struck by the similarities in phrasing between these passages. He truncated the midrash found in *Midrash Psalms*.

one who clothes the naked, enter it! And likewise one who raises orphans and likewise one who charitable acts, and likewise one who bestows kindnesses. David said “I did all of these things—Let all of these gates be opened for me!” For this reason it was said in the Psalm: *Open for me the gates of righteousness [that] I may enter them praising the Lord.*

In Jewish sources we find the claim that one who supports the poor and needy is as if he supports the Lord. There is an ostensible parallel in thought, form and conceptualization between the verse in Matthew and the following passage, also from *Midrash Tanh. Mishpatim* 15:

*If you will loan money* (Exod 22:24):—Rabbi Tanhuma opened this verse in reference to Prov 19:17, “The Lord—one lends him—. Whoever gives to the poor, his [very] kindness will He reward him.—It means that the one who gives to the poor is like one who has credited God’s account and He will reward him for his kindness to Him. Rabbi P[inchas] ben Ḥama, the priest, explained in the name of Rabbi Reuven: “He will reward him for his kindness to Him.”—How is this? I might have thought it meant if he gave a penny to a poor person, God will pay him back—but really it means that God promises, “Just as this poor person was about to expire from hunger and you fed him/her and revived him, so I will revive your family’s life in the future when death threatens.” And God further says (Exod 22:24), “If you lend money to My people (‘ami), you have merited to be with Me (‘imi) in the Next World.”

The comment is derived from the exegetical observation that “my people” is spelled the same in Hebrew as “with me,” (‘ami and ‘imi); while the pronunciation of one of the vowels shifts slightly, the consonants stay the same. The two are homiletically harmonized in “What you give to My people you give to Me.”

*Then he will say to those on his left side, “Go away from me, you who are cursed, to the eternal fire prepared by the Devil and his Angels.”* (v. 41)

Now we return to the bifurcation between those who are saved (right side) and those who are damned (left side). The association of the right side with righteousness, the left side with evil and misfortune, was pervasive in the ancient world. *Sinistra*, the Latin and modern Italian word for “left,” is the etymological precursor of the word “sinister.” On the Day of Atonement the High Priest in the Temple would choose two goats by lot, one selected with his left hand

and one with the right hand. If the one destined to be offered to God was the one placed on the right of him and the one destined for Azazel (*Gehenna*) on the left it was seen as fitting.<sup>5</sup> The Pharisees would have approved of switching the lots from one hand to the other if the desired result was not randomly achieved, but they knew the Sadducees would object.

The Kingdom of Evil, *Gehenna*, is quite developed here. Whereas the earliest Jewish literature from the period of the Hebrew Prophets admits no breach to God's sole kingship, as we advance through the centuries, the Devil, in post Biblical sources, is shown as having more and more autonomy. That the Devil has supernatural spirits or helpers in our passage is not surprising. Satan's angels are called *malakhei ḥabbalah*—“Angels of Destruction”—in Talmudic literature. I have located over 100 such references, e.g., minor tractate *Semahot* book of *ḥibut hakever* 1:2: “In the evening they take him to *Gehenna* and show him the wicked being beaten with whips of fire by the *Angels of Destruction*.”

*“For I was hungry and you did not give me anything to eat; I was thirsty, and you did not give me anything to drink; I was a stranger and you did not gather me in; I was naked and you did not clothe me, weak and in prison and you did not visit me.” Then they too will answer him, “Master, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or weak or in prison and we did not serve you?” Then he will answer them: “Amen, I say to you, as you failed to do to one of the least of these, so did you fail to do to me. These will go away to eternal torment, but the righteous to eternal life.”* (vv. 42–46).

In contrast to those who helped one another are those who did not lift a finger to help those in need. While it is not the case that Jesus' followers refused to clothe and feed, him, that they failed to provide for the naked and the hungry is regarded here as though they had deprived Jesus himself of basic material necessities. As we pointed out earlier, those who provide for others are regarded as though they provide for God. This verse in Matthew reflects the sentiments of many *midrashim*. The entire passage may well be from an early Gospel tradition within which biblical references were viewed from the perspective of their Jewish interpretations. Nonetheless we also see that there is an underlying theology here of the divinity of Christ, since what Talmudic exegesis says with regard to God is applied here to Jesus.

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<sup>5</sup> See *B. Yoma* 4ob, which cites a Tosefta version concerning Akiva's tradition of the Temple service. The *Azazel* goat is placed to the left of the High Priest. For Azazel and the fires of hell see the description in *Apocalypse of Abraham* 14:5–6.

# Chapter 26

## Introduction

Five thematic movements comprise chapters 26–28: 1) the Day of Preparation; 2) the Last Supper; 3) the Trial; 4) the Crucifixion; and 5) the Resurrection. Readers who have prepared for the encounter with an adequate supply of oil for lighting their lamps, acquired from special shops, and whose souls are appropriately attired for the mystery that will conclude the Gospel, can illuminate what is behind the hidden shadows on the page. Chapter 26, whose implicit subtitle might well be “Prelude to the End,” opens with Jesus predicting his crucifixion and concludes with the betrayal he had foretold would come to pass.

There are several puzzling aspects of the narrative that invite the reader’s attention. We might, for example, wonder why the anointing episode at Bethany is highlighted here, since chronologically it belongs in chapter 21, when Jesus visited Bethany at the house of Simon the Leper (*en oikia simōnos tou leprous*). Nor can we hope to recover from Matthew’s Gospel any authentic and trustworthy chronology of historical events leading up to the Last Supper and the Crucifixion. While source criticism might provide a key to sorting out threads of earlier and later narratives that were subsequently intertwined, my commentary is predicated on appreciating Matthew’s skill as a story teller who weaves diverse accounts into a complex textual tapestry.

Matthew may have combined two narrative strands in such a way as to hint that the Last Supper might somehow have occurred after the Crucifixion, since Jesus himself is the sacrificial lamb, and it is his body and blood that comprise the substance of his Passover meal. However, the betrayal of Jesus by Judas—the immediate cause of his crucifixion—must, of logical necessity, have preceded it. The Last Supper and the Crucifixion—two scenes that at one time may have been narratives from different sources—are thus purposefully superimposed one upon the other, overlapping so as to create the perception that time has entered a new dimension where temporal sequence ceases to be meaningful.

There seem to be two Passover eves: one prior to the Crucifixion and the other after Jesus had died. The three synoptic gospels apparently adhere to one chronology, the Gospel of John to another. In the synoptics, Jesus dies the day after the Passover meal; in John, he is crucified as the lambs are slaughtered for it. Remarkably, the claim is even made by some that there is no Passover meal in any Gospel. Nevertheless, I find the early identification of the meal in the Gospel with Passover to be warranted based on the text of Matt 26:17:

On the “first day” (Exod 12:15) of Unleavened Bread the students came to Jesus: “How do you wish us to prepare for you to eat the Passover?”

The unfolding events then lurch between two distinct time frames, earthly and next-worldly. There is no evident explanatory bridge to plausibly connect all of the components of chapter 26 if they are interpreted as occurring in the sequence in which they are recounted in Matthew’s Gospel. Instead, the narrative challenges and even contradicts the normal logic of time, so that earlier events must, of necessity, have occurred later than they are presented in the Gospel and those later, earlier. One wonders how so much could have occurred in a single day. Some would push back the time of the Crucifixion to the early morning, although the hours mentioned in the Gospel do not easily admit such a reading. Certain actions after the Passover meal, of which Jesus’ arrest and execution will be a consequence, have significance only in terms of the post-crucifixion context.

For some, if the result is an impossible muddle, so be it. Matthew has not left us many choices other than literalistic acquiescence and inventing unlikely meanings and scenarios. Perhaps what makes certain texts classics, both as works of art and as sacred texts, is precisely the impossibility of unraveling all of their intriguingly complex puzzles that look so unremarkable when first encountered. Nevertheless I offer my reading of the order of events predicated upon a third possibility: that the scene at Bethany is a flashback to chapter 21, which had foreshadowed Jesus’ death.

In this flashback, Matthew mentions a woman in Bethany who poured expensive ointment on the living Jesus before he departed for Jerusalem, where he will die. This anonymous woman, whose deed is immortalized rather than her name, had unwittingly anointed Jesus’ corpse that, according to Matthew, would otherwise have remained without anointment because of the imminent onset of the Sabbath on the Friday of his crucifixion. The need for a hasty burial would have precluded anointing. *B.Yebam.* 74a suggests anointing the dead was an ancient practice. In Matthew’s narrative, Jesus understands this unnamed woman’s deed to be neither extravagant nor frivolous, but rather an appropriate, gracious and compassionate act. Other Gospels have women tending to Jesus’ burial needs after his death.

Thus, I suggest that the chapter, which opens two days before Passover and the Crucifixion, flashes back to the scene in Bethany and what will turn out to have been the anointment of Jesus’ corpse before burial. Then, in real time (vv. 14–16) Judas, one of the disciples, offers to betray Jesus, providing the priestly establishment with certain information that they need, and clearly want, in order to arrest Jesus. His price is thirty pieces of silver. The priests pay Judas

up front, after which Judas seeks the first possible opportunity to carry out the betrayal.

The events in the narrative about the Passover meal are clearly out of chronological order, which has attracted the attention of Michael Cook. He proposes that all Passover references are interpolations by Mark, and that if these are removed from the text, some of the chronological confusion can be remedied. If we hope to establish any cogent reading of this chapter in Matthew in respect to other Gospel accounts, Cook shows we will get mired in numerous difficulties.<sup>1</sup> I, however, suggest that if we follow Matthew alone, his narrative can make sense. Problems surface when we try to square it with what we know about Passover rites, and attempt to fit the narrative into a chronology that accommodates and is consistent with other Gospel accounts.

We need simply to read Matthew to determine the extent to which the Passover meal that he describes corresponds to, or shares features in common with, the Mishnah's post-70 C.E. description and prescriptions, and its account of the Temple rituals. According to the Mishnah, the Passover meal has four ordered components: 1) dipping *merorim* (bitter herbs) in *charoset*; 2) breaking a loaf of *matzah*, and eating it with the previously dipped *merorim* and possibly with *charoset* as well; 3) eating the paschal lamb and other festival sacrifices; 4) pouring a second cup of wine.<sup>2</sup> It was customary, if not mandatory, to explain the ritual items that constituted the Passover sacrificial meal, which most likely was done as the items were being consumed.<sup>3</sup> Albeck understands *Mishnah Pes. 10:3* to be describing an actual meal in Temple times:

They had brought him [a table/ a platter]. He dips the lettuce (*merorim*) before he reaches the breaking of the [unleavened] bread. They brought him unleavened bread, lettuce, and *charoset* and two dishes, although the *charoset* is not essential, Rabbi Eliezer bar Tzadok says it is essential. And in the Temple they used to bring him the body of the Passover-offering. Then they poured him a second cup of wine.

This passage, informing us of the essential elements of the Passover meal ritual, helps us see that our Gospel author is reasonably familiar with them.

<sup>1</sup> Michael J. Cook, "How Credible is Jewish Scholarship?" in *The Jewish Jesus: Revelation, Reflection, Reclamation* (Garber 2011), 254–7.

<sup>2</sup> Albeck's *Shisha Sidre Mishna, Moed*, 455–456, on the basis of an alternate reading, reverses the order of the initial paragraphs in m. *Pes. 10:2* and *10:3*.

<sup>3</sup> See Philo, *Special Laws* 2.158 and Josephus, *Ant.* 2:315–17 for explanations of the symbolism of the unleavened bread (*matzah*) wafer.

The aftermath of the meal, however, seems to be a tangle of contradictions. Jesus foretells his betrayal, announcing that the time has come for the unfolding of the preordained final act of the drama, while at the same time he prays to prevent it. The hearing in the courtyard of the High Priest does not establish that Jesus has done anything deserving of punishment. What appears at the outset to be a trumped up charge seems doomed to backfire, as the fairness of the proceedings impels the hearing toward resolution. But it is Jesus—in the few words that he utters—who forces matters to an ambiguous climax, incriminating himself by claiming that he will sit among the divine powers. Destiny will neither be deflected nor defeated. In these scenes, it is not Messiah, son of God who dominates, but Lord Jesus—a divine associate. For the first time in Matthew we meet the Jesus of John and Paul.

This chapter and the next have been the subject of seemingly endless theorizing of a historical nature, scholarly exploration of text-critical issues, and volumes of literary analysis. Michael Cook has lain out the puzzlements succinctly and offered cogent textual speculations as to how these oddities came into the Gospel texts.<sup>4</sup> Cook finds four passages that are contextual oddities and concludes that Mark had brazenly inserted into his source the idea that at Jesus' last meal, they had a prepared Passover offering. Mark must have had some theological scheme in mind in proposing this scenario. Matthew corrected some of Mark's incriminating errors, the result of hasty interpolations, but left the idea of a Passover sacrificial meal intact.

According to Cook, Mark recast the trial of Jesus before Pilate as two distinct trials—one Jewish, one Roman, predicated upon his close reading of repeated verses. Why would Pilate care whether or not Jesus had blasphemed? Matthew then copied Mark without much thought. Cook likewise views the entire Barabbas scene as an interpolation intended to exonerate Rome and maximize Jewish responsibility for the death of Jesus. After all, the “kindly” Roman prefect had found no fault in Jesus whatsoever; nevertheless, it was the Jews who insisted he must die. We will ponder this further in the next chapter.

Meanwhile, let us consider the celebratory meal as a kind of dream sequence, envisioning what might have occurred after the sacrifice of the lamb had Jesus been present after his death. We have seen such dream-like flashes forward before (for example, in chapter 21) in episodes during which now-time merges with future time in order to highlight a Christological point, such as the celebration in of Jesus' arrival in the new Jerusalem and the new Kingdom. The blurred chronology of the course of events is bewildering. In the next chapter, the sun will darken at noon, confusing not only the distinction between

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<sup>4</sup> Cook, “How Credible is Jewish Scholarship?” 251–270.

day and night but past, present and future, during the passing of the Age until the dawn of the new kingdom. The final scene of Matthew's Gospel includes Jesus' words about his body and blood as symbolized by bread and wine, the ritual of the Eucharist.

### Commentary

*And it was as Jesus concluded all of these words, he said to his disciples... (v. 1)*

No sooner had Jesus uttered his words of warning about an impending ominous event than the narrative overtakes his preaching, revealing the unfolding of end-time events. Some commentators consider Matthew's five notations of points in the narrative when Jesus had concluded speaking (*viz.* 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1) to indicate five internal divisions within the texts, corresponding to the Five Books of Moses.<sup>5</sup> In my opinion, the use of "concluded all of these words" is an indicator of prophetic significance. Jesus has spoken, and his words are about become reality.

In 1 Sam 24:16 the use of the same phrase is also forward looking: "*And it was as David concluded these words...*" David had just declared to Saul that God would judge between the two of them; one would be found innocent and the other guilty. In so doing he quoted an ancient proverb: "*From the wicked comes forth wickedness,*" which also sums up Jesus' message in the previous chapter. Just as the events of history overtake David's words, so too with Jesus. It seems unlikely that these literary parallels between Jesus and David are random or accidental.

But the time for parables, parallels and sermons has now passed. The events in and of themselves become the focus of Matthew's attention:

*You know that two days from now Passover comes, and the Son of Man is to be handed over to be crucified. (v. 2)*

Passover occurs yearly around the time of the spring equinox, always on the eve of the full moon (Num 28:16), in what was biblically ordained to be the first month of the year (Exod 12:12). Lev 23:5 states, "*On the fourteenth day of the first month at darkening is the Lord's Passover.*" Details of the manner in which the paschal lamb is eaten are the subject of tractate *Pesahim* of the Mishnah.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Aaron M. Gale, "Gospel of Matthew," *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (Levine and Brettler 2011), 1.

Passover is also the name of the festival when the paschal sacrifice was brought to the Temple in Jerusalem during the mandatory springtime pilgrimage. The paschal lamb was neither a sin offering for individual expiation nor was it a communal burnt offering. Rather, it was a distinctive festival sacrifice. It was obligatory for families and other groups convened for the occasion to partake of it in Jerusalem, in a ritualized festive meal along with unleavened bread (*matzah*), a wafer devoid of any leavening agents, and *merorim*, usually translated as “bitter herbs.”

The lamb was slaughtered on the 14th day of Nisan sometime between noon and evening but consumed after night had fallen. The meat of the roasted lamb was to be eaten in its entirety by midnight, after which any leftovers had to be burned. Only certain fatty parts were put on the Temple altar as an offering. The lamb’s blood would be sprinkled on the altar; sprinkling blood was generally identified with atonement for sins. Passover celebrated the release of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage and the Exodus from Egypt, epitomizing God’s power to intervene in human history. Passover is identified with *leil shmurim*<sup>6</sup> (Exod 12:42): a night of wakefulness, watchfulness, alacrity.<sup>7</sup> It was stated by Rabbi Yehoshua that on this date the final redemption will occur.<sup>8</sup>

The juxtaposition of the Passover sacrificial rite and Jesus’ impending crucifixion is intentional. Passover is morphing into Easter, and the rituals marking the collective memory of Israel’s past are now appropriated by the Gospel as a sign to the Christ-faithful future. With true literary genius, Matthew merges “the Son of Man comes”<sup>9</sup> with “the Passover which is handed over to be slaughtered” (by one of the group), so as to identify Jesus himself with the paschal lamb. Building upon longstanding Jewish associations between Passover and redemption, Matthew makes the expectation of ultimate final redemption imminent. To the parable of the ten virgins in chapter 25, Matthew (or his source) inserted the necessity for watchfulness that is not warranted by the parable alone. In Matthew’s drama, parables do not explain as much as they map out events, operating as prophetic signs that both symbolize and presumably enable cosmic events to unfold.

The various titles referring to Jesus intimate to us the stage in the narrative in which an event is occurring. The term “Son of Man” seems to be reserved for

<sup>6</sup> According to *m. Tamid* 1:1 priests served watches in various locations in the Temple and they were described as *shomerim* which Abraham ben David of Posquieres renders as “not sleeping” and Rabbenu Asher adds “not letting matters slip their minds”: watchful and aware.

<sup>7</sup> *Mekhilta of Rabbi Yishmael, Bo, pisha, parsha* 14.

<sup>8</sup> *Mekhilta of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yoḥai* to Exod 12:42.

<sup>9</sup> See further 26:64, also note the expression “come” is used of the Kingdom (e.g. Matt 6:10).

the Jesus at the end of days, who must suffer tribulations and, in the immediate aftermath, for the risen Jesus, divinely empowered as a heavenly figure before the new age has fully arrived. This title of the Jesus figure is transitional, conveying both his earthly and heavenly roles during the liminal period between the end of one Age and the start of another. Subsequently he will be known as Jesus (the) Christ, as stated in the genealogical opening sentence of Matthew's Gospel. "Jesus the carpenter's son" will become the "Son of Man" and ultimately "the Christ," son of God. It is not *Jesus* who will be crucified; the *Son of Man* will be. Jesus uses this latter term deliberately, aware not only of what is transpiring but also of its full import. However, although they heard it, no one else will grasp its significance.

*Then the chief priests and the elders of the people gathered in the courtyard of the High Priest called Caiaphas. They plotted together to seize Jesus covertly, and kill him. (vv. 3–4).*

The chief priests, I should think, are those who sat on the High Priest's executive council while the "elders" mostly likely were non-priestly members of the Sanhedrin.<sup>10</sup> Jesus has just spoken of being handed over for crucifixion, yet the priestly scheme to abduct Jesus and put him to death, at least until this point, seems to lack any indication of a formal judicial process at work or even a legal basis. Nevertheless, it is clear that to "seize" here means to arrest, and this decision to seize Jesus becomes a turning point in the narrative. This necessitates finding a means by which to have Jesus killed. The priests and elders were all in agreement, however, that this could not take place during the upcoming festival, when throngs of pilgrims will have made their way to Jerusalem.

Later in the chapter, in v. 57, we get a quasi-judicial hearing by the Sadducean High Priest, accompanied by "scribes," whatever that term might mean. Josephus tells us that this high priest was named Joseph but was called Caiaphas" (*Ant.* 18:95). By then it is clear that Jesus realizes that what is about to take place, as well as its timing, has been foretold by ancient prophecies. Having both the full knowledge of the meaning of the events taking place and also the power of choice to thwart their occurrence by summoning miraculous help, Jesus chooses to let his divine destiny be realized.

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<sup>10</sup> See Craig A. Evans, "Excavating Caiaphas, Pilate and Simon of Cyrene: Assessing the Literary and Archaeological Evidence," in *Jesus and Archaeology* (Charlesworth 2006), 324–328 for sources relating to the historical Caiaphas and his father-in-law.

The account in Acts 5:17–28 of the arrest of Jesus' apostles (mirroring his own) and the discovery of their vacant jail cell (analogous to his empty tomb) despite the presence of a contingent of guards who saw no one exit, helps us to understand the roles of some of the characters in the Jesus drama:

Then the High Priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the *Sadducees*, were filled with jealousy. They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail. But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. “Go, stand in the Temple courts,” he said, “and tell the people all about this new life.” At daybreak they entered the Temple courts, as they had been told, and began to teach the people. When the High Priest and his associates arrived, they called together the Sanhedrin—the full assembly of the *elders* of Israel—and sent to the jail for the apostles. But on arriving at the jail, the officers did not find them there. So they went back and reported, “We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside.” On hearing this report, the captain of the Temple guard and the chief priests were at a loss, wondering what this might lead to. Then someone came and said, “Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the Temple courts teaching the people.” At that, the captain went with his officers and brought the apostles. They did not use force, because they feared that the people would stone them. The apostles were brought in and made to appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the High Priest. “We gave you strict orders not to teach in *this name*,” he said. “Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of *this man’s blood*.”

Court proceedings were public affairs. A secret arrest was a prologue to a summary execution without a stated accusation, due process, or conviction based upon testimony by victims or witnesses. This explains the need to plot the speedy and secret arrest of Jesus.

What are we to make of the group that the High Priest has assembled? Apparently a quasi-proceeding of some sort is held, attended by “the scribes” who here share a judiciary function in the High Priest’s council. “Elders” is a general term for members of the High Court. They will all witness an act of blasphemy, sufficient for the Sadducean court of the priests to convict Jesus of the misappropriation of God’s name. While the hearing itself is somewhat private, the actual execution that results will be a public affair.

*They said, “Not during the festival, lest there be a riot among the people.” (v. 5)*

It seems rather curious that the concern expressed about putting Jesus to death during the festival is confined to the possibility of mob violence, rather than the violation of any religious stricture or procedural rule that would prohibit the courts from meeting on the Passover festival, let alone carrying out capital punishment. They evidently believe Jesus to be so beloved by the crowds of simple folk that any harm to him would be attributed to the official leadership. A binary principle appears to be at work: what is troublesome for the masses is favored by the leadership and *vice versa*. It is therefore quite inexplicable that during the Crucifixion scene, the sentiment of the mobs will favor the leadership against Jesus.

*When Jesus was in Bethany, in the house of Simon the leper (v. 6)*

We now get a flashback to Matthew 21:17: "*And he left them and went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there.*"<sup>11</sup> The narrative in chapter 26 will fill in the details of that night. There are some puzzling issues here. If "Simon the leper" had leprosy, then according to biblical law he ought to have been quarantined, as Lev 13:45–46 stipulates:

The leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, 'Unclean, unclean.' He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp.

There are numerous explanations offered as to why Simon was not living under the stipulated conditions for a leper. The commentators who believe that Jesus would not have dined with a leper contend that the name refers to someone who previously had leprosy but no longer does. Perhaps he had been cured of his disease, but the moniker "the leper" persisted. There may have been some confusion in the translation of two identical Aramaic roots with very different meanings, with the original identifying Simon as a "potter" rather than a leper. It is also possible that Simon had some other skin condition that outwardly resembled or was referred to as "leprosy" but which did not require quarantine. Speculation brings us no closer to resolving the question. Matthew and Mark follow their source and call him "Simon the leper" without worrying about the details, and so must we.

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<sup>11</sup> I find it hard to imagine that Jesus departed from Jerusalem to visit Bethany again and prefer to think Matthew wants us to regard this as a flashback rather than a new visit.

The single sentence about the night in Bethany in chapter 21 made no mention of the anointing of Jesus by a sinful woman, described in Luke 7:36–50:

When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume.<sup>38</sup> As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them. When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner." Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you." "Tell me, teacher," he said . . . Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little." Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." The other guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

We do not know how much of what Luke tells us about this woman is gospel tradition and how much is Luke's own creativity. An intuitive inference would suggest that Mark (14:1–9) and Matthew (26:6 ff.) followed a source with a much fuller reading, as did the tradition in John (12:1–8), where we find the name of Lazarus instead of Simon and the woman is named Mary. Matthew's placement of the Bethany story at this juncture anticipates the resurrection scene. The purpose of the anointing is to remove earthly odor of death and replace it with the heavenly scent of fragrant balm:

*A woman came to him who had an alabaster jar of very expensive ointment of myrrh, and poured it upon his head as he was reclining at the table. (v. 7)*

Matthew provides no information as to the woman's identity. She expresses her faith in Jesus by enacting a gesture that ironically presages the resurrection scene but also literally declaring him the "Anointed One" i.e. the Christ or the Messiah. The verse seems to presume Jesus ate at this house. But Matt 21:18

said, “Early in the morning, as he was on his way back to the city, he was hungry,” which I discussed in my commentary on this verse. The Bethany episode is recounted in detail here, although it had occurred earlier.

*When the students saw this they became indignant: “What is the reason for this waste, this could have been sold for a great deal and given to the poor!* (vv. 8–9)

Jesus’ disciples react to the anointing with outrage, criticizing the woman’s gesture to be a wasteful and sinful extravagance. They are unaware of the significance of the prophetic actions of this “foolish woman” and accuse her of “*ba’al tashhit*” (*b. Šabb.* 67b; *b. Hull.* 7b; *b. Qidd.* 32a)—wasting a useful item and squandering an opportunity to perform an act of charity (*mitzvah*) with it.

*Jesus knew, and said to them, “Why are you causing trouble for this woman? She did a good deed for me.”* (v. 10)

Knowing what the future held in store for him, Jesus responded to their question by asking a rhetorical question, and explaining the woman had performed an act of great merit. The meaning of good-deed (*mitzvah*) here reflects the act of kindness of preparing a body for burial.<sup>12</sup> Since the recipient is dead, pre-burial rituals on behalf of the deceased are performed without hope of reward or even appreciation, and are considered within Jewish tradition to be the penultimate example of kindness and selflessness (*b. Sukkah* 49b).

*You will always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. In putting this ointment of myrrh on my body she prepared me to be buried.* (vv. 11–12)

The disciples know the importance of giving charity, even though it is understood that charity will not put an end to poverty. Deut 15:11 relates, “For the poor shall never cease out of the land: therefore I command you, saying, you shall open your hand wide unto your brother, to your poor, and to your needy, in your land.” Jesus shows the verse is open to an over-ride; not all charitable acts are performed for the poor. There will be ample opportunity to fulfill the verse and assist the poor. It is more important to tend to the fleeting need (*mitzvah overet*—*b. Qidd.* 29b) and perform an act of kindness which will be impos-

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<sup>12</sup> It was considered an honor for the host to provide a guest with anointing oil at a meal (*b. Hull.* 94a). Anointing was required for the dead (*m. Šabb.* 23:5).

sible in the future. While Jesus, via Matthew, had earlier argued that charity and mercy must trump sacrifice (Matt 12:7) he argues here (as explained in comments to v. 10) that what she has done by preparing a dying person for burial is “*hesed shel emet*”—an act considered to epitomize selfless kindness in Jewish tradition because it can never be reciprocated. The woman herself was probably unaware of the significance of her own action, which she offered as a timely kindness to a revered teacher, rather than as an act of compassion rendered to a corpse.

*Amen, I say to you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the entire world, she will be spoken of, and what she did will be for a memorial of her.* (v.13)

What the woman has done by anointing Jesus is so meritorious that the gospel records it, preserving the memory of her and her deed for all time. It is not the disciples who will be remembered for their deeds but this anonymous woman. Therefore Matthew structured his narrative so that the events of Bethany would be recalled just before Jesus is arrested and condemned to die. Jesus’ teachings conclude here, and the dramatic events leading to his death now follow. There is no hint that Jesus’ death is sacrificial.

*Then one of the Twelve, called Judas Iscariot, came to the chief priests. He said, “What would you give me if I hand him over to you?” They paid out thirty silver coins. From that time forward he/they sought a suitable occasion to hand him over.* (vv. 14–16)

The narrative of Jesus’ betrayal continues where it broke off in verses 3–4, at which point the chief priests were conspiring against Jesus in anticipation of receiving Judas’ evidence. Some translations infer that it was Judas (singular) who sought the opportunity to betray Jesus and turn him over to the priests. Other translators read this verse as saying the chief priests were looking for (plural) an occasion upon which Jesus could be handed over to them. Regardless, the priests are now formulating a plan, and the outline for a judicial procedure in the Court of the High Priest begins to take shape. Again there is a break in the narrative, which will resume in v. 47. Between the hatching of the conspiracy and the hearing, the meal in Jerusalem takes place at which Jesus reveals that he is destined to be betrayed and put to death.

*On the first day (Exod 12:15) of [the Festival of] Unleavened Bread, the students came to Jesus: “How do you wish us to prepare for you to eat the Passover?”* (v. 17)

While in v. 2 the term for the festival about to be celebrated was *Passover* (stressing the Passover sacrifice which Gospel theology telescopes into the day of the death of Jesus), the Feast of Unleavened Bread is used here, as in Lev 23:6: “On the fifteenth day of that month, the Lord’s “Festival of Unleavened Bread” begins; for seven days you must eat bread made without yeast.” The Festival of Matzot and the Festival of the Paschal Sacrifice both begin on the eve of the 15th of Nisan, and so the observance of *Passover* and *Matzot* are conjoined, even in Scripture; the two—the paschal sacrifice (*Passover*) on the eve of the seven days of eating unleavened bread and *Matzot*—are generally regarded and observed as a single weeklong festival, particularly since the roasted lamb is to be eaten with unleavened bread, in conformity with Exod 12:15: “Seven days you shall eat *unleavened bread; but on the first day* you shall have leavening terminated from your houses, for whoever eats leavened bread from the first day until the seventh day, that soul shall be cut off from Israel.” The “first day” (*yom harishon*) here is taken by the Talmud to mean before the evening of the 14th of Nisan, when all leaven had to have been removed from the house in preparation for the slaughter the paschal lamb, and ordering of the *matzot, merorim* and wine for the Passover meal after darkness had fallen.<sup>13</sup>

“But on the *first day*”—That is from the time of the day before the Festival which simply means prior to the first day of the festival.<sup>14</sup>

It makes sense to understand the words “eat the Passover” as referring to eating the paschal lamb which had been slaughtered earlier that day (“prepare the Passover”), rather than any other meat, at the Passover meal.

*He said: Go into the City to a certain person and say to him, “The Teacher says: My time is near; I will perform the Passover with my disciples at your house.”* (v. 18)

“My time is near” indicates that Jesus knows his betrayal and his execution are imminent, but until then he needs to be cautious. Knowing he must be betrayed for the divine plan to be fulfilled, he must avoid detection until then. To assume that Jesus could wander about the city anonymously and undetected would undermine the credibility of the Gospel, which has informed us many times that he is well known to both the crowds and to the priestly authorities.

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<sup>13</sup> See *b. Betz.* 19b, which refers to the Festival of Matzot as the 14th of Nisan, when the Passover sacrifice is prepared.

<sup>14</sup> *Midrash Sechel Tov* (ed. Buber), Exod 12:15.

“Certain persons” (21:2–3), like the house-owner, appear at crucial events in the narrative to supply donkeys or rooms. They already know the script and are invoked or called upon to further the plot along. The city is understood to be Jerusalem and it requires no mention of its name, as in Matt 21:17 and in Lamentations 1:1. The owner of the house needs no name, standing outside the story and putting in a momentary appearance solely to fulfill the needs of destiny. Presumably Jesus will be in one room and the owner in another, each with his own group comprised of a sufficient number participants to consume an entire roasted lamb. It is not necessary for all those partaking in the sacrificial meal to be present at the slaughter of the lamb itself. Jesus is not present and need not have been. An agent is sufficient to perform the slaughter.

*Y. Qidd. 2:5*

How do we know that a principal’s designated agent is equivalent to the principal? Rabbi (E)leazar cited “And all the Assembly shall slaughter it (the Passover lamb) in the late afternoon.” How could all of them slaughter it?—One will slaughter *on behalf* of the many. Hence a principal’s designated agent is equivalent to the principal(s)!

So as long as Jesus has given the orders and the agents (the disciples) followed them completely, it is as though he had slaughtered it himself. “Performing the Passover” implies some kind of rituals attendant to eating the paschal lamb—such as leading the antiphonal Hallel hymns and explaining the ritual items involved in eating the Passover and then later recounting the meaning of the items used in the ritual and reviewing the laws of the Passover rite.<sup>15</sup> According to the Tosefta one stayed up all night after the meal discussing the meaning of the laws (*t. Pesah. 10:11–12*).

*His disciples did as Jesus ordered them, and they prepared the Passover.*  
(v. 19)

The disciples repeat verbatim what Jesus has told them to say to the one whom he trusts not to prematurely divulge his whereabouts. Then they slaughtered their lamb in the Temple court yard, dividing it up and arranging the ritual items for the meal. Since the Gospel tells us that the disciples followed his orders, Jesus was regarded as the head of the group. The preparations were elaborate and occupied many hours. Most commentators suggest they were not eating

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Philo’s commentary to Exodus 12:8 and S. Lieberman, *Tosefta Kifshuta, Pes.*, 654.

an official Passover meal, but I see no reason not to take “Passover” as the name of the paschal sacrifice. The disciples were the messengers of Jesus. He himself stayed behind, perhaps in order to evade premature plots to arrest him. This would have short-circuited the public humiliation and scourging that he knew to be inevitable. Nevertheless, there is no way to determine with certainty how Matthew understood his sources.

*When it became evening he reclined with the twelve (disciples). (v. 20)*

Jesus and his students are reclining in preparation for eating the Passover sacrifice and the meal. The time to eat the Passover is evening: “In the evening you shall consume *matzot*” (Exod 12:18). Biblical *lehem* (bread) refers to food in general and on Passover one suspects the reference to *matzot* is synecdoche for the full Passover meal, including the sacrifice and the *merorim* which were consumed with *matzot*. I included the word “disciples” in v. 20 not only because some manuscripts read that way but also because Matthew usually refers to them as such, and only rarely as “the twelve.” “*Anekeito*” (Heb. *Yasev*, m. *Pesah*. 10:1) is the word for reclining, a posture assumed at Passover meals, even by the very poor and downtrodden, to show one was free. The major message of Passover is God’s redemption of Israel from Egyptian bondage. Since slaves and the lower classes in the Hellenistic period did not recline when they ate, leaning was the custom while consuming the Passover sacrificial lamb. Body language was mandated that would proclaim the message of the Passover—redemption, equality and freedom.

Some commentators see the meal as an ordinary rather than a Passover meal, eaten on the day before the day of slaughter of the lambs for the Passover rite in the Temple; others see it as a Passover meal eaten a day early, being celebrated a day before the Sabbath when roasting the lambs would have been prohibited. Some view it as a special Jesus meal, a rehearsal of sorts one day prior to the actual Passover meal. The Gospel of John clearly has the meal twenty-four hours prior to the evening when the real Passover was eaten. Still others like myself consider it an authentic Passover event and observance. Since I am interpreting Matthew, I do not worry about the problems raised by other accounts, although I do find the wordings in those accounts illuminating.

*When they were eating he said, “Truly I say to you, one of you will betray me.” (v. 21)*

The words for eating and dipping are interchangeable (*tibul*) since usually one dipped bread (in this case, *matzah*) in liquid as one ate. However, it is the dip-

ping aspect that is the focus here, as will be made clear. Jesus confirms in quasi oath style (“truly I say to you”) that one of the disciples present at the meal has betrayed him. To “betray” in the original sense of the Greek is to “hand over” (to an unjust power). Roman justice was not unfair to its citizens, but in provinces such as Judea, the administration of justice was in the hands of the governor. Pontius Pilate was notorious for his uncompromising cruelty.

The crime of handing over a Jew to a wicked government has historically been the one heinous crime for which Jews in various countries might execute a co-religionist, the *moser*. A prayer for the downfall of the *malshin* (denouncer) continues to be recited three times daily in the traditional Jewish prayer service to this day. The technical and legal term in Hebrew for a betrayer is *moser*—a trusted person handing over evidence that provides grounds for arrest leading to a death warrant.

The Torah indicates that Moses was not surprised to see an Egyptian striking a Hebrew—but Moses was angered because he understood that a fellow Hebrew handed over evidence (*moser*) that accused him and occasioned the beating—even as now most police beatings of Jews occur through the betrayal of Jews themselves.<sup>16</sup>

Alternatively, one might argue when Joseph was had been sold by his brothers for twenty pieces of silver (Gen 37:28) and handed over to slave traders, the stage was set for hundreds of years of persecution in Egypt, events which were already revealed to Abraham and recorded in Scripture. Joseph, unrecognized by his brothers, arranged a meal with his eleven brothers at which he reveals his identity to them. Their reconciliation and the relocation of the entire family of Jacob to Egypt will give rise to the enslavement of Israelites of a later generation, but also to their miraculous redemption as celebrated in the Passover story, symbolized by the bread of affliction, *merorim*, and the wine. The lamb itself represents divine protection and redemption.

*They were extremely pained, and each one started to say to him, “It is not me, is it, Lord?” (v. 22)*

The disciples realize, perhaps for the first time, that Jesus’ death is unavoidable. The climax has been foretold in Jewish Scriptures and is immutable. The purpose of Jesus’ death is to effect atonement for humanity. More than just an execution, it is the cosmic culmination of the divine plan. Most disturbing to them, however, must have been the knowledge that one of them would hand

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<sup>16</sup> *Or haMeir* Commentary (Zev Wolf of Zhotomir, late 18th c.) to *Shemot* (Exod 2:11–14).

over information to the authorities that will bring about Jesus' death. Exactly who the traitor is remains undisclosed. Each of the disciples worries that he will be the traitor who could do it. That fear reveals that each realizes he is capable of doing it, and seeks reassurance it is not him. It may be stretching matters a bit but one might suggest the setup for the question of the disciples at this point in the proceedings is curious because it is at this point in the Mishnah's ritual that children and students are prodded to ask questions about the significance of what is about to happen in the Passover ritual. Except for Judas, who calls Jesus "Rabbi," the disciples all address Jesus as Lord.

*He answered, "The one who has dipped the hand in the bowl with me, that one will hand me over." (v. 23)*

Jesus knows it that it was Judas who had betrayed him. Apparently he had just dipped his hand to prepare for, or as part of, the meal's rituals. This betrayal may have been orchestrated in the tradition of prophetic narrative, as witnessed in *Targum to Ps 41:9*: "Also the person who had sought my welfare, whom I trusted sharing my meal with him, will Lord it over me through cleverness." This friend is identified as Ahitophel in *m. Abot* (4:3). He betrayed David and in the end hanged himself (*2 Samuel 17:23*):

When Ahitophel saw that his advice had not been followed, he saddled his donkey and set out for his house in his hometown. He put his house in order and then hanged himself. So he died and was buried in his father's tomb.

The parallels are beyond coincidence. The literary model is quite clear.

*The Son of Man goes as it has been written about him, but alas for that person by whom the Son of Man is betrayed; it would be better for that person if he had never been born! (v. 24)*

The verses that were interpreted to mean the Son of Man was to be crucified seem to be well known. I do not know what the reference is (*viz.* "has been written") here, but Matthew assumes Jesus' audience knows the verse. The implicit reference to uncited biblical verses is more common in Qumran documents than in midrash.<sup>17</sup> It is likewise not unknown that Talmudic sources allude to verses of the Bible without actually citing them. For example, "Teach your tongue to say, 'I do not know,' lest you get caught up in a lie—as it is

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<sup>17</sup> See Paul Heger, "Challenges to Conventional Opinions on Qumran and Enoch Issues" (2012), 37–41.

written about Ahimaaz . . ." (minor tractate *Kallah Rabbati* 4:22). The obvious verse alluded to here is: *And the king said, "Is the young man Absalom safe? And Ahimaaz answered, "When Joab sent the king's servant, and me your servant, I saw a great tumult, but I knew not what it was."*" (2 Sam 18:29).

One suspects here that something grievous befell the Son of Man in the unspecified scriptural verses being cited. Among the possibilities are Daniel 7:28:

Hitherto is the end of the matter. As for me, Daniel, my cogitations much troubled me, and my countenance changed in me: but I kept the matter in my heart;

and Isaiah 53:4–6:

Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, Yet we considered him punished by God stricken by him, and afflicted But he was pierced for our transgressions . . . We all, like sheep, have gone astray.

This might explain the citation of scattered sheep further on in Matt 26:31, from Zech 13:7.

The expression "it would be better for that person if he had never been born" is a well-known idiom in the Talmudic literature and the sentiment is biblical (see Eccl 4:3). We are surely within the most ancient of Gospel traditions with this utterance. For example, *Exod. Rab.* 40:1 tells us that Rabbi Yohanan used a similar graphic expression for one who studies but does not practice: "It would be better if he had never come into the world but his fetus had turned over on its face." Also *b. Hag.* 16a (cf. *m. Hag.* 2:1) says concerning one who does not protect the honor of his maker, it would have been better had he not come into the world.

*Judas, the one who betrayed him, answered, "It is not me, is it, Rabbi?" He said to him, "So you say!"* (v. 25)

The disciples remain unconvinced by Jesus' dire prediction about the events about to transpire, asking incredulously whether one of them could actually be the betrayer. Judas, however, knows full well what is happening, and to him Jesus responds, "So you say!" Ironically, Jesus again will say these same words at his hearing. If Judas and Jesus shared their bowl to dip *merorim* (pl. of *maror* = bitter suffering), their ends will be *mirror* images, with imminent death common to the two of them.

Judas, the betrayer of Jesus, will eventually hang himself in self-loathing for his own treachery. One may wonder why Judas needed to meet such an end when all this had been ordained in heaven. The question is similar to

that which asks why the Egyptians were punished for enslaving the Israelites, since God had preordained the Israelites' exile and bondage in Egypt (Gen 15). Theodicy's answer is the same regarding Judas' ignominious fate and why the Egyptians deserved the plagues and punishments that befell them. While it was preordained that certain evil acts would be committed, which individuals would agree to carry them out was not. Because they chose to, according to this approach, the punishments were fitting. Perhaps that is why Judas is called "one of the twelve." Any one of them might have chosen to betray him to the authorities, but who would do so was not determined in advance. Therefore, although the divine script calls for Jesus to die, his betrayer would nonetheless be guilty of a heinous crime. While this answer may not be particularly satisfying, answers to questions of theodicy rarely are.

Earlier Jesus had taught that Satan robs a house, i.e. a person, by entering and tying up his will; other Gospels have recorded Satan doing this to Judas. However, there is no hint of this in Matthew's account. Instead Matthew imputes that Judas' motive was greed—thirty pieces of silver. Judas calls Jesus "Rabbi," giving us room to consider that perhaps Judas was a faithful follower of Jesus' conceptions of the Torah and of his humanitarian program. But Jesus' political opposition to the priesthood and his messianic claims might well have turned Judas against him. Jesus could indeed have been the threat to the establishment that some thought him to be. Perhaps this reading overreaches in interpreting "Rabbi" but the switch from the disciples' addressing Jesus as "Lord" to Judas as "Rabbi" is remarkable and invites further speculation. In v. 49 when Judas betrays him, he again refers to Jesus as "Rabbi," a term never used by the other disciples.

*When they were eating, Jesus took a loaf, and having said the blessing, broke it and giving it to his disciples said, "Take and eat; this is my body." Taking a cup and having given thanks, he gave it to them: "Drink from it, everyone. The is my blood of the covenant, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."* (vv. 26–28)

They were to begin the heart of the Passover feast. Jesus blesses the loaf; with it came the dipped herbs and the paschal lamb. He explains the symbolism of the rite according to the prophetic moment at hand. The expression "broke it" has added meaning in the Passover ritual. According to Albeck's translation of Mishnah *Pesaḥim*,<sup>18</sup> after dipping the *merorim*, he breaks the *matzah*

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<sup>18</sup> Albeck, *Shishah Sidre Mishnah*, 456.

(*meparper et hapat*). “Take and eat” is the stock expression for guests to eat without delay.

In chapter 14:19 I pointed out that early Jews were divided as to whether one should first break the loaves and then bless or the reverse (break first and then bless) before distributing the bread. The Talmud decides that first one should bless and then break the bread. Rashi (to *b. Ber.* 47a) neatly summarizes an involved discussion by citing the Talmudic decision of *b. Ber.* 39b (eight pages earlier) that the blessing had to be concluded before commencing the breaking: “He would break off a piece and give it to whoever was beside him saying, ‘Take from the slice of blessing [i.e., one that had already been blessed before being sliced].’” The order of blessing first and breaking afterwards is fixed in Jewish Law and we see it to be precisely the order found in the “Last Supper” description in 1 Corinthians 11:24.

The essence of the present *Seder* ritual is based on a complex understanding of a biblical verse, Exod 13:8: “*And thou shalt show thy son in that day, explaining, for the sake of THIS (pointing to the ritual food) God did for me when I came forth out of Egypt.*” This verse is an essential peg of the present Passover *Seder* around which the entire ceremony revolves.<sup>19</sup> It traditionally signaled the need to point to and point out the ritual foods on the table and their historical meaning. While there may be some doubt as to the period when this verse was understood as identifying the reason for consuming ritual foods at the Passover meal, the Gospels themselves indicate that some foods were identified with obvious explanations citing *THIS* as in Exod 13:8.<sup>20</sup> This formula of identification was known to Paul prior to 70 C.E. as seen from 1 Cor 11:23–26. Of relevance here are the comments of Philo to verses in Exodus explaining the rituals of the 1) Paschal sacrifice, 2) unleavened bread and 3) bitter herb dippings. Rabban Gamaliel, as cited in the Haggadah, says these are three items which require explanation and warrant elaboration.

Naomi G. Cohen has done a comparative study of the explanations of Philo and those found in the Passover Haggadah.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *Mek. R. Yish. Bo piska* 17: “For the sake of this” (Exod 13:8) refers to the time when [the Passover, an addition evident from *m. Pes.* 10:5] *matzah* and *maror* are set before you on your table.” Post 70 C.E. when the Paschal lamb was no longer eaten reference to the Passover sacrifice was deleted from the text concerning what was supposed to be on the table.

<sup>20</sup> David Henschke, “Passover Eve Meal, Hallel and Recitation” in *Shoshannat Yaakov* (Secunda and Fine 2012), 17.

<sup>21</sup> Naomi G. Cohen, *Philo Judaeus: His Universe of Discourse* (1995), 230; 307–313 and “The Passover Seder Eve in Philo’s Writings” (2009). Also see the critical comments offered by

### Paschal sacrifice

PHILO: (*Questions and Answers in Exodus*, 1:14)—(Exod 12:8) (Why) does He command that the flesh of the Passover sacrifice be *offered* roasted? First for the sake of speed (rather than baking bread) ...

HAGGADAH: *Pessach*—(= *Paschal lamb*) that our ancestors used to eat *in the days when the Temple stood* because the Holy One Blessed be He, passed over the houses of our fathers in Egypt (Hebrew = *Pessah*, Passover) ...

### *Matzah* (Unleavened Bread)

PHILO: (*Questions and Answers in Exodus*, 1:14, Exod 12:8)—Unleavened Bread is (a sign) of great haste and speed ...

HAGGADAH: *Matzah* (Unleavened Bread)—because the dough did not have time to ferment before the Holy One (blessed be He) ... redeemed them ... ‘because they were thrust out of Egypt and could not tarry ...’

### *Maror* (Bitter Herbs)

PHILO: (*On the Preliminary Studies*, 162:19): The Bitter Herbs (are a sign) of the life of bitterness and struggle which they endured as slaves.

HAGGADAH: Bitter Herbs (*Maror*): ... It is because the Egyptians embittered the lives of our ancestors in Egypt.

In some Christian adaptations of the Passover celebration, Matthew’s Jesus informs the disciples that *Seder* meal rituals signify that the Israelite Exodus from Egypt was “for the sake of this,” where “this” refers to the Passion of Christ, and to the Crucifixion and atonement effected by it. The traditional Jewish reading alluded to the synthesis of the Exodus redemption and the final messianic redemption. The two verses that say “Through your blood [you shall] live” in the Passover rite have been deleted from some versions of the Jewish Passover liturgy on grounds that Christians might claim it as evidence justifying the canard that Jews used Christian blood in preparing their *matzot*, inflaming the murderous and infamous blood libels of the Middle Ages. The traditional Jewish understanding of these references to blood has been the dual covenants: the promise to Abraham, effected through the blood

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Judith Hauptman in “How Old is the Haggadah?” in *Rereading the Mishnah*, 58–59, particularly n.30.

of circumcision, and the covenant of fulfillment to the Israelites by means of the blood of the paschal sacrifice. The blood symbolism runs throughout the Passover ritual narrative recounting what was done in Egypt on the eve of redemption. In the Temple, the priest's sprinkling of the blood of the sacrificial animal symbolized atonement, as did the blood of the paschal lamb poured out upon the walls of the altar. Thus the Christian interpretation builds upon the Jewish one.

But then after the disciples actually ate the matzah Jesus tells them "THIS" again—in reference to explaining the final cup of wine—perhaps that of the final paragraphs of Hallel to be recited that speak of salvation and divine help in accomplishing their final redemption (Ps 118:112). *Exod. Rab. Bo* 17:3:

*And you shall take a bunch of hyssop, and dip it in the blood that is in the basin [and strike the lintel and the two side posts with the blood that is in the basin; and none of you shall go out at the door of his house until the morning].* (Exod 12:22)

Why did God see fit to use blood for the instrument of protection? In order to remind them of the circumcision of Abraham, for through two bloods Israel was saved from the Egyptians—1. the blood of the Passover and 2. the blood of circumcision, as Ezekiel wrote: *and as you lay there I commanded you "in your blood you shall live, 2. in your blood you shall live."* (Ezek 16:6)

Christian interpretation has reworked the symbols and understands the wine, the blood of the grape, to represent Jesus' blood—poured out for remission of sins. Then the disciples share his cup; presumably this is the final cup of wine Jesus has blessed. I assume this to be the case because the scene opens after they have begun the rituals and likely blessed the earlier cups of wine already. He orders them to drink from it because they may have been satiated at this point—a suggestion bolstered by their uncontrollable drowsiness that ensues. The disciples are about to sleep through the onset of the cosmic Passover, and its foretelling through the symbols of the Last Supper.

*I say to you, from now on I will never drink from this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it with you fresh in my father's kingdom.* (v. 29)

One wonders whether Jesus is taking a Nazirite vow or acknowledging that his death is so imminent that he will not be alive by the coming Sabbath meal, when drinking wine would be customary. In his commentary on v. 29, France thinks that Jesus' refusal to drink wine on the cross is a result of a vow. He

will of course celebrate the Sabbaths and festivals in the coming kingdom, the *Eschaton*, when history stops, and the disciples and Jesus will again celebrate. There is ambiguity in the phrase “drink with you.” Is he referring to the Jewish festivals, the Christian Eucharist or simply to convivial celebration with friends imbibing drink that “gladdens the heart”? The traditional blessing over wine refers to it as “fruit of the vine” (*m. Ber.* 6:1; *t. Ber.* 4:3). Messianic wine will be fresh, according to 1QSa 2:17.

*After they sang a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. (v. 30)*

Presumably they had sung the meal’s closing hymns of Hallel-psalms (and perhaps *Birkat Hashir*) and went to the Mount of Olives, still remaining within Jerusalem’s confines, the area fit for the Passover ritual. It was even considered for some occasions as part of the Temple’s precincts.<sup>22</sup> Philo usually refers to passages from Psalms as “hymns”. If indeed this was the Hallel recitation that accompanied the eating of the paschal sacrifice, it might indicate a practice that is now identified as that of the School of Shammai. The School of Hillel divided the Hallel psalms; some were sung before the meal and some were sung after it.

*Then Jesus said to them, “You will all be made to fail through me tonight, for it is written, ‘I will strike down the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered’” (Zech 13:7). (v. 31)*

The citation from Zechariah has been condensed to highlight Matthew’s point: God will take Jesus’ life and the distressed disciples will run and hide in dismay because they are leaderless and lack security.

*After I am raised up I will go before you to Galilee. (v. 32)*

The frightening news ends on a positive note—Jesus will walk this earth after his resurrection and will meet them in their home, Galilee. This announcement tempers the previous one and is intended to console the disciples. The significance of going to the Galilee suggests that this was the home-base of the Jesus movement.

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<sup>22</sup> See Victor Eppstein, “The Historicity of the Gospel Account of the Cleansing of the Temple” (1964), 48.

*Peter answered him, “Even if everyone is made to fail through you, I will never be made to fail.” Jesus said to him, “Amen, I say to you, tonight before the rooster crows three times you will deny me!” (vv. 33–34)*

Jesus tells Peter that not only will he fail his master, but he too will betray him. By the dawn he will be complicit in lying about his relationship with Jesus. The three crows of the rooster is mentioned for dramatic effect, heightening the veracity of the prediction. This passage is structured around threes. In Jewish law three represents a setting of final status. An ox who gores three times becomes a public menace. Residing for three years on property without any parties contesting it grants status of permanent ownership. There are many other examples where three establishes a rule rather than a happenstance. Jesus will pray three times to be spared a torturous death; after his prayer is turned away three times, he is resigned to the fact that God wants nothing less than to put him through an agonizing trial.

*Peter said to him, “If I must die with you, I will never deny you.” All the students said the same thing. (v. 35)*

Peter and the other disciples assure Jesus that they would die rather than be complicit in his death. Nevertheless, at the crucial moment they will all distance themselves from him. Jesus' disciples will stand back, hesitant to demonstrate their faith in him, while a Roman centurion will appreciate his greatness.

*Then Jesus came with them to a field called the Gethsemane. He said to his disciples, “Sit yourselves until I go over there so that I can pray.” (v. 36)*

All of the disciples had come with Jesus to the estate. They leave their dining area and walk to Gethsemane, which might mean the “olive oil press,” “fat valleys” or “oil plots.”<sup>23</sup> Only three are chosen to accompany him as he proceeds further to his place of prayer, according to the plain meaning of Mark 14:32. Departing, he leaves them alone, sitting and waiting for him to return, oblivious to the transpiring events Jesus has so often mentioned. The omniscient narrator describes the scene as they fall asleep.

Much has been written on the scene in terms of the Passover rituals and staying awake. One approach sees the rules of *habura* as operative: the paschal sacrifice is eaten in a group (*habura*), and if the whole group dozes at the same time, the bond between the members of the group is broken and the group

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<sup>23</sup> See Lachs, *Rabbinic Commentary*, 414.

dissolves. I cannot see any relevance here. Others point out that *Tosefta Pes.* 10:9–10 prescribes staying up all night to discuss the events of the original Passover and the Israelite redemption from Egypt. I do not find too much relation to Jewish custom in the verses before us, and see the parable of the ten virgins as of much more relevance.

*He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be pained and troubled. Then he said to them, “My soul is greatly pained, to the point of death. Stay here and keep awake with me.” (vv. 37–38)*

Matthew's words here are reminiscent of those of the biblical prophet Jonah when God strikes down the plant that was shielding him from the heat of the sun. Jonah 4:9 states, “I am greatly pained to the point of death” (LXX, *lelupēmai egō eōs thanatou*), Matt 26:38, “My soul is greatly pained to the point of death” (*perilupos estin hē psychē mou eōs thanatou*). Both Jonah's and Jesus' pleas of bewildered agony will be rejected. There is a divine plan—a plan that ultimately will bring salvation to the Gentiles in both cases. But what is the point of staying awake? Here we need to recall the parable of the ten maidens in chapter 25 who needed to be prepared for the arrival of the bridegroom. Matthew modified the message of the parable by shifting the emphasis from preparation to watchfulness, concluding with the admonition in Matt 25:13, “Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour when the Son of Man comes.” Parables in Matthew typically prefigure a narrative.<sup>24</sup> That narrative emerges here. The disciples now need to be able to stay awake now in readiness for the resurrected Christ, who will meet them on the third day.

The test of wakefulness is ancient and not particularly Jewish. In the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh* Utanapishtim, if the hero can remain awake for six days, he will gain eternal life. Gilgamesh fails the test, much as the disciples will fail it in Matthew. The mortal flesh yields to the lure of slumber, even at the price of immortality. It is the women who will be sufficiently self-disciplined to keep steadfast watch over the tomb, not the disciples. We recall the plea of the mother of the two sons of Zebedee in Matt 20:20–21:

Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him. “What is it you want?” he asked. She

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<sup>24</sup> Jer 31:6 likely has some bearing here. “There will be a day when watchmen cry out on the hills of Ephraim, ‘Come, let us go up to Zion, to the Lord our God.’”

said, “Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.”

Jesus proceeds onward, and separates out Peter and the mother’s two sons (of Zebedee) from the others. They had been present at the Transfiguration scene as well (17:1–8).

*He went a little further and fell upon his face praying: “My father, if it is possible, let this cup go away from me; but it is not as I wish but as you do.”*  
(v. 39)

As Jesus is now alone, the omniscient narrator records two things. First is his posture. Falling on the face from a kneeling position is the classic way of beseeching potentates, and Jewish practice was no exception. The posture was commonplace on public fast days (*b. Meg.* 22b) and daily when asking for private requests (*b. B. Meṣi‘a* 59b). The *Tur* (O.H. 104) records, in explanation of *t. Ber.* 3:5, that Rabbi Akiva would repeatedly fall on his face after prayers in his beseeching God. But the content jars us. After explaining to the disciples that the script (above v. 24) is written, and the Son of Man will be betrayed and killed, how can the Gospel have Jesus beseech God to annul the plan that lies at the heart of the Gospel and Christian theology—and even while asking, refer to God’s will? He asks that the cup of tribulation and torture be removed—but he is resigned to bear his fate if that is what God really wants. Yet at this point he still wonders if he might escape the ordeal that the Son of Man is to undergo. (See Ezek 23:32–34 for the image of the cup of suffering.)

*He came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, “So you were not strong enough to stay awake with me for a single hour? Stay awake and pray that you not enter into trial. The spirit is eager, but the flesh is weak.”* (vv. 40–41)

Jesus addresses the three disciples he had chosen to accompany him. He sees they have failed. In a flash they have succumbed to their mortal nature and fallen asleep. The shared time of this world/next has not encroached upon the disciples, who are fully of this world and lack the discipline to be otherwise. They are told now to pray that Satan not put them to sleep. Matt 12:29 showed us how Satan can enter the body of the strong man and bind him before plundering everything he holds valuable. The disciples have proven useless in the face of trials and tribulations that will face them.

*Again, a second time, he went out to pray: "My father, if it is not possible to take this away unless I drink it, let your will be done." (v. 42)*

He repeats his first prayer hoping the strength of the disciples will mean he need not bear the death that awaits him. The next world is already here—if only the faith of the disciples would prevail and they not be sleeping.

*Coming back, again he found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. Leaving them again, he went and prayed a third time, saying again the same words. (vv. 43–44)*

Psalm 145:19 is an example of God paying special heed to the prayers of those who fear the Lord. Jesus adds the proviso that God must nonetheless do whatever is necessary to achieve the cosmic goal. He is uncertain whether it can be done other than through his death. *T. Ber.* 3:1 articulates the same ambivalence: “Do Your will in heaven above, and provide a calm mood for those who fear You on earth, but do whatever is best in Your eyes.”

*He came back to the disciples and said to them, "You are still sleeping and taking rest! Look, the hour draws near and the Son of Man is being handed over into the hands of sinners." (v. 45)*

Jesus seems exasperated by the disciples’ drowsiness, which indicates they have not understood anything Jesus has told them. He speaks to them as though they ought to realize who the Son of Man of whom he speaks is, and what he will undergo. How can they possibly sleep through this major event, about which Jesus has been hinting in his parables and is now imminent? Have they truly not understood anything he has taught them? Who better than they should comprehend the import of what they are about to witness? Nevertheless, the lackadaisical attitude of the disciples is not the point, except insofar as it may represent the indifference of the earthly world to the cosmic events that are unfolding, moment by moment. From a literary perspective, however, Matthew uses this admonition of the disciples as an opportunity to briefly make Jesus the first person narrator, keeping the reader informed of what is happening and why.

*"Get up, and let us go. Look, the one who is handing me over is coming near." While he was still speaking, look, Judas, one of the twelve, came, and a great crowd with swords and clubs came with him from the chief priests and the elders of the people. (vv. 46–47)*

The description of Judas here as “one of the twelve” seems superfluous, since we already know this. It might be intended to underscore that Judas was part of Jesus’ inner circle of disciples. On the other hand, the repetition might give us a clue that these verses derive from a different source. This would also explain why, after the priests had decided Jesus should not be arrested during the festival, outraging the mobs in Jerusalem for the Passover festival, the decision is nonetheless made to arrest him. There are other noteworthy reversals as well. The mobs will instigate Jesus’ arrest, and remain hostile to Jesus from now to until the very end.

We find some explanations for these reversals but also some apparent contradictions embedded in Jesus’ declarations. Until now there has been every indication that there was a divine script that required the Son of Man to drink the cup of death. Now it appears that Jesus may appeal to God to revise the script, or to interpret it in some way that would allow him to live. The lesson deduced from 2Kings 20:1 telling Hezekiah that he will die is no reason to refrain from prayer (Isa 38:2). As long as events have not yet occurred, it is still possible to pray for mercy. When his plea is refused three times, however, Jesus knows for certain that God will not relent. This decree, while physically painful for Jesus, is ultimately what God wants for the good of humanity.

The imperative expression “get up” in this verse indicates urgency and immediacy, not necessarily “wake up,” which is also implied, and could be said even if the apostles were not asleep. The expression occurs only once in Jewish literature of the Rabbis, and the circumstances of the passage are curious. In *b. B. Qam.* 38a we are informed of a group of Babylonian Rabbis asking Ullah, from the Land of Israel, to join them in offering condolences to a colleague who has lost his young daughter. They say to him *Qum, nizal*—“Get up, let us go, let us console him.” Ullah’s retort shocks—he laces into Babylonian customary consolations: “You Babylonians always say, ‘Well, what could I do to prevent it?’ which implies if there was something that could have been done, I would have done it.” Ullah claims this is out and out blasphemy and he refused to go with the Rabbis. Eventually he went alone and told the father of the dead girl—Moses sought to destroy Moab and Amon, but God would not allow it. Instead he took payments from them and let them be. Na’amah the Ammonite and Ruth the Moabite were destined to come from these nations and God, knowing the future, would not allow their destruction. God certainly must have known nothing good would have come from your daughter and nothing you could do could change that. It is always God’s will that prevails even if one does not see it.

Now Jesus says to the students—the event has not happened but it cannot be stopped. Up and onwards—there will be no consolation now. A divine mystery is about to unfold.

*The one who was handing him over gave them a sign: “Whomever I kiss, this is the one; seize him.” Right away, approaching Jesus, he said, “Rabbi,” and kissed him. Jesus said to him, “Friend, for which thing are you here?” They came forward and laid hands upon Jesus, and seized him. (vv. 48–50)*

There is no specific mention of who did this. Judas is not mentioned by name. This is very curious and requires some reflection. But it is only one curiosity amongst many. For instance, the mob is aroused and mobilized against Jesus. Clearly this would not be the case if they did not know who he was. Moreover, we might wonder what the kiss is for. What is this signature address “Rabbi,” which Judas calls Jesus? Why do the priests need Judas at all? They know him all too well, as Jesus himself points out in the narrative, saying in effect, you could have arrested me any time at my teaching station in the Temple, why did you need to go through hiring Judas? Might we think the kiss signifies a change of heart and regret on Judas’ part? Might we think it is an act of contempt? If it is a change of heart does Jesus respond, as if to a friend, realizing Judas now regrets what he has done, or is this an ironic response? At any rate, why the fuss if all is according to a divine script that must happens as God wants? The problems, whether literary, textual, historical or theological defy explanation. While multiple sources might account for some discrepancies, it clearly does not begin to address them all. And there will be more discrepancies to address as the chapter progresses.

*And look, one of those with Jesus extended his hand and drew his sword, struck the slave of the chief priest and cut off his ear. Jesus said to him, “Turn your sword aside to its place. All who take up the sword will perish by the sword.” (vv. 51–52)*

To strike at the servant of the priest is to strike at the priest himself: “It is sufficient for a slave to be like his master.”<sup>25</sup> The threat would be felt as a personal attack. And Jesus paraphrases (Lachs refers us to the notice of Kosmala): “Behold all you that . . . take the sword . . . fall by the sword” (*Tg. Isa. 1:11*).

*Do you think that I am not able to call upon my father, who would provide me immediately with more than twelve legions of angels? How then would the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must happen this way? (vv. 53–54)*

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<sup>25</sup> *Sifra parasha 3, Behar ch. 4; b. Ber. 58b; Gen. Rab. 49:2* (ed. Theodor-Albeck), as well as the near parallels in *Exod. Rab. 42:5* and *Tanh. Gen., Lekh lekha 23*. See also Matthew 10:25.

This is the paradox known as “the scandal of the cross.” How can a divine messiah be humiliated, tortured and killed? Should not the angels be protesting? “*Why should the nations say, ‘where is God?’*” (Ps 79:10). Even Israel’s persecution elicits protest from the Psalmist: “*Why should pagan nations be allowed to scoff, asking, ‘Where is their God?’ Show us your vengeance against the nations, for they have spilled the blood of your servants.*” Such response is natural for a nation that should never have been abused so much and how much more so for the chosen beloved of God. However Jesus refuses to protest and seek protection, let alone vengeance. Yet the text clearly stresses Jesus’ refusal to escape, while revealing by the very mention of this alternative that he rejects, we can nonetheless see that the possibility of escape is very much on his mind. There must have been an inner struggle against Satan—the adversarial tempter—as at the beginning. In the end Jesus submits to his death not as an act of martyrdom, but as an act of faith. Jesus refuses to be lured into calling upon his divine connections to save his earthly life. The divine plan would then be for naught.

Yet the notion that Jesus *must* let this happen is challenged by his three prayers petitioning for divine intervention. Furthermore, there is no doubt that the notion of a suffering messiah raises theological problems. While the Gospel has been preparing us for the eventuality of a dying messiah, the wavering narrative does not offer any clear and unequivocal assurance that Calvary must occur, not in spite of Jesus’ exalted status, but because of it. Jesus would have had no need to die except for his death having been woven into the fabric of redemptive history. Realizing this heightens the poignancy of the petitions Jesus offers in the hope of evading the tragic outcome. When his plea is not granted, Jesus then tells us he has freely chosen to allow his preordained death to take place. The tensions in the text persist. What Jesus says in these verses is undoubtedly intended to soften the pagan and Jewish critique of Christianity.

*In that hour Jesus said to the crowds, “You have come out with swords and clubs to capture me as if you were after a brigand! I sat teaching in the Temple every day and you did not seize me! All this has happened so that the Scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled.” Then all of the disciples left him and fled. (vv. 55–56)*

Here the Gospel is standing back from the narrative, seeing events through Jesus’ eyes, and offering insight into how this strange story line is proceeding from Jesus’ point of view. Why does everyone exhibit such odd, extreme and unnecessary behavior? The throngs are inconsistent: welcoming Jesus; intimidating the

priestly authorities with the prospect of mass protests if Jesus is arrested; and now harassing him.

The Gospel indicates that many things have happened which appear to make no sense in human terms. God is demonstrating that the Scriptures are being fulfilled, and events are being controlled by a divine plan that nothing can thwart. Various characters are enacting a preordained drama with a Christological interpretation. The disciples defect, just as Jesus had foretold, fulfilling prophetic prognostications. The bizarre occurrences that defy logic, chronological sequence and consistency now are explained: "I sat teaching in the Temple every day and you did not seize me! All this has happened so that the Scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled." The operative biblical verses here are surmised by the commentators to include Isa 53—the suffering servant. Other biblical verses will also shed light on various details of the hearing.

*The ones who seized Jesus led him to Caiaphas the High Priest, where the scribes and the elders were gathered... Peter was following him to the court-yard of the High Priest from a distance; he went inside and sat with the servants, to see the end. (vv. 57–58)*

It is noteworthy that Caiaphas is mentioned by name in Matthew and John but not in Luke or Mark. He was the son-in-law of Annas, of the dynasty that controlled the High Priesthood and the Temple for many years, and seemed to enjoy Rome's favor. Annas, and presumably his son-in-law, belonged to the Sadducees, who seem to have accommodated Pharisaic practices in the Temple ritual. Pharisees are never mentioned by Matthew in connection with any of the judicial proceedings against Jesus.

It is difficult to even imagine any High Priest holding a trial on the festival of Passover. Yet the execution of Jesus on the day before the twilight on Passover is given by John and also noted by a Talmudic story. Hence what is reported by Gospels of a priestly trial might be the transfer of responsibility to the High Priest for a proceeding that customarily would have been conducted by Pilate alone. It is also possible that the High Priest had no interest of his own in executing Jesus, but was under pressure from Rome. But we deal with Matthew's narrative here, not a transcript nor even an eyewitness account.

*The chief priests and the entire Sanhedrin sought false testimony against Jesus so that they could put him to death. (v. 59)*

If the improbability of certain events becomes meaningful insofar as their absurdity affirms that God is controlling the unfolding drama behind the

scenes, we must include the bizarre convening of the Sanhedrin at night, on a festival,<sup>26</sup> as well as the notion that the Sanhedrin sought false witnesses but was unable to find any. If the suggestion here is that the Sanhedrin was so corrupt that it was actually willing to act based upon false testimony, then surely it would have had the resources to find meretricious witnesses who were willing to tell them what they wanted to hear.

The Talmudic account (*b. Sanh.* 43a) states that the members of the Court trying Jesus actively sought out witnesses who could offer them testimony to exonerate Jesus, sending out a herald forty days in advance of his trial to find them. None were found, so he was executed. The Gospel account is intended to incriminate the Court while the Talmudic account is meant to justify the legality of the judicial proceedings.

*They found none, although many false witnesses came forward. Finally two came forward.* (v. 60)

This was not a “kangaroo court” as many have suggested. The Court disqualified the bribed witnesses who were unable to meet the searching and probing credibility tests suggested in *m. Sanh.* 5:2. Then two honest witnesses came forward whose delay must have been caused by their reluctance to incriminate Jesus. According to biblical law, the Court needs to hear testimony from two witnesses in order to proceed with a capital case.

*They said, “This one said, I am able to destroy God’s Temple and build it in three days.”* (v. 61)

This testimony does not constitute evidence of any capital crime. It neither advocates idol worship nor curses God. The accusation infers that Jesus claims his person symbolizes, indeed embodies, the Temple. In effect Jesus is foretelling that he will die and be resurrected three days afterwards. It is recorded that Jeremiah was sentenced to death for being a false prophet. The literary model,

<sup>26</sup> See *m. Sanh.* 4:1 that one does not judge capital cases at night or on the eve of festivals. However, it seems this is not really a trial but a fact-finding hearing in order to hand him over to the Romans. One might suppose that Sadducean Temple courts did not follow laws as laid out in the rabbinic Mishnah 170 years after the death of Jesus. According to *b. Šabb.* 15a, around the year 30 the Sanhedrin was forced to meet at Hanuyot and left the Temple grounds. Jesus would have been tried after that date. There are many anomalies that, were the Gospel aware of all of them, it might point out in order to prove that the events were supernatural and predetermined.

limited as the parallels are, seems appropriate as a suggestive motif for the trial of Jesus, as Jackson points out.<sup>27</sup>

*Jeremiah 26: 12–17:*

Then Jeremiah said to all the officials and all the people: “The Lord sent me to prophesy against this house and this city all the things you have heard. Now reform your ways and your actions and obey the Lord your God. Then the Lord will relent and not bring the disaster he has pronounced against you. As for me, I am in your hands; do with me whatever you think is good and right. Be assured, however, that if you put me to death, you will bring the guilt of innocent blood on yourselves and on this city and on those who live in it, for in truth the Lord has sent me to you to speak all these words in your hearing.” Then the officials and all the people said to the priests and the prophets, “This man should not be sentenced to death! He has spoken to us in the name of the Lord God.” Some of the elders of the land stepped forward and said to the entire assembly of people, “Micah of Moresheth prophesied in the days of Hezekiah king of Judah. He told all the people of Judah, ‘This is what the Lord Almighty says: Zion will be plowed like a field, Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble, the temple hill a mound overgrown with thickets.’”

The Gospel divides the trial of Jesus into two hearings: the first is before the High Priest and the second, in chapter 27, before Pontius Pilate, who, we will be told, would have set him free but for the crowds demanding Jesus' execution.

*The High Priest stood up and said to him, “Do you have nothing to reply to the things they testify against you? (v. 62)*

As a matter of due process, the Court asks whether Jesus wishes to say anything and he wisely declines. Then, incredibly, he proceeds to offer an incriminating statement.

*Jesus was silent. The High Priest said to him, “I put you under oath against the living God, so that you tell us: Are you the Messiah, God’s son?” (v. 63)*

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<sup>27</sup> See Bernard S. Jackson, “The Trials of Jesus and Jeremiah” in *Essays on Halakah in the New Testament* (Jackson 2008), 33–58.

Jesus must answer, as the force of the oath requires a response; if not, a curse attaches to the one who violates the oath. Again there is nothing directly in the charge that might be construed as an offense in Jewish Law but the charge might have been serious in the courts of Roman Judea. The High Priest seems to be preparing an indictment for the Roman courts, as self-proclaimed messiahs were seen as promoting sedition against Rome's authority.

*Jesus said to him, “You say it. But I say to you, from now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power and coming upon the clouds of heaven [Dan 7:13–14].* (v. 64)

Thus far Jesus has not been accused of anything specific, and the court proceedings seem very strange. But now Jesus voluntarily makes a statement implying that he claims divine status for himself. He had been asked if he were the Messiah, a claim that, in and of itself was not a crime. But by asserting that he sits at the right hand of Power—a divine manifestation—he is claiming to be aligned with the mystical “hypostasis of the divine *logos*.” Jesus appeals to the Talmudic equivalent of the *logos*, the communicative aspect of the deity pictured as *Gevurah*: “*mipi hagevurah*”—from the mouth of the Power (e.g. *b. Eruv.* 54b and a hundred other places). Jesus’ admission is tantamount to suicide. There is no need for new witnesses. He has blasphemed before the Court and all have heard it. Blasphemy constitutes the misappropriation and violation of the primary social/religious principle that creates Jewish society. The Talmud refers to this grievous assault, this treason, as “*poshet yado ba’ikar*.<sup>28</sup> It is considered tantamount to idol worship or cursing God, and is included under the rubric of “*megadef*”—blasphemy.

*Then the High Priest tore his cloak: “He committed blasphemy! What do we still need witnesses for? Now you have heard the blasphemy!”* (v. 65)

One is bidden to rend garments upon seeing desecrations and destructions of hallowed import. The Court itself has witnessed Jesus’ profanation of the divine name by claiming he is a member of God’s family, a quasi-divinity. They rend their garments as an act of mourning and sadness at the outrageous blasphemy: 2Kings 19: 1–3 provides the model for this act, which survived to form part of the required reaction to blasphemy (*b. Sanh.* 60a; *m. Sanh.* 7:5–6):

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28    *B Sanh.* 49b. See Darrell L. Bock, *Blasphemy and Exaltation in Judaism and the Final Examination of Jesus: A Philological-Historical Study of the Key Jewish Themes Impacting Mark 14:61–64.* (1998).

And it came to pass, when King Hezekiah heard it, that he rent his clothes, and covered himself with sackcloth, and went into the house of the Lord. And he sent Eliakim, which was over the household, and Shebna the scribe, and the elders of the priests, covered with sackcloth, to Isaiah the prophet, the son of Amoz. And they said unto him, "Thus saith Hezekiah, This day is a day of trouble, and of rebuke, and blasphemy; for the children are come to the birth, and there is not strength to bring forth".

*"What[course] seems best to you?" They answered, "He is deserving of death." They spat in his face and beat him, and some struck him. "Prophecy for us, Messiah! Who is it who struck you?" (vv. 66–68)*

The verdict is handed down as an informal consensus, suggesting the hearing has no legal standing other than to deliver Jesus to Pilate. Blasphemy would not elicit much sympathy. While the rough treatment here would never be condoned by any court, if we keep in mind that this is simply a process to determine what do about Jesus and not a formal trial, we might well imagine that Sadducee priests might behave like this. *T. Menaḥ.* 13:21 refers to their ruthless behavior, cursing people and beating them (see page 600 above).

*Peter sat outside in the courtyard. One of the maids came to him: "You were also with Jesus the Galilean." But he denied it before everyone: "I do not know what you are saying." When he went out to the gateway, another woman saw him and said to those there, "This one was with Jesus the Nazarene." Again, he denied it with an oath: "I do not know the person." A little while later the ones who were standing around said to Peter, "Really, you are one of them, for your speech makes it clear." He began to invoke a curse on himself and swear: "I do not know the person," and right then a rooster crowed. Peter remembered what Jesus had said: "Before the rooster crows you will deny me three times," and, going outside, he cried bitterly. (vv. 69–75)*

Peter's Galilean accent does not allow him to convincingly deny that he is Jesus' disciple. When recognized, he attempted to deny he had any association with Jesus. The crow of the rooster the next morning reminded Peter that, just as Jesus had predicted, he could not sustain the courage to admit to being his associate, although Peter had pledged that, even on pain of death, he would never deny knowing Jesus. Again, the unavoidable has not been avoided. Peter moves from an outer courtyard into the roadway, where he can be absorbed by the throngs beginning their day. Peter has gradually moved from the inner circle of Jesus to the outer fringe. Inside, however, he has not moved at all and his bitter weeping foreshadows the final outcome.

# Chapter 27

## Introduction

The tension in Matthew's narrative builds as the uninterrupted action of chapters 26 and 27 propels the Gospel towards its climactic conclusion. At the end of 26, the cock crowed and dawn broke. Peter wept, regretting he had fulfilled Jesus' prophecy that he would deny him, knowing for certain what will follow. Peter's fears for his own safety contrasted with Jesus' willing self-surrender. Prophetic biblical verses will now drive the curiously counterintuitive narrative, as Jesus has already announced.<sup>1</sup>

We cannot go far into this chapter without tripping over a most perplexing and troubling difficulty which has required two millennia of heroic hermeneutic agility to make things work. The synoptic gospels have a Last Supper, that appears to be a festival meal observing the rituals of Passover, which Jesus had instructed his disciples to prepare. Then we are told that the following day is the day on which the Passover meal is eaten. We learn that the Roman Governor has the authority to release a prisoner on that day as a pre-festival act of clemency, allowing the prisoner to celebrate with his family. Furthermore, it is implied that Jesus is the symbolic sacrificial offering of the Passover and that his death on that day is to be at the time the Passover lamb will be ritually slaughtered.

There is no easy textual solution to the problem in Matthew of Jesus partaking in the Passover sacrifice the night before the slaughter of the Passover lamb takes place. If the ritual sacrifice of the paschal lamb takes place on the afternoon when Jesus is put to death, then the Last Supper does not take place on Passover. The Gospel of John has a cogent chronology only because it has no Last Supper scene. Pope emeritus Benedict XXVI is among those who believe that there was no actual Last Supper but rather a rehearsal for one on the day before the Passover sacrifice was to be slaughtered.<sup>2</sup> Michael J. Cook, as mentioned in the introduction to chapter 26, believes that Mark—in a botched manner—manipulated his sources in such a way as to have the Last Supper appear to be a Passover meal, and Matthew tried to cover for some of his gaffes.

From my own perspective, if synoptic tradition says the Last Supper was a Passover meal, we have to accept that as part of Matthew's narrative. If Matthew

<sup>1</sup> See B. Jackson, "The Trials of Jesus and Jeremiah," 33–58.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, v.2 (2011).

subsequently portrays the death of Jesus the following day as representing the sacrifice of a Passover offering, we have to accept that as well. We have then only to say that the synoptics follow a narrative tradition that diverges from the dating in the primary source material and leave it at that. Cook's critical analysis may well be accurate but my objective is to explain the texts that we read, rather than the processes which brought them about. In the same way I cannot worry too much about tangential issues, such as how Jews could hold a trial on a festival day when such events were forbidden, and perhaps beyond the authority of Jewish leaders on any day, since in that period, it is possible that only Rome might try capital cases. My job is not to challenge the narratives, but rather to explain them within their literary settings, trusting that the tale has meaning apart the question of its fictiveness or historicity.

That the early Rabbis or *Tannaim* were direct descendants of the Pharisees is confirmed by first century sources. The great Pharisee mentioned in Acts 5:34 ("But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the Law, respected by all the people, stood up in the Council and gave orders to put the men outside for a short time") is the father of the Simeon mentioned in Josephus, *Life* 38:

He then sent...to Jerusalem, to Simeon, the son of Gamaliel...This Simeon was of the city of Jerusalem, and of a very noble family of the sect of the Pharisees, which are supposed to excel others in the accurate knowledge of the laws of their country.

Both Simeon and his father are mentioned in Talmudic literature. *B. Šabb.* 115a<sup>3</sup> refers to him and *b. Sanh.* 11b refers to his grandson, Gamaliel the President of the Academy of Yavneh. The traditions handed down by this latter Gamaliel and by his son, also called Simeon, form the backbone of the teachings of the Sages. It is argued that many, if not all, of the leading Sages known as *Tannaim* stand in a direct line of succession, familial and intellectual, from the Pharisaic teachers of the first century. We might therefore accept their words with some gravitas.

The proceedings presented in Matthew were not Pharisaic. However, to my mind, Caiaphas did not conduct a trial but rather held a preliminary investigation before handing Jesus over to the Romans for a summary hearing and execution. Even this scenario is open to challenge. Rosenblatt dismisses the likelihood of any kind of Jewish judicial proceeding against Jesus.<sup>4</sup> He

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *t. Šabb.* 13:2.

<sup>4</sup> Samuel Rosenblatt, "The Crucifixion of Jesus from the Standpoint of Pharisaic Law" (1956), 328–331.

considers it impossible that Pharisees would have held court proceedings on Passover eve let alone on the festival itself. Nor would it have been likely that priests, even if Sadducean, would have conducted any such hearing just before or on Passover. This was one of the busiest times in the Temple, with thousands of pilgrims in attendance and requiring the services of priests.

### Commentary

*When the early morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus so that they could put him to death. They bound him, led him out, and handed him over to Pilate, the Governor.*  
(vv. 1–2)

It was not a crime, according to Jewish law, to claim to be the Messiah. If it were, no one could ever be the Messiah. It is quite likely Matthew's account of Jesus' trial is a literary construction based on the biblical book of Jeremiah, rather than an historical account. The implication seems to be that there was no official legal proceeding. Instead the text speaks of consultations, presumably to determine the best way to silence the threat of someone who claimed divine status. Such a claim not only bordered on both blasphemy and idolatry; it also threatened the Roman political order with restiveness. Jesus has already hinted at this in Matt 19:42–45. These chief priests and elders presumably were among the Jewish leadership, dependent upon Rome for their status. The assumption has been made by many that they constituted an official court.

It is noteworthy that Matthew omits his usual references to "Scribes and Pharisees." Elsewhere in the Gospel, they were the Jewish leaders who had targeted Jesus for forgiving sins, which they considered to be blasphemy, since God alone has the power to forgive sins (Matt 9:1–3). Thus, those who believe that there is a historical basis for the trial narratives in Matt 26 and 27 tend to argue the procedures were Sadducean. Since Caiaphas was a Sadducee, one need not wonder why their procedures were so at odds with those of Pharisees. This would not, however, explain why these priests were not occupied with their ritual duties at the Temple just before Passover.

*When Judas, the one who handed him over, saw that he was condemned, he was regretful, and he returned the thirty silver coins to the chief priests and elders: "I have sinned by handing over innocent blood." They said, "What is it to us? Look to it yourself!" And tossing the silver coins into the Temple Sanctuary" he left and went out and hanged himself. (vv. 3–5)*

As soon as Judas repents, he feels compelled to rid himself of the money he had received for betraying Jesus. He tries to return it to the priests who had paid it to him but they refuse to touch it. Acknowledging his crime in anguish, Judas rids himself of the coins by tossing them into the sacred section of the sanctuary. Finally, Judas goes with clean hands to pay the price for his crime by hanging himself on a tree, arousing in the reader dissonant sympathy and loathing for him.

A story found among the midrashim of *Gen. Rab.* 65:22 shares some interesting elements with Judas' self-inflicted punishment. During the Seleucid-Hasmonean wars, a renegade by the name of Yakim Ish Tzrorot betrayed his pious uncle, Yossi ben Yoezer, who was sentenced to a horrible crucifixion at the hands of the Syrians.<sup>5</sup> Regretting his act of treachery, the betrayer devised an ingenious contraption that simultaneously strangled him, stoned him by means of a falling wall, burned him at the stake, and impaled him on his sword, thereby atoning for his sin with his death by means of the full contingent of death penalties. The midrash relates that he preceded his righteous uncle to Paradise. The fantastical device developed by Yakim effects modes of execution somewhat at variance with the stipulated procedures for enacting the death penalty found in *Mishnah Sanhedrin*. Stoning is effected by a stone wall collapsing on him rather than the rabbinic prescription of falling from a tower. Burning is accomplished through a conflagration rather than his swallowing a molten pellet, and so on. This suggests a provenance for the story outside of rabbinic circles, perhaps from an earlier period. The texts vary and it is not certain there are four means of carrying out the death penalty as enumerated by the Rabbis (*m. Sanh.* 7:1).

It is reasonable to suppose that Yakim's hanging was the original focus of the story. There are some noticeable parallels between this story and that of Judas Ish Kariot, and some common folkloric influence is likely. These stories share a common motif: the implication that Judas' atonement was regarded as complete and accepted in heaven. Craig Keener rejects viewing Judas' death as an honorable act of atonement,<sup>6</sup> but in light of the story of Yakim, his objections may be discounted.

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5 Merkin, editor of *Midrash Rabbah*, Tel Aviv, 1986, par. 65:22 and 1906 *Jewish Encyclopedia*, equate the repentant Yakim Ish Tzrorot of the midrash with Alcimus. Josephus (*Ant.* 12:385) relates that Alcimus (identified as Yakim), the head of the Hellenists under Demetrius I Soter, was rewarded with the High Priesthood for turning against Judas Maccabeus and supporting the Jewish Hellenists and Syrian army.

6 Keener, *Commentary*, 658–660.

*The chief priests took the pieces of silver and said, “It is not permitted to put them into the ‘qorbanas’ because they are blood money.” Taking counsel, they bought with them the potter’s field for a burial place for foreigners. Therefore they call that field “Field of Blood” to this day. Then what had been spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: “They took the thirty silver coins, the price of the one whose value was set, he whose valuation was set by the sons of Israel. And they gave them for the potter’s field, as the Lord directed me.” (vv. 6–10)*

The priests retrieve the coins and realize there is a prohibition against putting them into the fund used to purchase communal sacrifices. According to Deut 23:18, ill-gotten gains cannot be used for Temple purposes such as sacrifices. So the *Qorbanas* fund is out of the question. Josephus refers to this Temple fund in *War* 2.175. An analogous story from the Talmud comes to mind (*b. ’Abod. Zar.* 16b–17a):

He [a student of Jesus] said to me: It is written in your Torah, “You shall not bring the hire of a harlot [or the wages of a dog into the house of the Lord your God in payment for any vow].” (Deut 23:18)—what about using these funds to make a latrine for the High Priest?

But I did not respond to him.

He went on and said to me: Thus Jesus the Notzri taught me, “From the hire of a harlot she gathered them<sup>36</sup> and to the hire of a harlot they shall return” (Micah 1:7)—from a place of filth did they come, to a place of filth they shall go!”

We find here a rather interesting application of the concept of restorative justice whereby contaminated offerings may be used for necessary yet utterly mundane or profane purposes. A whole theology of this process came to be current in the kabbalistic schools of thought and particularly in Hasidism. Hasidic Rebbes were known to collect questionable funds from disreputable people and use the proceeds to shoe horses which pulled the carriages of the saintly Rabbis. Adducing *y. Qidd.* 3:15 as a parallel, as Tomson and Schwartz do [“Rabbi Meir said: Bastards (*mamzerim*) will not be purified in the future . . . mud goes to mud and stench goes to stench”], to my mind, misses the point of the Jesus interpreting from “filth to filth” as *tikkun*. There is no redeeming quality whatsoever in the outcomes in *y. Qidd.*, even if the wordings superficially seem equivalent.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See Joshua Schwartz and Peter J. Tomson, “When Rabbi Eliezer was Arrested for Heresy” (2012), 1–37, particularly 17.

The Jesus *drasha* creatively constructs a surprisingly positive interpretation by atomizing and isolating the phrase from Micah 1:7. This blood money purchased a field for foreigners who had no kin to purchase a burial plot for them, expressing the very sentiment of the Jesus *drasha*. Tainted funds may be used toward a necessary purchase on behalf of the socially marginalized (e.g. dead foreigners) who must be buried somewhere, even if in a field of potter's clay; the community is obligated to fund the burial of strangers who are found dead, and provide a place for such burials. Funds that had been used for bribery "which blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous" (Deut 16:19) could be dedicated for a charitable use. Judas' vile remuneration for his treachery goes toward the purchase of a place in which to bury unidentifiable corpses, a charitable act of kindness which could offer no possibility of reward or repayment or even thanks, which is real "*tikkun*."<sup>8</sup> The etiological story explaining the name "Field of Blood" as the tract purchased with Judas' bribe-money suggests there really was a locale with this appellation, the reason for which was otherwise unknown. The Gospel supplies a story to explain the origin of the strange designation that became the popular name for the field.

What Matthew means by "fulfilling a verse from Jeremiah" is probably best explained as referring either to an apocryphal account in, or a variant reading of, the book of Jeremiah as preserved by the community of the Nazarene Gospel. Jerome says that the quotation given in Matthew 27:9 is found in the Nazarene book. The priests do what Jeremiah had predicted, assuring Matthew's readers that events are transpiring according to a preordained divine plan.

*Then Jesus stood before the Governor. The Governor interrogated him: "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus said, "So you say!" (v. 11)*

The narrator, having suspended the account of the trial to direct the reader's attention to the remorse of Judas, now returns to the court room drama. Jesus responds almost exactly as he had when he was questioned by Caiaphas (26:25 and 64). Unlike the hearing before the priests, however, the charge is now sedition and treason. Since Rome has sole sovereign authority in Judea, only the leader of a rebellion would lay claim to kingship. The interchange here is interesting. When Pilate asks, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus responds, "So you say!" The expression, also found as a retort in *b. Ketub.* 104a—"You say so"—is intended by the speaker to convey, "It was not I who said it!"; in other words, "Although these words are yours and patently true (speaking of the passing of

<sup>8</sup> The rule, found in *b. B. Qam.* 94b, is that if one has stolen from people he does not know he should establish things that will benefit the public at large.

Rabbi Yehudah the head of the Sanhedrin), please consider that I did not utter those words at all and should not be cited as the bearer of such evil tidings." So too Jesus does not dispute the allegations but does not want to be quoted as having uttered treason against Rome.

Tacitus provides us with this illuminating account of the merciless Roman treatment of Christians under Nero, mentioning the role of Pilate while saying nothing of Jewish or priestly involvement, in *Annals* 15.44 (c.e. 62–65):

Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their center and become popular.

*When he was accused by the chief priests and the elders he made no answer. (v. 12)*

Once Jesus had openly revealed his brazen claim to divine status to the priests in the preliminary hearing, they most likely pressured him to reiterate what he had said earlier. Nevertheless he remained silent, to the consternation of his interlocutors.

*Then Pilate said to him, "Don't you hear how many things they testify against you?" He did not answer him for even a single thing, so that the Governor was greatly amazed. (vv. 13–14)*

The Talmud (*y. Soṭah* 5:5) recounts the story of Rabbi Akiva's trial before a Roman judge that took place a century after that of Jesus. There are some noteworthy parallels and differences in the way these two stories of Roman trials are told. Facing a torturous death from which he could not escape, Rabbi Akiva welcomed the moment of martyrdom as an opportunity to recite the *Shema*, the liturgical affirmation of God's unity. The *Shema* demands love of God so total that a person is willing to surrender all of his or her soul. Facing death as a martyr for love of God, Akiva recited the *Shema* under his breath with a joyous smile. Being so occupied, he did not respond to the judge's interrogation. When the judge heard him whispering, he assumed the rabbi was either a magician uttering incantations or a madman scoffing at torture. Rabbi Akiva

assured the judge that he was neither, and explained why he was saying *Shema*. He was forfeiting his life in order to please God by loving Him with all his soul. Jesus too offers no defense and so accepts upon himself the death he believes will please God, in accordance with an ancient prophecy.

*At the festival, the Governor used to release one prisoner to the crowd whom they wished. They had at that time a well-known prisoner called Jesus Barabbas. When they were gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you wish that I release to you, (Jesus) Barabbas or Jesus, who is called Christ?" For he knew that they handed him over on account of envy. When he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent a message to him: "Have nothing to do with that righteous man; today I suffered many things in a dream because of him." The chief priests and the elders convinced the crowds to ask for Barabbas, and to destroy Jesus. (vv. 15–20)*

The account of the trial breaks here and the scene is suddenly shifted to the day of the Passover. Jesus has been tried and found guilty, and he awaits execution in some kind of holding cell. There has been no Last Supper and there will be none, for Jesus will be executed before the hour when the paschal lamb and ritual meal are eaten that evening. The scenario seems to have been spliced in from another source, in which the events occur as they do in John, with no indication of any bridge between one narrative source and another. This interpolation abruptly redirects attention away from Jesus' willing self-sacrifice in fulfillment of the divine plan to the guilt of the Jews for his death. Its apparent purpose is the exoneration of Rome for Jesus' death.

Its insertion into an earlier gospel tradition most likely occurred during a period when large numbers of Romans were converting to Christianity, in order to disparage Jews who rejected and perhaps even mocked the new faith. It would appear that the Roman province under Pilate's jurisdiction adhered to a Babylonian and Greek custom of the governor releasing a prisoner of his choice on the day of a festival. *M. Pes.* 8:6 mentions the announced release of a prisoner from Roman jails on the eve of the slaughter of the Passover sacrifice. The statement appears in the context of a hypothetical question as to whether or not such an announcement may be taken seriously enough to warrant that a dedicated lamb be slaughtered for the prisoner before his actual release. Chavel has discussed this mishnah in connection with the release of Barabbas; others have disputed its relevance.

One need not regard the story of Barabbas as historical to subscribe to the view that such a practice might conceivably have been in vogue at some point. The Mishnah often alludes or responds to atavistic and anachronistic customs

even if they were no longer practiced by mishnaic times. Archaic case law was recognized as having legal significance insofar as it tested the applicability of a particular set of rules under highly unusual, even farfetched circumstances. The same mishnah describes a situation in which someone sets out to rescue the body of a person in a collapsed building who may or may not be alive. If the victim is dead, the rescuer will be ritually impure from contact with the corpse, and will not be able to participate in eating the Passover offering until a later date. If, on the other hand, the person is still alive, the rescuer will not become ritually impure, and will need to have a prepared lamb to eat later that night.

*He said, "What harm has he done, then?" But they cried even louder: "Let him be crucified!" Pilate saw that he could accomplish nothing, but that a riot would occur, he took water and washing has hands in front of the crowd: "I am innocent of this man's blood. You see to it." The whole people answered: "His blood is upon us and upon our children." (vv. 23–25)*

The Pilate of Matthew's narrative is modeled on the advocates for Jeremiah's release in Jer 26. Pilate's hand is being forced by the clamor of the mobs, and he very reluctantly pronounces sentence upon Jesus. Needless to say, the historical Pilate would never have shown clemency under these circumstances. This scene most likely is a literary device that simultaneously serves to inculpate the Jews and exonerate the Romans. Many have suggested this reveals an increasing bias in favor of Gentiles—a bias which has been building from the inception of the Gospel. As the break between the two communities of Jews and gentile Christians becomes more and more evident, Matthew's Gospel becomes more and more antagonistic toward Jews.

It is possible that literally washing their hands after pronouncing judgment was customary for Roman magistrates. However, the Gospel's rationale for Pilate's doing so is based on Deut 21:4–9—the ritual ablution and absolution of the leaders of the city if a corpse of a murdered stranger was discovered:

And the elders of that city shall bring down the heifer into a rough valley, which may neither be plowed nor sown, and shall break the heifer's neck there in the valley. And the priests the sons of Levi shall come near—for the Lord your God has chosen them to serve Him, and to bless in the name of the Lord; and according to their word shall every controversy and every stroke be. And all the elders of that city, who are nearest to the slain man, shall wash their hands over the heifer whose neck was broken in the valley. And they shall speak and say: "Our hands have not shed this blood; our eyes have not seen it. Forgive, O Lord, Your people Israel,

whom You have redeemed, and suffer not innocent blood to remain in the midst of Your people Israel." And the blood shall be forgiven them. So you shall put away the innocent blood from your midst, when you do that which is right in the eyes of the Lord.

The literary reversal here is unmistakable. Pilate washes his hands as do the elders in Deut 21, absolving himself of responsibility for the death of an innocent person. In contrast, the Jews are depicted as collectively admitting their guilt.

Let us consider some of the textual analogues to this scene. When God offered the commandments to Israel, "all the people answered together and said, 'All that the Lord has spoken we will do'" (Exod 19:8). The Torah had always unified them. Now, ironically, they are unified in their assertion, "His blood be on our heads." In another related biblical episode, David pronounced judgment on King Saul's slayer, who explained that he had very reluctantly drawn his sword when the wounded and suffering Saul begged to be put out of his misery: "Your blood be on your own head. Your own mouth testified against you when you said, 'I killed the Lord's anointed'" (2 Sam. 1:17). A different account of the role of the armor bearer in Saul's death found in 1 Sam. 31:4–6 is outside the scope of this study. In Matthew, the Jews seem to invite as well as accept retribution for Jesus' death upon themselves and their descendants, even though their actions were preordained and fulfilled a preordained divine plan. While some see an oath here that extended to only two generations, there can be little doubt that the text conveys the understanding that Jews incriminated themselves and all future generations of Jews. The mobs of Christendom have often been incited to exact vengeance from Jews when this scene was reenacted in Passion plays.

*He released Barabbas for them, and, after whipping Jesus, handed him over to be crucified. (v. 26)*

The language here alludes to both Isa 53 and Psalm 22. Psalm 22:1 is also invoked in Matt 27:46. We will uncover the template of Ps 22 in the Gospel's account of Jesus' death. Quite often in Pseudepigrapha and Midrashim, narratives are constructed around biblical verses, although the verses themselves remain implicit and hidden from sight. Almost all commentators see references to Isaiah and Psalms in the final chapters of Matthew's Gospel. Isaiah 53:3–8 provides a model for a martyr, falsely accused and rejected by those whom he had sought to shield from punishment, who makes no attempt to defend himself even if it means suffering physical abuse as a consequence.

He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he hath borne our grief, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he opens not his mouth. He was taken from prison and from judgment: and who shall declare his generation? For he was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken.

Throughout the Gospel Matthew has looked to Isaiah and Jeremiah, rather than to Moses, as the precursor of and literary role model for Jesus.

*The soldiers of the Governor took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole cohort to him. (v. 27)*

Strictly speaking a “cohort” consisted of 600 men. That number, even if hyperbolic, conveys that a huge throng of soldiers was present.

The torture and mocking of a divine messiah has always been theologically problematic, appearing incongruous even to many Christians. Paul developed a highly complex theology of “the scandal of the cross,” which not only became a stumbling block for non-believers but a challenge to the faith of even the staunchest defenders of the concept of a divine Christ. How could a divine messiah be subjected to such indignities and to torture?

In Matthew 26:53–54, Jesus explains that, had he chosen to, he could have called upon heavenly powers to intervene on his behalf and save him: “Do you think that I am not able to call upon my father, who would provide me immediately with more than twelve legions of angels?” He also explains why he did not. Were he to have been rescued, how could the prophetic scriptures have been fulfilled? Nevertheless, Matthew neither offers nor invokes any theological rationale for why events must, by necessity, unfold as they do. The Gospel gives us an account of the death of Jesus in which the Christian eschatology of redemption and forgiveness remains hidden from sight, without embedding these events within any specific theological framework.

Scriptural citations scattered throughout the Gospel are intended to affirm that nothing happens in the world of time and space which God has not

already planned. Although Matthew does not explicitly state that Jesus' death will atone for humanity's sins, it is not difficult to read such meanings into the narrative. By the time the Gospels were written down, this theological tenet had likely been adopted by the various Christian communities.

Returning to the text, in the first century Praetorium, situated within a luxurious palace in which the governor might reside, the judge sat on a raised platform and issued rulings under military authority as he saw fit, unfettered by the legal framework of the Roman judicial system. Judgment has been passed on Jesus without Matthew revealing what Jesus is guilty of or what his sentence is—this too has happened outside the text. The storyteller emphasizes the seriousness of the charge against Jesus and its consequences, letting the dialogue paint the picture.

*They undressed him and put a scarlet robe around him. They plaited a crown of thorns and put it in on his head and a reed in his right hand, and they knelt before him and made fun of him: "Hail, King of the Jews!" (vv. 28–29)*

The soldiers' mockery makes it evident that Jesus has been found guilty of a political crime. Decked out like a cardboard king, Jesus hardly matches the prophetic description of "one who is glorious in his apparel, traveling in the greatness of his strength" (Isa 63:1). The royal bluish-crimson distinguishing the outer garments of Roman nobility and the makeshift crown scepter reveal at last the charge against Jesus—his claim that he is the King of the Jews (i.e. their Messiah). The final Roman refrain "Hail . . ." hurled in malicious jest, is both dramatic and tragic.

*They spat on him and took the reed and hit him on his head. Then, when they had mocked him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him, and led him away to crucify him. (vv. 29–31)*

The detail regarding the change of clothing is noteworthy. Romans as a rule led prisoners to their deaths without any clothes—a practice which Jews found unseemly.<sup>9</sup>

*When they went out they found a person from Cyrene named Simon, and they forced this person to carry his cross. (v. 32)*

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<sup>9</sup> R. France's discussion of these anomalous details in *The Gospel of Matthew* (2007), p. 1062 is as good as any.

“Cross” (Greek *stauron*) denotes a distinctive Roman apparatus: “a cross for crucifixion.” Elsewhere in the N.T., we find *xulon* (e.g. *Acts 10:39*) a word that came into Aramaic signifying *tree* or *gibbet*, a more general term for a gallows made of wood or a tree used for hanging including—but not limited to—a cross (e.g., LXX to *Esth 7:10*).

Jesus pointed out in chapter 5 that the Roman army could draft anyone to perform any service, a practice known as *angareia*. Not only had Jesus advocated compliance with such demands, but expanded it to doing twice as much as required; if forced to do a mile, do two! (5:41). Here, ironically, Simon is compelled to carry the cross of Jesus, “King of the Jews,” as though he were a slave carrying his royal master’s appurtenances.

*When they came to a place called Golgotha, which means Skull's Place, they gave him wine mixed with bile but when he tasted it, he did not wish to drink. They crucified him and cast lots to divide his cloak. (vv. 33–35)*

Some manuscripts have an added gloss in the margin of the text, “This was to fulfill what had been said by the prophet: ‘They part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture’” (Ps 22:18). Matthew only implies it was in the afternoon, saying the sun darkened for three hours. Some scholars see an allusion here to Psalm 69:21: “They put bile in my food and gave me vinegar for my thirst.”

*And they sat and kept watch over him there. They placed over his head his charge, written thus: “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.” (vv. 36–37)*

The disciples were asked to keep watch but had fallen asleep. Now a cohort of Roman soldiers is keeping watch.

The paschal offering was said in Hebrew Scriptures to have been offered during the course of a night of God’s protectively watching over the Israelites. One of the meanings of the Hebrew root of the word *pasaḥ*—from which both Passover and paschal derive—is “to protect” (*Targum Onkelos* to Exod 12:42):

It was a night of watching by the Lord, to bring them out of the land of Egypt; so this same night is a night of watching kept to the Lord by all the people of Israel throughout their generations.

The Passover watchfulness in Exodus meant a night of extra safety and security. In Matthew, ironically, it is the opposite. It is the enemy who watches, and mocks, while God seems defeated, powerless to intervene and rescue Jesus. The ultimate indignity is the sign “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.”

*Then they crucified two brigands with him, one on the right and one on the left. (v. 38)*

Situating Jesus in the center implies he is the arch criminal—the boss of a gang, flanked by bodyguards on both sides. Here many see a reference to Isaiah 53:9: “And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death; because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth.”

*The passers-by reviled him, shaking their heads. They said, “You, the one who is destroying the Temple and building it in three days, save yourself, if you are God’s son, and get down from the cross!” Likewise the chief priests mocked, with the Scribes and elders: “He saved others, but he cannot save himself; he is the King of Israel, so let him now get down from the cross and we shall believe in him! “He trusted in God; let him rescue him now, if he wishes, for he said ‘I am God’s son.’” (vv. 39–43)*

The behavior and gestures of the crowds who taunt Jesus is reminiscent of Psalm 22:7–8:

All they that see me laugh at me to scorn: they shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying, he trusted in the Lord that he would deliver him: let him deliver him, seeing he delighted in him.

A story found in *Sipre Deut., Ha’azinu* and its cognate versions has some interesting similarities to our chapter in Matthew and its synoptic parallels. It relates that Titus had entered the Holy Temple to attack God. He thrust his sword into the curtain demarcating the Temple’s most sacred area, the entrance to the Holy of Holies, where the blood of the sacrificial offering on the Day of Atonement was sprinkled. In one version of the story, Titus’ stabbing the curtain brought forth all the atonement-blood that had accumulated over the ages. Mocking God, Titus said “If you are God, come and stop it, come and defend your children!” The curtain had been ineffectual in fulfilling its protective function and all of the burnt offerings and libations offered on the Temple’s altar had failed to save Israel. Titus reiterated, “[if He be God] Let them rise up and help you, let him protect you.”<sup>10</sup> Since the midrash regards

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<sup>10</sup> In both *Midrash Tannaim* and *Midrash Deut. Rab.* (ed. Lieberman) to Deut 32:37 (para. 23) “Eloh-eimo” was read as two words (God arise!)—eloha ya’amo(d). In *Sipre Deut., piskaot* 327–328 it is read as Eloha-yimḥeh (God prevent it!). For connections to the Gospels see Basser, *Midrashic Interpretations*, 238.

this as desecration of God's name, one suspects that the non-blaspheming forms of *them* and *you* in the text are scribal circumlocutions to avoid speaking blasphemies: “[If he be God].... Let him rise up and protect himself” is what the text had originally read.<sup>11</sup>

This midrash is an aggregate of legends engendered by Deuteronomy 32:43, which inspired many commentaries and later absorbed many interpretations: *Sing out praise, O you nations, for His people! For He will avenge the blood of His servants, inflict revenge upon His adversaries, and appease His land [and] His people.* While the story itself probably was not known to the author of the Gospels, tales of mocking tyrants dating from the Hellenistic period were retold and placed in Roman settings. When biblical verses or quasi-historical legends bore some resemblance to a familiar and more contemporary scenario or situation, they could be updated and recontextualized. The apocryphal tale of a woman whose seven sons were martyred during the period of Antiochus IV (2Macc. 7) resurfaces in *b.Git.* 57b, reset during the period of the Hadrianic persecutions more than three hundred years later.

*The brigands who were crucified with him insulted him the same way.* (v. 44)

Even the poor wretches facing death carried out by the cruel arm of Rome seem to have felt no sympathy for Jesus. Instead they express contempt for someone guilty of blasphemy while they themselves had only stolen from mortals or committed crimes for the sake of national honor against Rome. The crucifixion of Jesus alongside them might well have signified that Rome considered Jesus' crimes, and perhaps theirs as well, to have been of a subversive nature. If they were Jewish, perhaps the criminals crucified alongside Jesus were disappointed that Jesus had not defeated Rome and restored Jewish sovereignty as the long-awaited Messiah was supposed to, and they felt duped. Or perhaps the point was to literally add insult to injury.

*From the sixth hour darkness fell over the whole land, until the ninth hour.* (v. 45)

The time of day specified for the Crucifixion in Mark 15:25 is the third hour, while John 19:14 has it at noon. The three hour interval referred to here is the time during which the lambs to be eaten at the Passover meal were slaughtered.

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<sup>11</sup> Perhaps the idiom was common, cf. the idol which fell apart of its own accord in *b. Abod Zar.* 41 b—“It could not save itself, could it possibly save me?” I owe this suggestion to Jacob Basser.

It triggers the scene of the Crucifixion—the liminal point between slaughter and sacrifice—that fuses the two events.

After the ninth hour, the priests placed certain parts of the animal on the altar and sprinkled its blood. Although not explicitly commanded in the Pentateuch, almost every reference to the Passover meal in post-biblical literature mentions the priestly role in the ritual preparation of the paschal offering. After darkness fell, families and groups roasted the lamb.

That Matthew's narrative previously stated that the Passover meal took place the night prior to the Crucifixion indicates to some scholars that the text either is a conflation of variant traditions or was tampered with for some reason. However, I prefer to see the crucifixion scene segue backwards to the meal that rightfully should have followed the offering on the altar. Nevertheless, the meal itself is a literary device whereby events occurring at different chronological times shift forward and backward, merging into one other, as we have already noticed. Since Jesus could hardly have been expected to celebrate his death on the night after his execution, he did so in literary time the night before.

The darkening of the sky signaled a cosmic event, blackness hovering over the whole world for three hours. The day was divided into four parts—marked by the third hour, the sixth hour, the ninth hour and the twelfth hour. According to 2 Chronicles 35:14, the writings of Philo (*Special Laws* 2.145–148), commentators such as Ramban in notes on Exod 12:6, and many other Jewish sources, the Passover lamb was slaughtered between noon and the ninth hour.

While scriptural law says nothing about parts of the lamb being offered on the altar, 2Chronicles, rabbinic tradition (*m. Pes.* 5:1–2), Josephus (*War* 6:409–434) and other works refer to the placing of certain parts there. The Rabbis and Josephus state that the slaughtered lamb was offered on the altar between the 9th and 11th hours of the day. The blackening of the sky recalls Joel 2:10: “I clothe the sky with darkness and make sackcloth its covering.” This would correspond to the time of day that both the slaughter of the lambs and the crucifixion occurred, reinforcing the parallel between Jesus and the Passover lamb. The very heavens respond to its cosmic significance.

*Around the ninth hour, Jesus called out in a loud voice: “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you deserted me?” (Ps 22:1) (v. 46)*

Jesus' outcry, from Psalm 22:1, reads “*Eli, Eli, lama 'azabtani*” in Masoretic Hebrew. Matthew preserves the Aramaic *shabaqthani*—desert or abandon—

transcribing it as *sabachthani*. Greek does not have an equivalent to *shin* and so uses *sigma*, just as *Sabbath* is the Greek rendering of the Hebrew “Shabbath.” The Aramaic equivalent of the Hebrew “*azabtani*” is more precisely rendered in the standard Targum as *shabaqhtani*. Modern commentators are correct in surmising that *sabachthani* is the way *shabaqthani* was most often transcribed, which is credible since Matthew gives us the accurate translation of *sabachthani*: “deserted me.” Some versions of Matthew, however, replace *sabachthani* with *'azaphthani* as in the original Hebrew version of the verse from Psalms (*azavtani*), but with *phi* representing aspirant *bet*. Sounds assimilate from one language into another, fitting into the linguistic patterns of the language into which they are absorbed. Nonetheless, I am inclined to accept that *sabachthani*, evident in Mark 15:34, is a firmly established tradition by Matthew’s time. Also, the Syriac reads *shabaqthani*. It is reasonable to interchange *xi* and *kappa* when transliterating into Greek because *kaf* and *qof* sound identical, even in Aramaic; for instance, Aramaic *kalmei* (lice) is interchangeable with *qalmei*.<sup>12</sup>

The verse seems to have been chosen because the name Jesus (*Yeshua*) in Matthew 1:21 had signified that God would save his people. But Psalm 22:1 continues, after asking why God “has deserted me,” to further inquire why he is “far from my salvation (*yeshuathi*), from the words of my scream.” The anguish of the scene places the entire expectation of the Gospel into question, and there will be no resolution until the next chapter.

*Some of the ones standing there who heard said, “He is calling Elijah.”* (v. 47)

Matthew tells us that Jesus’ cry of “*Eli, Eli*” (my God, my God) was heard by some as “Elijah, Elijah!” They construe it to be a call for the Prophet Elijah to bring in the new Kingdom. Since Jewish tradition looks to Elijah as the herald announcing the arrival of the messianic era (cf. Matt 17:10), it would make sense for Jesus to be calling out to him, rather than crying out that God had abandoned him. Alternatively, we might suggest that people heard him perfectly well, and some understood Jesus to be importuning God to send Elijah immediately to usher in the new era. According to this interpretation, what Jesus would have meant was, “My God, my God—surely you have *not* abandoned me!” Whatever the case, Jesus’ death on the cross elicited confusion and dismay.

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12 See *Aruch Completum* (Kohut) vol. 3, 238, s.v. *kalmei*.

*Right away one of them ran and took a sponge and filled it with sour wine, put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink. (v. 48)*

One person who had heard him understood Jesus was crying out in pain. He offered him *posca* (sour wine), since common untreated water smelled putrid.

*But the rest said, "Let it alone; we shall see if Elijah comes to save him."*  
(v. 49)

The faithful believers maintained Elijah would come. Their words are not meant to be construed sarcastically. This is how the Gospel's literary art creates suspense and tension, and eventually disappointment that needs to be resolved.

*Look, the curtain of the Temple was split from top to bottom into two pieces, the earth shook and the stones were split. (vv. 50–51)*

The history of interpretations of this verse shows us the utter futility in trying to unravel the meaning or the precise identity of the Temple veil that was ripped down. To these speculations I add another that I have not seen elsewhere, but may well have been previously proposed. So much has been written about this verse that it is hard to imagine that anything entirely new might be said.

In an interesting twist on ancient Near Eastern creation myths, *b. Sukkah* 53a–b and *y. Sanh.* 10:2 recount a legend about the digging of the Temple's foundation. The Temple represents the renewal of the cosmos, and the beginning of its construction is therefore a reenactment of creation. The pattern found in other creation stories informs the narrative. *Tehom*, the personified primordial sea, threatens to flood the world when the digging of the Temple's foundation begins. The earth's waters begin to rise, threatening to inundate and submerge the cosmos into Chaos. At the last moment, the Divine name, written on a shard, is submerged into *Tehom* and the flood waters abate. God's name subdues Chaos.

In this scene of crucifixion, Chaos has arisen from the depths, smashing the Temple stones as the curtain enveloping the home of the Divine presence is ripped apart. The process of creation is reversed, with conventional earthly notions of sequence tottering as end time and primordial time spill over into one another. In the surge forward to future time, the righteous are saved, but in the backward flow of time Jesus is entrapped in the throes of a painful death. He cries out as the world begins to devolve into its chaotic beginnings.

The heaving Abyss can only be subdued and sealed by the Divine name hovering over it. The words of the centurion—who had been part of the cohort that had been mocking Jesus—now speak of Jesus as God's beloved, echoing his statement of faith with the expletive adverb “truly!” The centurion recognizes that the cataclysmic event he has witnessed would summon a new creation (see v. 54 below). Thus he brings some closure to this liminal and chaotic state of the gaping Abyss. That future and past are now merging is evident in v. 53 below. The historical timetable of the destruction and rebuilding of the Temple and all creation is alluded to in various midrashim. *Deut. Rab.* 3:13 expounds:

“There is a time for everything (Eccl 3:1).” Rabbi Tanḥuma said, “A time to cast stones” (Eccl 3:5): This refers to when Hadrian, may his bones be ground to dust, will arise to scatter the stones of the already destroyed Temple. “And a time to gather in stones” (Eccl 3:5): This refers to when God will build it.

This midrash is reacting to the seemingly odd sequences within the cycles of Ecclesiastes—first stones are cast out and then they are assembled. One normally would take for granted that stones would be gathered together when the construction of a building is begun; only then would it be possible destroy the building, knocking it down and removing the stones to a distant site. According to Rabbi Tanḥuma, “scattering stones” refers to the reduction of Jerusalem to rubble, which Hadrian would plow up to make way for a new Roman city, *Colonia Aelia Capitolina*. “Gathering stones” foretells that God will reassemble a new Temple from the ruins. It may therefore be that the Gospel is referring to the actual physical destruction of Jerusalem.

Alternatively, we might understand Jesus himself to be the Temple in the imagery he is depicting. The smashing of the stones fulfills his prophecy that no two stones would be left standing (Matt 24:1–3)—now revealed to signify the smashing of his body. The tearing of the curtain symbolizes the release of his soul from his battered body. Three days later, as he had foreseen, the metaphorical stones are resurrected as Jesus rises from the dead; Jesus is the new Temple that brings atonement. Perhaps both meanings, the physical and the metaphorical, were intended, with multiple meanings operating in creative tension with one another.

*And the tombs were opened and many bodies of the holy dead were raised. They came out of the tombs after his raising and went into the holy city and were apparent to many. The centurion and those with him who were*

*keeping watch over Jesus saw the earthquake and the things that were happening; they were greatly afraid, and said, “Truly this one was a son of God!” (vv. 52–54).*

The centurion (v. 54) had been posted to supervise the crucifixion. The opening of numerous tombs simultaneously occurs in an upheaval that follows it, after the resurrection of Jesus. Cosmic upheavals, bizarre occurrences in nature, and damage or destruction of stone structures were also said to have taken place at the moment when various great rabbis died. Pillars of cities exuded water, gutters overflowed with blood, the stars appeared in the daylight, trees were uprooted and statues melted, according to legend.<sup>13</sup>

Subsequently the risen dead come to Jerusalem. Past and future intermingle, not unlike the surrealistic motion picture scenes of director David Lynch. Alternatively, one might think like a source critic and consider vv. 53–54 to have come from some other account, which was somehow incorporated into the current Gospel text. Then the narrative resumes, with Jesus still on the cross.

*There were many women there watching from a distance, who followed Jesus from Galilee to wait upon him. Among them were Mary the woman from Magdala and Mary the mother of Jacob and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee. (vv. 55–56)*

The women who had joined his group in Galilee have been inconspicuously viewing the transpiring events. The two women are both named Miriam, Hebrew for Mary. It was Miriam, the sister of Moses, to whom Scripture attached the descriptor of “prophetess.” According to tradition, she had prophesied before Moses’ birth that the child about to be born would be the savior of the Jews, leading them out of Egyptian bondage; when the baby Moses was rescued from certain death by the daughter of Pharaoh, Miriam had “set herself from a distance to know” what would become of the prophecy.

The Rabbis probed the biblical verse “Then Miriam the prophetess, Aaron’s sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women followed her, with timbrels and dancing.” (Exod 15:20). They were heir to a tradition explaining the verse that she was called “a prophetess, Aaron’s sister” because she prophesied about the redeemer before Moses’ birth, when she was only Aaron’s sister. She was not yet Moses’ sister since Moses had not yet been born. After his birth, the infant Moses was set adrift and she waited to see how her vision

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<sup>13</sup> See b. Mo‘ed Qat. 25b.

would unfold. “His sister set herself at a distance to know what would happen to him.” (Exod 2:4).

*B. Sotah* 12b–13a:

Miriam forecast when she was but the sister of Aaron: “in the future my mother will bear a son who will redeem Israel.” When Moses was born the house was filled with light and her father thought her prophecy was at that moment being fulfilled. But then, when Moses was cast into the Nile, her father rapped her on her head: “My daughter, where is your prophecy now?” So she watched “from a distance,” Scripture says, “to know what would happen to him (or it)” — i.e. what would be the final outcome of her prophecy.

These two Miriams in v. 56 of Matthew likewise await the fulfillment of the prophecy of Jesus. The Gospel language reinforces the biblical typology, suggesting why these women are singled out by name, and why the expression “watching from a distance” is significant. Apparently the other women witnessing Jesus’ death left disappointed, while the two Miriams kept faith and continued watching, even after his burial (see v. 61 below).

According to minor tractate *Semahot* 8:1, graves were “watched” for three days to make sure the person was really dead. Under normal circumstances this would have been routine, but in a case where death was certain, as in the case of crucifixion, there would be no point in watching the body. Yet the custom of not leaving a corpse alone from the time of death until burial is still observed today by many Jews, and is called “watching” (Heb. *shemira*).

*When it was evening a wealthy person came from Arimathea, by the name of Joseph, who himself had also been a student of Jesus. This man came to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. Pilate ordered it to be given. Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a pure linen cloth. (vv. 57–59)*

Let us compare Matthew’s account with that of the twenty-third chapter of Luke (23:54):

And that day was the Preparation, and the Sabbath drew on. (Luke 23:54)

Matthew’s wording “when it was evening” seems awkward, telling us what happened after the day of Preparation (the Sabbath eve), implying that the burial had been on the Sabbath which would have begun in the evening as customary. It would have been forbidden to bury anyone on the Sabbath. Luke just

says it was getting close to the Sabbath, which means there was still time to bury him but not much.

Now when the centurion saw what was done, he glorified God, saying, certainly this was a righteous man. (Luke 23:47)

Matthew says “son of God,” likely a near synonymous variant of “righteous man.”

And all the people that came together to that sight, beholding the things which were done, smote their breasts, and returned. (Luke 23:48)

They felt remorse. Matthew would have them say that Jesus’ blood is upon their heads and their children’s heads. They were prepared to suffer the wrath of God for their treachery. The two Gospels are almost diametrically opposed.

And all his acquaintances, and the women that followed him from Galilee, stood afar off, beholding these things.” (Luke 23:49)

No one is named here; in Matthew we are told of two Miriams and the wife of Zebedee.

And, behold, there was a man named Joseph, a judge; and he was a good man, and a just one. (Luke 23:50)

While Matthew does not mention Joseph’s personal traits except in the broadest of terms, many legends found in non-canonical texts expand upon this limited information. Joseph will be appropriated into Arthurian legend as the keeper of the Holy Grail in Robert de Boron’s *Joseph d’Arimathie* in the 12th century.

He was of Arimathea, a city of the Jews: who also himself waited for the kingdom of God. (Luke 23:51)

Matthew tells us nothing about the city. Luke claims that it was a Jewish city or what can also be translated as “a city in Judah.” Arimathea is not mentioned anywhere else in the Bible, and there is no reference to any place by that name outside the Gospels.

This man went unto Pilate, begging for the body of Jesus. And he took it down, and wrapped it in linen, and laid it in a sepulcher that was hewn in stone, wherein never man before was laid.” (Luke 23:52–53)

Matthew notes the grave was new. Never having been used, anyone could be buried in it, according to Jewish practice. (See below v. 60–61 for Talmudic citations)

And the women also, which came with him from Galilee, followed after, and beheld the sepulcher, and how his body was laid. (Luke 23:55)

In Matthew, only the two women went to make the burial arrangements. Luke (23:56) also explains that the women assembled the necessary items to properly prepare the body for internment.

And they returned, and prepared spices and ointments; and rested on the Sabbath day according to the commandment.

The preparation of the body with spices is also mentioned in John 19:40:

They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it in linen cloths along with spices, according to the burial custom of the Jews.

That women could attend to male burial needs is evident from the following account in Minor tractate *Sem. 12:10*:

A male may wrap [shrouds] and bind [spices] for a male body for burial but not a woman's. A woman may wrap [shrouds] and bind [spices] for both a male and female body for burial.<sup>14</sup>

Matthew depicts a woman in Bethany anointing Jesus several days before his death and so mentions nothing about preparing the body on the day of his death.

As for the designation of Joseph of Arimathea as a man of means, it is noteworthy that Joseph used linen cloth, which the wealthy would not have used. The Talmud suggests linen was used for paupers during this time period and the relatives were always ashamed to admit they could afford no better. However, the Talmud also suggests that using a more luxurious fabric was ostentatious and wasteful. So as not to embarrass the poor in death, in the 2nd century Rabban Gamaliel himself left instructions he should be buried in a simple linen cloth. Subsequently all people, rich and poor alike, were buried in simple linen shrouds. Later, in Babylonia, even cheaper, cruder material was used. The standard Jewish shroud to this day is made of linen.

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<sup>14</sup> Note how closely this accords with the details in John 19:40.

*B. Mo'ed Qat. 27b:*

In the early period the clothing expenses for the deceased were often more troublesome for the relatives than the actual death—to the point where they would rather have fled the whole ordeal. Then when Rabban Gamaliel died he instructed he be degraded by being buried in a linen cloth. The people as a whole then imitated his practice by using a linen garment. Rabbi Pappa said “Nowadays people might even use a canvas garment worth but a *zuz*.”

What Joseph did may have had less to do with his affluence than to his deference to the simplicity and modesty of Jesus.

*He laid him in his new tomb which he had hewn in the rock, rolled a great stone onto the entrance<sup>15</sup> of the tomb, and left. Mary the woman from Magdala and the other Mary were there sitting across from the tomb. (vv. 60–61)*

We can only speculate as to why Joseph is mentioned at all. It may be that he does represent a class of people who were followers of Jesus that were not from the oppressed, underprivileged lower classes and held an important position in his city. That he hewed a burial place in the stone walls of a cave proves to be a sacred act of dedication.

Minor tractate *Semaḥot*, chapter 5, contains a fascinating tradition.

Rabban Shimon ben Gamaliel said also one who hews a chamber in rock for his father and then buries him elsewhere may not ever bury anyone else in the hewn spots.

Luke's account has Joseph wrapping Jesus before he laid him to rest, while Matthew has Joseph burying him in his new tomb. Some commentators think Matthew means Joseph had hewn the grave for himself but I doubt this is the case. The Greek *autou* refers to possession—“the tomb of *him*”—and not purpose (“the tomb *for him*”). Luke alone omits “his” altogether. Matthew says he had dug a “new” grave in the rock. We can see that the Gospel tradition is justifying the use of a new and unused grave for Jesus. In a similar scenario, the

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<sup>15</sup> The Greek “*thura*” refers any opening like a door, an entrance, way or passage, and the Hebrew likely would have been *petaḥ*, which also could refer to a door or the opening or entrance of a structure. Gen 4:6–7 accordingly reads *petaḥ*, which Rashi paraphrases “at the entrance of the grave” (“Sis crouches at the *petaḥ*”).

Talmud (*b. Sanh.* 47b) refers to a debate as to whether using such a grave contradicts the position of Rabban Gamaliel, cited above, that a grave dedicated for a specific person may not be used for anyone else. The Talmud explains if “a new grave (*qever hadash*) was carved in rock,” it could be used for anyone, since it was not yet dedicated. The narrative in Matthew does not have this as a superfluous detail, as it might seem to be at first glance, but rather explains why it was proper to bury Jesus in this new grave.<sup>16</sup>

Rolling the stone and sealing the grave marked it as an occupied crypt. This apparently was common practice, and accords with the Talmud’s directive (*b. Sanh.* 47b) that mourning was to begin when the grave was sealed with a rolled stone.<sup>17</sup> For all intents and purposes Jesus was properly buried prior to the onset of the Sabbath. Matthew tells us the women watched until the Sabbath and resumed their vigil after the Sabbath. They constituted proper witnesses reporting to the disciples, *M. Yeb.* 15:4 affirms that women could give testimony about those presumed dead.

*On the following day, the day that followed the day of the preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees were gathered before Pilate. “Lord, we remember what that faker said while he was still alive: ‘After three days I will rise.’ So order the tomb to be secured until the third day, so that his students do not come and steal him, and say to the people, he was raised from the dead, —and his last fakery will be worse than the first.” (vv. 62–64)*

The “day before” the Sabbath (i.e. Friday) was called “preparation” (Aramaic *aruvta*, e.g. *Gen. Rab.* 11:8) when various things that could not be done on festivals or Sabbaths were made ready. It is therefore strange that Matthew would refer to “the day that followed the day of Preparation” rather than to “the Sabbath.” What seems to be meant here by “day of Preparation” is the designated day of Jesus’ burial—which had to be finished before the Sabbath. Luke is very clear on this point.

Matthew’s account of the priests and Pharisees asking for a contingent of guards to be posted at Jesus’ gravesite anticipates Matthew’s claim in chapter 28 that the Jews would account for Jesus’ disappearance by claiming the guard had been bribed.

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16 See John 19:41: “and in the garden a new sepulcher, wherein was never man yet laid.” The details perfectly match the Talmudic discussion.

17 See Basser, “Some Examples of the Use of the New Testament” (2015).

*Pilate said to them, “You have a guard; go and secure it as you think.” They went and secured the tomb, sealing the stone with the guard. (vv. 65–66)*

The guard most likely was a unit of Temple soldiers employed to keep order in the Temple, assigned to see that Jesus' followers did not sneak in and smuggle out his body. In Matthew's day a story may have circulated that was likely told to discredit the Gospel account. Matthew's Jews apparently argued that the early Christians were not liars *per se*—instead they were hoodwinked by the disciples robbing the grave.

# Chapter 28

## Introduction

Matthew's Gospel has reached its denouement: the tragic fulfillment of the dire prophecy of Jesus' crucifixion. But the "end-time"—the awaited final arrival of the *Eschaton* and end of history—is not yet imminent. The Gospel's concluding chapter opens into "and-time," to use Geoffrey Hartman's apt term: the continuing saga of breaking through the protective wall to the Kingdom. The narrative presents its message through images rather than outright description, combining layered shades of "light and the darkness." The past and the future dance in the shadows in near embrace of one another. Just as the first Jewish day formed during Creation in Genesis was preceded by a primordial darkness from which light is extracted, even before the formation of the sun and the moon, so too the day of the Kingdom begins in chaos and darkness. The dawn of a new day is a liminal period when images are shadowy and the eye doubts its ability to distinguish the non-dead from the non-living. The period when the rays of the sun must break through the mist and slowly dissipate the miasma—when the Gentiles of the world will become disciples by listening to the preaching of the Gospel. Chapter 28 reflects on the Gospel's own narrative power to generate warmth and light, and a new story waiting to be told: the end of one Age and the beginning of another.

Matthew's Gospel opened intimating a historical, messianic cycle. Forty-two generations had waxed and waned from Abraham to the birth and death of Jesus. Just as the new moon ripens at the 14th day of the lunar month, there were fourteen generations from Abraham to David. From David to the Babylonian exile, another fourteen generations passed, the full glory of the invincible Davidic dynasty receding into invisibility. Yet another fourteen generations pass from the gloom of exile to the glory of redemption: the destruction of God's House to the coming of the Messiah in the 42nd generation, bringing history to fruition in implicitly Divine splendor, as the full Paschal moon rises in the sky.

Earthly and supernal worlds merge in the final chapter of Matthew. The earth shudders apocalyptically, wracked by upheaval and earthquakes as heaven and earth, light and darkness, kingdoms of evil and of goodness, swirl precipitously. Jesus commands that his message be taught everywhere. He has risen from the dead and commissioned disciples to spread his gospel. There is no mention of ascension here; one senses that this material belonged to the earliest churches. Nor can Matthew resist rebutting a position espoused by the Jews in his day to explain why no one found Jesus' body in its crypt;

namely, that the guards watching Jesus' sealed were bribed by Jews to say the disciples had stolen it. Matthew has no qualms calling them "the Jews," rather than priests or Pharisees, in order to completely separate the Christian community from all Jews after the Easter story of the Resurrection. It is clear that Matthew, whatever his origin, considers himself a Christian here. In differentiating Christian from Jew, he highlights the disbelief of the Jews, their spreading falsehoods, their spewing corruption. These themes will engender strife between Jewish and Christian communities in antiquity, medieval times and modern periods.

The Gospel concludes with a promise of the close of this world and anticipation of its aftermath, the coming Kingdom. Jesus is the bridge between them. Remarkably, Mark, considered by most scholars to be the earliest of the Gospels, had originally concluded (as noted by early commentators and evident in its Greek versions) without any reference to Jesus' resurrection. This deficiency in Mark troubled readers and listeners and eventually a longer ending was appended to it which did portray the Resurrection. Matthew, however, knew better than to disappoint his audience, and provided a theologically satisfying ending to his Gospel.

### Commentary

*Now with the departing of the Sabbath at the "lighting to the first day of the week," Mary the Magdalene woman and the other Mary came to see the tomb (v. 1).*

Most translators interpret this verse as stating that the women as going out at first light on Sunday (the first day of the Hebrew week) while others understand them to have left at dusk. I myself sense behind the strange construction here two Hebrew idioms: "*bemotse'i šabat*"—literally "with the bringing out of the Sabbath"—and "*or le'ehad bešabat*"—literally "lighting to the first of the new seven day cycle."<sup>1</sup> While the new day begins at the previous night-fall, in order to distinguish daytime proper from the preceding and subsequent evenings, the custom arose of referring to the period of night just prior to the emergence of a new day as "the lighted period of the full day" (*m. Pes.* 1:1 and *b. Pes.* 2a). The word *light* in this context is a positive euphemism for darkness,

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<sup>1</sup> Jan Joosten has preceded me in noting this usage. See "The Ingredients of New Testament Greek" (2005), 68.

much as Good Friday is, at first glance, for “Horrible Friday.”<sup>2</sup> But in a more profound sense, *Good Friday* is an accurate term, since the horrific event that takes place on that day heralds the resurrection of the Christ. Likewise the *light* of the darkness before dawn heralds the promise of tomorrow.

This explains as well as emphasizes the women’s hurry to see the tomb, eager to validate their faith and dispel any lingering doubt. Presumably it was the night after the Sabbath, illuminated by the Passover harvest moon, and the women rush out into the “darkness” mitigated by moonlight. They did not wait for dawn as would have been customary for women visiting a grave, but instead set out to see the tomb as soon as the Sabbath had ended, beyond which they could not contain their suspense.

*And look, there was a great earthquake, for an Angel of the Lord came down from heaven and went and rolled away the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning and his clothing white as snow. From fear of him the guards shook and became like corpses. (vv. 2–4)*

The advent of the first signs of the Heavenly Kingdom begins with palpable tremors, the entire earth heaving with trepidation. The guards experience a deathly fright. The harbinger of this cataclysm is the Angel of the Lord, a familiar figure in the Hebrew Bible: a divine being who appears to humans under various guises. This angel is clothed in white, as is one of the supernal beings described in Daniel 7:9:

The Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool.

Dan 10:6 uses metaphors of fire and light to depict the angelic being:

His face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze.

Jesus himself had undergone a similar transformation into a luminescent being: “He was transformed in front of them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as light” (Matt 17:2).

<sup>2</sup> The Talmudic term is “*leshon sage nahor*”—“abundance of light,” as it was originally the polite way to refer to the blind. The usage became generalized into meaning any “euphemism” and one suspects this usage accounts for the term “Good Friday”. See the commentary of Ritva to *b. Pes.* 16b where he explains euphemism as “*yipui hashem*,” i.e., a refined label.

Matthew's source here relies on secondary reports, rather than the direct narrative style of the Transfiguration, to describe the dead coming to life (Jesus) and the death-like fear of the living (the guards). The stone, like the dying Age of history that had separated Jesus from the living Age of the coming Kingdom, is now rolled away. The burial is cancelled, and the stone becomes a divine throne. The Angel of the Lord, acting for God in the physical world, transforms the stone into a heavenly throne by sitting on it. The narrator hides the astonishment of the women from our view. We do not know how they reacted, what they did or said. They must have proffered some type of salutation, expressed shock or fear, or asked a question:

*The Angel answered the women: “Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here, for he was raised as he said. Come; see the place where he lay. Go quickly and say to his disciples that he has been raised from the dead. And look, he will go before you to Galilee. There you will see him. Look, I spoke to you.” (vv. 5–7)*

The sequence of verbs in the angel's reassuring response to the women is noteworthy. First the angel issues a rapid series of direct commands: “Come”; “See”; “Go”; “Say.” The focus is on the women's activity, while Jesus is spoken of in the passive voice as “raised.” The women are active in the world, while Jesus is remote, elusive and mysterious. Why has Jesus gone to the Galilee?

The women who had come to see his body are now sent far away to see him. They had followed him from the Galilee to Jerusalem, and they will now return to the site where their journey began. At the opening of Matthew's Gospel, an angel had spoken to Mary's husband Joseph in his dreams. Here an angel speaks to the women face to face, and points out to them how remarkable this is. This may well be the same Angel of the Lord who had told Joseph, “Do not be afraid” (Matt 1:20) when he informed him that Mary was expecting a child who will redeem his people.<sup>3</sup> Matthew has now tied the end to the beginning in true epic style. Remarkable indeed!

Jesus rose on the third day following his death, but it seems clear that thirty-six hours or less has passed since his crucifixion. How can thirty-six hours qualify as three days? According to Jewish calculations of time applicable to burial and mourning periods and their rituals, even one minute may count as a whole day. The Hebrew term for these rules is *miqtsat yom kekulo*, discussed in *b. Mo'ed Qat.* 19b. The three days prior to Jesus rising from the dead are calculated as follows: The remainder of the day on the Friday of his crucifixion—the

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<sup>3</sup> Also see 2:13 and 2:19: the angel's announcement to go to and depart from Egypt.

day on which Jesus was buried—counts as one day. The second day, Saturday, was a full day. Sunday, the third day, began immediately after nightfall upon the conclusion of the Sabbath. Therefore, Matthew's assertion that the Resurrection occurred "on the third day" is fully consistent with Jewish tradition insofar as the counting of days before burial is concerned.

*They left quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to report to his disciples. (v. 8)*

The paradox of 'simultaneously experiencing "fear and great joy" has a biblical referent. Ps 2:11 says, "serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling" and this psalm held particular significance for the early Christians. Another verse in this same psalm (Ps 2:7)—"I will tell of the decree . . . You are my Son; today I have begotten you"—was interpreted as presaging the divine election at Jesus' Baptism (Matt 3:17) and the Transfiguration (Matt 17:2). Alluding to this psalm through the phrase "fear and great joy" suggests the women are, to some extent, aware of the significance of the empty tomb, and of their momentous role in being chosen to initiate the spread of the news of the Resurrection. Just as they had rushed to arrive at the tomb, only to find it empty, so they now hurry to give the next phase of their account.

Although v. 11 chronologically follows v. 8, its postponement allows it to close the narrative of the women's experiences as well as introduce a flashback to the events that transpired when the women had first left the tomb. The polemic of vv. 11–15 distinguishes Jesus' command to the women from his commission to the disciples. That the disciples do appear in Galilee indicates that the women fulfilled their mission, and had given the disciples their instructions.

*And look, Jesus met them: "Greetings." They approached, lay hold his feet and worshipped him. (v. 9)*

Much has been written concerning this enigmatic phrase about the seizing of feet. It is an act of recognizing a prophet as a messenger of God who is empowered to perform divine acts. We find in the verse "And when she came to the man of God to the hill, she lay hold of his feet" (2Kings 4:47) that laying hold of the feet of a holy person affirms one's status as an obedient servant—much as "worship" reinforces the idea of serving. Similarly in Hinduism, one acknowledges one's inferiority and shows respect by initiating contact with someone's feet. For a person to touch the feet of a guru or elder, for students to touch the feet of their teacher, or for children to touch the feet of their parents is a gesture of obeisance. Some temples contain shoes meant to represent the feet

of God, which worshippers touch to their forehead.”<sup>4</sup> Persian custom regarded such an act as sign of servitude requiring protection, in the face of great fear, especially for women (*Esther 8:3*): *And Esther spoke yet again before the king, and fell down at his feet, and besought him with tears.* In a similar fashion, the women’s deferential posture invites Jesus’ protective reassurance.

*Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid. Go and report to my brothers and sisters that they should go to Galilee, and I will see them there.”* (v. 10)

Jesus asks the terrified women to instruct his followers to unite in Galilee. Referring to them as his “brother and sisters,” Jesus reveals he regards them as his true family. In the final age, the biological bonds of the nuclear family are superseded and replaced by the ties binding the faithful to Jesus and to one another.

Matthew interrupts his narrative to explain why one must ignore those reports current in his day that denied that Jesus had been resurrected from the dead.

*When they were going, look, some of the guard came to the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened.* (v. 11)

The women had just left the tomb to seek out the disciples. The guards employed by the Temple priesthood now return to report that the tomb was empty. This was most mysterious since no one had entered or left. A *prima facie* case can be made that these verses are meant to counter the rumor circulating among Jews in Matthew’s day that Jesus had not risen from the dead but rather that his followers had removed the body before anyone came. It seems, since no mention of this Jewish claim is given elsewhere, that these words are those of Matthew alone. They signal the growing hostility between Jews and Christians during the period of time when he wrote his Gospel. Tellingly, Matthew refers to his opponents as “the Jews,” implicitly identifying himself as a non-Jew.

*When they had gathered with the elders they formed a plan to give a lot of money to the soldiers. “Say that his students came at night and stole him while we were sleeping. If this should be heard by the Prefect, we will persuade him and make you blameless.” They took the silver and did as they had been instructed. This report has been spread around by the Jews up to today.* (vv. 12–15)

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<sup>4</sup> See Philo Gabriel, “Significance of Shoes and Feet in Hindu Culture” (2010).

According to Matthew, the Jews bribed the guards to attest that they had seen Jesus' body being carried off by his disciples, and then spread the calumny that Jesus had not been raised from the dead. They were still doing so in Matthew's day. The Christian believer is warned this was intended as a ploy to undermine the women's mission of bearing witness to the Resurrection; the guards had said they had seen the body removed from the tomb only because they had been well paid to say so. Jesus' followers insisted that the tomb was empty because Jesus had been resurrected and left his crypt.

*The eleven disciples went to Galilee to the mountain which Jesus had commanded them. Seeing him, they worshipped him, but some doubted. Jesus came and spoke to them: "All authority has been given to me in heaven and upon the earth. So go and make disciples of all the Gentile nations, immersing them in the name of the Father and the Son—and the Holy Spirit." Instructing them "keep everything I commanded you. Look, I am with you each day, until the end of the age." (vv. 16–20)*

Only eleven disciples made their way to Galilee. Previously Jesus had spoken of twelve thrones (Matt 19:28), implying Judas may be among those honored in the New World.<sup>5</sup> While the text says Jesus had commanded the disciples to come, Matthew has already informed us that the instructions had been given through the women, not directly by Jesus himself. The message of Jesus is simple: God has entrusted him with the power to govern the Kingdoms of Heaven and Earth, which now are under his authority.<sup>6</sup>

If this is not outright idolatry to Jewish ears, it is certainly a form of the proscribed "two authorities or shared authority." Philo's doctrine of "powers", the midrashic images of *midot*, the apocalyptic picture of an angelic demiurge and the kabbalistic hierarchy of *sefirot* are essentially similar in conception.<sup>7</sup> Later

<sup>5</sup> This is a source-critical problem which gives weight to Michael Cook's reconstruction of the Judas episodes outlined in chap. 23 and lies outside the scope of our commentary to the received text (see chap. 26 intro).

<sup>6</sup> This statement is actually phrased as a legal entitlement and mirrors ancient formulae. One might compare the Aramaic sources, although relating to another Gospel text, cited by J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke* (1981) v. 2, 927. Also see Kister, "Words and Formulae," 139.

<sup>7</sup> A huge literature exists on these points. A good start are the works of Daniel Boyarin, which have extensive bibliographic references that demand attention, in particular *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* (2012); "The Gospel of the *Memra*: Jewish Binitarianism and the Prologue to John" (2001) and *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (2004). Also note the pertinent materials in Alon Goshen-Gottstein, *The Sinner and the Amnesiac: the Rabbinic Invention of Elisha ben Abuya and Eleazar ben Arach* (2000), 102–111.

Jewish texts (e.g. *b. Hag.* 15a, the whipping of the angel Metatron for seemingly encroaching upon God's authority) have contributed to the classical literature denying the possibility of any power being equal to God; there can be no all-powerful independent demiurge.

Scholars debate whether the Trinitarian formula was originally part of Matthew's Gospel or might have been added later. Did the baptismal ritual take these words from Matthew, or were the words added to Matthew to justify their centrality in the baptismal ritual? There is also the possibility that the formulation existed prior to his Gospel. Baptism is the rite that initiates the novice into a "New Existence" through equal loyalty to "the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit" according to Matthew's text. We note the fierce debates and schisms that developed in later Church history over these issues.

The disciples are commissioned to go and teach the Gentiles, and make disciples of them. The Jews have been written off. Jesus had been sent to the lost sheep of Israel, but henceforth they are removed from the kingdom as a whole since they refused to heed Jesus' message. Now Jesus' disciples, who are themselves Jews, are instructed to spread his message only to the nations, the new flock. The mission to the Jews, having failed, is replaced by the mission to the Gentiles. Matthew has structured his Gospel all along to reach this climax. Closure is now possible, with some careful instructions, and with the inauguration of a new age. His disciples stand at the edge of this dawn.

Not everyone had the reading of making disciples of all the nations, baptizing them with Trinitarian formula in their texts. Flusser has argued this was not in Matthew's original Gospel but was added later. Nevertheless, the Gospel has been edited so finely that it now appears to be the goal of the Gospel as a whole. Flusser suggests the text, as preserved by loyal Jewish followers of Jesus, originally asked the disciples to spread his teachings in his name: "Jesus of Nazareth says . . ."<sup>8</sup> Luke records in the Book of Acts (2:37–38) that the original disciples of Jesus baptized only in the name of Jesus.

"Repent!" said Peter, "Let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of your sins, then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See David Flusser, "The Conclusion of Matthew in a New Jewish Christian Source" (1966), 110–120.

<sup>9</sup> See Matt 3:11: *I immerse you in water for repentance, but the one coming after me is stronger than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to carry. He will immerse you in the Holy Spirit and in fire* (v. 11). Perhaps there is an intimation here of Gen 1:2, which associated the spirit of God with primeval waters.

After Jesus' death, Acts 11:1–19 presents arguments against apostles preaching to the Gentiles. This throws into question any longstanding and accepted tradition of Jesus having told his apostles to preach to the Gentile nations.<sup>10</sup>

The final instructions for the community are to observe all teachings recorded in Matthew. One possible view of these instructions is that the law might now be limited at best to those instructions found in the Sermon on the Mount and their derivatives found in this Gospel. More likely, the reference is to the practices current in the churches of Matthew's day. Flusser suggests the original reference was to the personal teachings of the law that Jesus' disciples had learned from him and witnessed him practicing.

Ending on a note of hope and assurance, the Gospel concludes with Jesus' message to all the faithful, who are Matthew's intended audience: "Look, I am with you each day, until the end of the age"—to hold fast in faith until the *Eschaton* is fully in place.

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<sup>10</sup> See John C. Fenton, *The Gospel of St. Matthew* (1963), 453.



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