

Matthew's Perspective on Roman Political Authority

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Abstract

In recent years, attempts have been made to view the gospel of Matthew through the lens of post-colonial studies as a text of resistance against a supposedly evil Roman empire. This study evaluates the approaches of Matthew Carter, David Sim, and Dorothy Jean Weaver. It judges the approaches of Carter and Sim as unsatisfactory in the light of the way Matthew's gospel keeps a distance between Roman imperial imagery and the image of the kingdom of heavens while at the same time avoiding any notion of an eschatological reckoning with Roman imperial power. While the gospel has little positive to say about Roman authority, it is lumped together with other political entities in a generalizing fashion to establish the kingdom of heavens as a counter sign.

Keywords: Roman empire, Gospel of Matthew, kingdom of heavens, political authority, eschatology

One of the striking features of Matthew's gospel is its antagonistic stance towards the religious leaders within Judaism. While this has sometimes been taken to imply an anti-semitic bias of the gospel, the pioneering work of Andrew Overman and Anthony Saldarini has led many scholars to view the conflicts with the religious leadership of Judaism as a feature of an ongoing competition between Pharisees and scribes on the one hand and the Matthean communities on the other hand over leadership within the Jewish communities' search for identity and cohesion in the period after the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple.¹ Yet while the Jewish background is hardly disputed as the

¹ It is not necessary to repeat the various stations in the history of Matthean scholarship. They are well documented (Harrington, 1975; Stanton, 1985, now reprinted in Stanton (2013, p.9-76); see further Repschinski (2000, p.13-61); Sim (2011); Gurtner (2013); Boxall (2014). If today there is a majority consensus on placing

major social backdrop for the Matthean groups recent studies have also queried the gospel's relationship with other early Christian groups or movements.² Finally the question of the Roman empire as the inevitable backdrop for any early Christian groups has been brought to bear on the gospel of Matthew. It is this last question on which this paper will try to offer some observations with particular regard to the question of Matthew's stance towards political authority.

It was Andrew Overman who, in modern research, first raised the question of Matthew's stance with regard to Roman imperial power.³ Occasionally, the christological titles employed by Matthew are connected with imperial imagery or metaphors.⁴ With the rise of postcolonial approaches to biblical literature it was Warren Carter who has made the Roman imperial background the center of his Matthean studies and has been pushing this dimension of Matthean studies to a more prominent position. Thus, this study will proceed as follows: In a first section there will be a recapitulation of Carter's approach before moving on to David Sim's radicalization of Carter's ideas and considering a more restrained approach by Dorothy J. Weaver. This will be followed by a second section which develops the thesis of this study, arguing that the gospel's imagery and language reminiscent of imperial institutions and persons indicates a certain unhappiness with the prevalent political powers, but that it does not point to opposition, resistance, or retribution.

Matthew's gospel in the context of so-called "formative Judaism" there are some notable exceptions as well (Deines, 2004; Schmidt, 2007).

² See e.g. the collection of studies in Repschinski & Sim (2008). Of obvious interest is the relationship between Matthew and Mark (Becker & Runesson, 2011; Becker & Runesson, 2013; Doole, 2013). Beyond that the possibility of a Matthean critique of Pauline theology has been explored, albeit with limited success (Sim, 2002; Theissen, 2011) The paper of Eric Wong in this collection explores such possibilities further. For a critique of Sim see Harrington (2008); Willitts (2009).

³ Overman (1995); Willitts (2013, p.82).

⁴ See e.g. Mowery (2002), who argues that the imperial formula θεοῦ υἱός as title for the emperor occurs *verbatim* in Matt 14:33 and 27:54, with 27:43 (θεοῦ εἰμι υἱός) strengthening the case that "at least some members of Matthew's community" (p.109-110) would have recognized a counter-claim to imperial sonship of God. Mowery is able to show that the formula occurred widely and was sometimes amplified by a third word.

1 Review of Previous Approaches

Warren Carter

Warren Carter's list of publications dealing with the gospel of Matthew and the background of the Roman empire are quite numerous.⁵ "Few have since advocated an anti-imperial polemic to the extent of Carter and Sim."⁶ One of the refrains in his work on Matthew is that Carter is not out to call into question the primarily Jewish horizon which aids our understanding of Matthew's gospel. But, as Carter rightly points out, even this Jewish socio-cultural rootedness of the gospel plays out within the Roman empire generally and within the confines of Antioch⁷ as a Roman provincial capital with a strong Roman military presence, particularly during and in the aftermath of the Jewish war. For Carter then, Roman claims to authority were an all-pervading reality that no one in antiquity could escape.⁸ Furthermore, post-colonial criticism argues that groups under oppressive colonial powers often show their frustrations through a polemic and antagonism towards each other. Consequently, the Matthean rivalry with the groups of Pharisees and scribes is an indication of an underlying hostility towards Roman powers, while hostility against Rome might go some way to explain the sometimes extreme Matthean polemic against fellow Jews. A reduction of the conflict to Jewish groups on merely religious issues would be severely flawed.⁹

Carter's (2011) most expansive treatment of his approach to Matthew is divided into three parts. The first part details the main features of the Roman imperial system and constructing this system around political, socioeconomic,

⁵ After a first contribution at the 1998 SBL meeting (Carter, 1998) Carter published over 20 contributions on the topic. The most substantial publications are: Carter (2000); Carter (2001). He has since expanded to John's gospel as well (Carter, 2008).

⁶ Gurtner (2013, p.33).

⁷ Of course, Antioch as the place of the writing of Matthew is less than certain. Among possible alternative contenders the Galilee hypothesis (Viviano, 1979) has perhaps the strongest following since. Yet good arguments can be brought forward for Antioch, which remains the most popular hypothesis; for a summary see Sim (2016). Carter's arguments, therefore, are viable, yet perhaps should be applied with more caution.

⁸ This position is also argued by Richard Horsley in many publications (e.g. Horsley, 2003, esp. pp.15-34): "The impact of western imperial control ... seriously threatened the viability and continuation of the traditional Galilean and Judean (Israelite) way of life" (p.34).

⁹ To be fair, Carter's argument (Carter, 2011, p.286) here is flawed, since scholars arguing for an inner-Jewish conflict as the main paradigm for interpreting the gospel would not view the conflict as entirely religious, even if the language is religiously colored. The conflict would be over leadership within a slowly emerging Jewish national identity, sometimes also called formative Judaism.

military, and theological networks. The latter employs a number of religious metaphors which show how deeply the Romans intermingled state and religion. Carter details the conviction that the gods willed Rome to rule and illustrates this with a number of examples of divine approval or election of particular emperors. Antioch was a focal point for this imperial ideology with a governor as representative of the emperor and a large military presence. Carter (2001, p.34-35) summarizes this ideology by asserting that imperial theology works through messages and rituals to present the emperor – and with him his representatives – as the chosen agent of the gods who wish to manifest their rule, presence, will and blessings among humankind.

With this background Carter examines the Matthean presentation of Jesus as an agent of God's salvation. His main thesis is "that the Gospel contests the claims of imperial theology that assert the empire and emperor to represent the gods' sovereignty, will, and blessings on earth. The Gospel's presentation of Jesus challenges imperial claims that the emperor embodies divine sovereignty and presence, and that the emperor, as the agent of the gods, ensures social well-being" (Carter, 2001, p.57). With regard to sovereignty, Carter shows how the Matthean Jesus is the representative of God's perspective and actions. Carter places great emphasis on the fact that the language of βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ constitutes a great threat to the Roman empire¹⁰ since the kings of the earth (Matt 17:25) resist the kingdom of God and are at the beck and call of Satan, the ruler of all the kingdoms on the earth (Matt 4:8-9). In a further step, Carter connects divine sovereignty with the Matthean Jesus' manifesting God's presence on earth.¹¹ That Jesus as the manifestation of God's presence undermines Roman ideology Carter sees evidenced in the thoroughly evil portrait of the client king Herod in Matthew 2. A third argument highlights Jesus as the agent of God, shown for Carter in the various titles of Jesus as Messiah, king, and Son of God. Finally, Jesus as the manifestation of God's presence is validated in his concern for societal well-being. The first to encounter this concern are the sick and possessed who experience healing. Jesus celebrates victory over demonic forces which Carter often correlates with

¹⁰ In a sub-argument, Carter points out how the language Matthew employs in describing God often recalls the language of imperial theology describing Jupiter (Carter, 2001, p.63).

¹¹ Most recently on Jesus manifesting the divine presence see Chung (2017).

Roman power. Whereas Jesus as an agent of God is a healer, "the world under Rome's control is a sick place."¹²

Having laid the groundwork, Carter goes on to apply the general findings to particular texts. The first of these is Matt 1:21 and the claim that Jesus came to save his people from their sins. For Carter this text is a pivotal statement controlling Matthew's entire narrative. Carter interprets the sins as oppressive political, social, and economic structures imposed by the Roman empire. The way Jesus saves from these is by his return in power, bringing about Rome's downfall and God's salvation.¹³ Carter sees this evidenced in the corpse attracting eagles in Matt 24:28, which Carter interprets as fallen Roman standards on an eschatological battlefield where Rome is finally vanquished.¹⁴

Further texts of interest are what Carter calls counternarratives. Such include the quotations of Isaiah in Matt 1:23 and 4:15-16, where Carter views Is 7-9 as texts reflecting on God's imperial power in punishing Assyria. The "Galilee of the Gentiles" is in Carter's reading a term referring to the occupied status of Galilee. The invitation to take Jesus' yoke (Matt 11:28-30) is interpreted in terms of contrast to Rome's power, particularly suggested by the terms of labor, burden, and yoke as forced labor under Roman dominion. Paying the *δίδραχμα* (Matt 17:24-27) is interpreted as a thoroughly Roman tax after the destruction of the temple, since Rome now collected what had been a temple tax. For Carter, the story itself is subversive, because the *δίδραχμα* is provided by a miracle asserting God's sovereignty, "offering those who pay it a new context and perspective, that of God's sovereignty" (Carter, 2001, p.142). Finally, in the confrontation between Jesus and Pilate (Matt 27:11-26), Carter argues that Pilate is not a neutral or weak figure, but an embodiment of the imperial power, manipulating the people and aligning himself with the ruling elite.

For Carter, these texts prove that Rome's power is not only visible in more or less marginal figures within the narrative like soldiers, client kings and rulers, or

¹² See the comments on Matt 8:28-34 where Carter points out that the demon-possessed pigs who run to their doom in the lake may be an allusion to the *legio X Fretensis* which was briefly stationed in Antioch during the Jewish war and had a boar as part of its ensign (Carter, 2001, p.71). For details of the connection to the *legio Fretensis* see Lau (2007) and Ebner (2013).

¹³ Carter (2001, p.75-90) is arguing here against interpretations that see the saving activity of Jesus fulfilled in his death on the cross, as advocated by, e.g., (Davies & Allison, 1988-1997, p.I:210). Their thesis is worked out more thoroughly in Repschinski (2006). Another possibility is offered by Blanton IV (2013), who argues that sin in Matthew means failure to observe Torah which is absolved by Jesus' teaching on Torah. Blanton includes a sometimes apt critique of both Carter and Repschinski. His thesis finds an echo in Runesson (2016, p.55-56).

¹⁴ Carter elaborated on this thesis in a later article (Carter, 2003).

Pontius Pilate. Rome's presence is squarely in the foreground throughout the gospel, informing most of its aspects and classifying it as a document of resistance. The irony, however, is that Matthew employs terms and expressions which are tied to imperial ideology in order to offer an alternative vision of God's sovereignty: "As much as the gospel resists and exposes the injustice of Rome's rule ... it cannot, finally, escape the imperial mindset ... The gospel depicts God's salvation, the triumph of God's empire over all things including Rome, with the language and symbols of imperial rule" (Carter, 2001, p.171). The Gospel trumps the Roman empire with the eschatological empire of God.

There is much to commend Carter's approach. He is very astute in noticing that some details in Matthew's narrative would have been very suggestive to readers of the first century under Roman occupation. And yet, often Carter seems to overstate his case. A first observation concerns his rather sweeping assumption that anyone who is a member of the ruling elite, be it religious or political, is *ipso facto* a representative of Rome's evil influence. For him, all "societal leaders based in Jerusalem including chief priests, scribes, Pharisees Sadducees, and elders"¹⁵ are Rome's provincial allies. Conflict with them is a conflict with Rome. When the Matthean Jesus argues with Pharisees over the Sabbath or with Sadducees over the resurrection, Carter sees this as a political act shaping societal visions and practices in conflict with Rome. As a consequence, there can be no merely religious conflicts in the gospel, since anything Jesus says or does is necessarily subverting Roman authority. Behind this Carter seems to suggest that there cannot be any spiritual act or teaching that isn't at the same time in competition with Rome.

Yet the gospel itself seems much more distant towards Rome than the "hands-on-approach" Carter suggests. Certainly, the kingdoms of the world are at the beck and call of Satan. Yet curiously, Rome is not singled out but just part of a group, and in the episode of the *δίδραγμα*, Matthew talks of "kings of the earth" in the plural. Finally, the warnings against persecution contain the prophecy that the disciples will be brought *ἐπὶ ἡγεμόνας δὲ καὶ βασιλεῖς* (Matt 10:18). Both rulers and kings are in the plural again. *In cumulo* these cases suggest that Matthew is not pursuing a campaign dedicated to the delegitimization of Rome but that his agenda goes a step further: perhaps

¹⁵ Carter (2011, p.300-301) is a little careless here, since not all of these groups are based in Jerusalem (Stemberger, 1991).

Matthew wishes to comment much more generally on the relationship between the Matthean communities and political or social institutions.

David Sim

David Sim's first brush with Rome as a topic of the Matthean narrative was an early article in which he already questioned the honesty of the confession of the Roman soldiers under the cross (Sim, 1993). This article did not find much positive resonance in the scholarly world, but he restated and refined his argument under the influence of Warren Carter's research on the relationship between Matthew's gospel and Roman imperial ideology (Sim, 2005). Sim's statement sets out to place Rome within Matthew's dualistic scheme of eschatology. It argues from the temptation pericope that within this scheme Satan and Rome are inextricably linked since Satan can offer Jesus all the kingdoms of the earth (Sim, 2005, p.93). Such connections between worldly powers and Satan can also be found throughout apocalyptic literature; Revelation or the War Scroll are particularly fine examples of eschatological battles pitting God against Satan and his powers. With regard to Matthew, Sim points out that the eschatological signs in Matthew 24 point to a battle scene between the forces of Satan and of the Son of Man. Following Carter, Sim argues for 24:28 as depicting the presence of Roman powers in the form of their eagles. Sim then continues: "Because Jesus returns in the context of a battle ... the evangelist describes his appearance in military terms. Jesus returns from heaven at the head of an angelic army" (p.96). Sim admits that the immediate context does not bear this out entirely, but points to Matt 26:53 where Jesus seemingly has 12 legions of angels at his disposal. For Sim, this eschatological battle between the Son of Man and the Roman forces of Satan bears close affinity with the account in Rev 19. Sim goes on to support this view of Matthew 24 with the last judgment scene of Matt 25:31-46 where "all the nations" will be judged, recalling "all the kingdoms of the earth" (Matt 4:8), indicating that "the Romans are destined to be sent to the eternal fire prepared for Satan and his angels (v.41)" (p.99).

Sim then goes on to illustrate his thesis with the confession of the soldiers under the cross (Matt 27:54). He first notes that the Matthean soldiers are clearly identified as those who had the responsibility of crucifying Jesus. Indeed, their brutality is highlighted in the mocking scene (Matt 27:27-31).

Their confession after the signs of the tearing of the temple curtain, the earthquake splitting the rocks, and the resurrection of the dead repeats the title "Son of God", which is a Roman imperial title.¹⁶ Then Sim goes on to question the scholarly consensus that the confession is, in fact, a true conversion of these Roman soldiers as representatives of a later Gentile mission. First Sim argues that Matthew has a consistent literary strategy in placing some sign of faith before a miracle in order to avoid the impression that a miracle might actually be the source of faith or conversion. Secondly, he argues that the fierce opposition to all things Roman preclude the soldiers expressing true repentance.¹⁷ Instead, the soldiers express their and their imperial master's utter defeat at the death of Jesus. "They stand condemned at the foot of the cross" (p.103). As such, they prefigure the fate of imperial Rome at the eschatological judgment.

Some of the arguments brought forward against Carter hold against Sim as well. It seems an unnecessary narrowing of Matthew's perspective if the last temptation of Satan is read almost exclusively in terms of Roman imperial power. The phrase *πάσας τὰς βασιλείας τοῦ κόσμου* suggests in and of itself already a much wider application through the adjective *πάσας* and reference to the *κόσμος*. Probably Rome is included, but it is certainly not the only power under consideration in this text.

Another point of contention is the question whether Matt 24 is really an eschatological battle depicted in military terms. It seems telling that Sim has to admit that the angels in Matt 24:31 do not really suggest military imagery, but read in tandem with 26:53 they do. However, the point in 26:53 is precisely that Jesus is not willing to call on those legions to do battle for him. Now if Jesus does not use the angels during his arrest, and if the Son of Man does not use them except for the gathering in of the elect, the battle, if indeed there is one, ought to be rather one-sided. Obviously, there are some who persecute the disciples in the endtimes (Matt 24:9), but they are not named and are lumped together with all nations hating the disciples, and with false prophets. Indeed, the advice given in Matt 24 is not to join in the battle against evildoers or persecutors, be they Roman or of some other nation, or even some fallen-away Christians, but to run and hide (Matt 24:16) and wait for the angels of the Son

¹⁶ Sim (2005, p.101) relies here mainly on Mowery (2002, p.100-105).

¹⁷ This is of course a circular argument. Sim (2005, p.103) writes: "But how realistic is [a conversion] in the light of recent studies that Matthew is vehemently opposed to Roman imperialism and those who enforce it?"

of Man and trust them to find all they are supposed to gather from the ends of the earth.

Sim's view of the final judgment in Matt 25:31-46 fits his interpretation of Matthew 24, but here, too, questions remain. Of course, among all the nations gathered before the king, Romans might feature as well, but they are not singled out. It is a judgment of all nations along the lines of Joel 3:1-12. The image of the gathered nations suggests that all these nations are at first mixed together. The king now proceeds to separate the just from the unjust. If one were, for argument's sake, to entertain the idea that the judgment scene is not about individuals but about Romans as a nation¹⁸ separated from the others, Matthew would give no indication whether they would stand among the just or the unjust. And finally, when Carter and Sim argue so forcefully – and rightly – that the Roman imperial system only worked because of local collaborators, one would have to ask where they would stand if the separation was really along national lines.

But the separation is not along national lines but along the question of the just or unjust behavior of individuals. The text makes this clear when πάντα τὰ ἔθνη are gathered before the throne, yet the shepherd-judge proceeds to separate αὐτοὺς ἀπ' ἀλλήλων. While the nations are a neuter noun, Matthew uses for those being separated the masculine form.¹⁹ There is a separation not of nations but of individuals. If this is the case one cannot exclude the possibility of individual Romans among the just. Matthew gives no hint that the Romans in general, or even only representatives of the Roman imperial power, are to be counted wholesale among the goats.

Finally, the claim that the confession of the soldiers is sarcastic needs to be examined. When Sim argues that in Matthew faith always precedes the miracle, this is not quite correct. The miracle in 9:2-8 includes a reference to the faith of the paralytic, but this leads to the forgiveness of sins. The healing miracle itself is explicitly occasioned by the doubts of the Pharisees. Similar observations can

¹⁸ Sim (2005, p.99) seems to imply this when he writes: "This reference to all the nations recalls the mention of 'all the kingdoms of the world' that come under the influence of Satan in Matthew 4.8. Rome is therefore included in the final judgment before the Son of Man ... the Romans are destined to be sent to the eternal fire prepared for Satan and his angels (v.41)."

¹⁹ See e.g.: Gundry (1994, p.512). He gives grammatical support to an otherwise widely held position (Nolland, 2005, p.1024; France, 2007, p.960). The position seems likely if we take into account that with regard to judgment over Jewish people Matthew distinguishes precisely between just and unjust. While this topic goes beyond the scope of this paper, reference should be made to Runesson (2016, p.207-339), who treats this at length.

be made about the Sabbath healing in 12:9-14. But the parallel to 9:2-8 is even more pertinent because Matthew includes a reaction of the onlooking crowds in 9:8: ἰδόντες ... ἐφοβήθησαν καὶ ἐδόξασαν τὸν θεόν. Matthew now recreates this reaction in 27:54: ἰδόντες ... ἐφοβήθησαν σφόδρα, λέγοντες· ἀληθῶς θεοῦ υἱὸς ἦν οὗτος. Thus, Sim's argument from the structure of the confession is unconvincing. It is true that they are Romans. But being Roman is not sufficient to prove bad intent.

Matthew has structured the passage after the death of Jesus quite clearly. In 27:51-53 the events are described in a series of statements beginning with καὶ: the tearing of the temple veil, the earthquake, the opening of the tombs, the raising of the bodies, and finally their leaving the tombs. In 27:54 the series of καὶ comes to an end, while the centurion and his soldiers are introduced with ὁ δέ, indicating what is then made explicit, namely that the centurion and his men are commenting on the preceding events. Their statement is not isolated but closely connected to the preceding events. It is not at all plausible, then, that Matthew intends to describe the events following the death of Jesus accurately while subverting the statement of the soldiers. Sim's argument that the statement of the soldiers is a proleptic judgement scene does not convince.

Instead there are several pieces of evidence indicating that the soldier's confession is indeed meant to be a truthful one. The use of ἀληθῶς introducing the statement of the soldiers can hardly be understood as ironic, as indeed it isn't in Matt 14:33 or 26:73. This is supported by Matthew's addition of ἐφοβήθησαν σφόδρα, a phrase from the transfiguration account (17:6). There, too, the identity of Jesus as the Son of God was made manifest.²⁰ Furthermore, the soldiers are described as τηροῦντες τὸν Ἰησοῦν, a distinct change from Mark's παρεστηκώς. Matthew seems to interpret the guarding of Jesus as generating intense interest among the soldiers.²¹ Finally, throughout the passion narrative Psalm 22 figures prominently. This is evident in Matt 27:35 (Ps 22:19), Matt 27:39.41 (Ps 22:7.8), Matt 27:43 (Ps 22:9). Now if Psalm 22 is one of the models along which Matthew offers an interpretation of the death of Jesus, the confession of the soldiers might well be an illustration of the end of the Psalm when "προσκυνήσουσιν ἐνώπιόν σου πᾶσαι αἱ πατριαὶ τῶν ἐθνῶν ...

²⁰ Nolland (2005, p.1219-1220), points to a number of further similarities between the transfiguration and the crucifixion in Matthew. Thus the phrase here should not be viewed as accidental.

²¹ See Liddell, Scott, Jones & McKenzie (1996, *ad locum*), similarly also Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich & Danker (2000, *ad locum*).

προσεκύνησαν πάντες οἱ πόντες τῆς γῆς" (22:28-30 LXX).²² Such an interpretation places the soldiers alongside the magi (Matt 2:1-12), the Roman centurion (Matt 8:5-13) and the Canaanite woman (Matt 15:21-28). The miracle following the sign of faith, if indeed this is a consistent literary strategy in Matthew, would be the resurrection.

With both Carter and Sim one gets the impression that the Roman empire is viewed as generally hostile, and that all Romans therefore are liable to judgment. Yet Roman imperial power and "the Romans" are not necessarily identical. Furthermore, there is extensive evidence to support the notion of sometimes rather friendly relations between Romans and non-Romans including Jews.²³ To claim that "as far as the Gospel is concerned, the world under Rome's control is a sick place" (Carter, 2001, p.71) is a bit of a stretch. This is one of the reasons that makes it worthwhile considering the views of Dorothy J. Weaver.

Dorothy Jean Weaver

Carter and Sim wrote about Matthew's gospel as a document of resistance against the Roman empire. Dorothy Jean Weaver (2005) takes a rather different and more nuanced approach that serves well to bring some perspective to Carter's and Sim's claims. She looks at the Roman characters as they appear in Matthew's gospel and asks what can be gleaned from the evidence of their appearance in the narrative with respect to Matthew's attitude towards them and, by implication, perhaps about Matthew's attitude to Rome. Methodologically, Weaver chooses a double approach to these characters. She first looks at who Matthew presents, describing their normal activities and roles. In a second step she asks whether the way Matthew presents these figures points to some indications about the attitude the gospel tries to project.²⁴

Weaver begins her "lower-level" analysis with the observation that the Roman figures appearing in Matthew's narrative are entirely male and military. Working her way up the command line from simple soldiers over centurions, the governor, and finally the emperor, she can show that the details that

²² This suggestion has already been made by Gnilka (1986, p.II:478). See also Ziethe (2018, p.346-347).

²³ See Trebilco (1994, p.173-185) and Harland (2003).

²⁴ Weaver (2005, p.108-109), speaks here of a "lower-level" and "upper-level" portrait, following Muecke (1969, p.19-20). The distinction between lower level and upper level narrative recalls the distinction between story and discourse often used in narrative criticism.

Matthew provides color the soldiers in all their brutality. Part of this brutality is highlighted in the role of the soldiers and their commanders in the passion of Jesus. Weaver rightly points out that the graphic violence of the common soldiers is shared by those commanding them. The centurion is part and parcel of the group executing Jesus, while the governor is the one with the power over life and death and is prepared to use it to condemn an innocent Jesus. finally, Weaver reads the wrathful king in the parable of the wedding banquet as an image of the Roman emperor destroying Jerusalem (p.113). This image of Romans as part of an oppressive force is broken only by the wife of Pilate who is neither male nor military. Yet she appears as someone who obviously has enough authority to interrupt her husband's judicial proceedings with her request on behalf of Jesus. With the exception of Pilate's wife, the Matthean Romans are a portrayal of brutal military might.

Beginning her "upper-level" analysis, Weaver sees this monolithic portrait of the Romans break up to a considerable extent. "Instead, Matthew paints an astonishingly variegated portrait of these characters, mocking some of them ... and offering highest commendation to others" (p.114). The centurion of Matt 8:5-13 is the first of these characters who even astounds Jesus. While his military power is clearly stated, he is agitated and concerned about his *παῖς*.²⁵ He is just as anxious as all other supplicants coming to Jesus, and he proceeds to an act of submission to Jesus which is honored by Jesus with astonishment, with the healing, and with the highest commendation. Weaver notes that for Matthew's readers, this account would have been just as amazing as it was for Jesus (p.115).

The next person under investigation is Pilate. Basically, Weaver sees in Pilate an authority figure whose true powerlessness is unmasked at the trial of Jesus. Pilate is powerless to get Jesus to talk in his defence (Matt 27:12-14). Pilate places himself at the mercy of the jeering crowds when he seemingly abandons his own trial and offers them any prisoner they want (27:15), repeatedly "abdicating his authority to the wishes of the crowd ... leaving him powerless to adjudicate the trial" (p.116) himself. In the end, having created a riot rather than a just trial (Matt 27:24), Pilate gives in to the wishes of the crowds. And this continues even after the trial and execution when Pilate is forced to hand over a

²⁵ The term may denote a child or a slave. The parallel in Luke 7:2-10, the person is called both *παῖς* (7:7) and *δοῦλος* (7:2-3.8). It may be that Matthew wants to emphasize that a centurion with many men under his command cares for a little one.

detachment of soldiers to the Jewish leaders who end up undermining the soldiers' allegiance to the governor (Matt 28:11-15). By the end of the story, Matthew has completely dissembled Pilate's authority and status. The seemingly powerful governor and representative of Rome has lost even the loyalty of his own soldiers. Weaver astutely points out that powerlessness does not constitute innocence (p.116). Despite his own protestations of innocence it is Pilate who hands Jesus over and declares the sentence, and at whose command the body of Jesus is handed over for burial. At the end, there is no absolution of commendation for Pilate. Rather, he serves Matthew's purpose of unmasking the powerlessness of Rome's agent.

Pilate's wife, a dreamer like the Joseph of Matthew 1-2, serves as a counter figure to her husband: a female and non-military figure, she recognizes that Jesus is innocent and acts on this without hesitation. The soldiers under the cross confessing Jesus are surprising figures, too. Weaver asserts the highly ironic twist that those whose purpose is to mock, torture, and crucify Jesus are the ones who at the climactic moment of the story are the ones to "proclaim the true identity of Jesus for all to hear" (p.122). And finally the guards at the tomb are exposed in their venality and corruption as they accept the bribe of the Jewish leaders to spread a lie that after being outmaneuvered by the angel at the at the tomb.²⁶

Weaver succeeds admirably in showing that rather than condemning the Romans wholesale as representatives of an evil empire that will go up in flames at the last judgment, there are two levels in Matthew's narrative. Matthew does not shy away from showing what Roman imperial power means: brutality, oppression, ruthless exercise of power. On the other hand, Matthew subverts this view in two ways. He shows the powerlessness of Romans in the face of the confrontation with Jesus and God, yet he shows that even in the midst of such ruthlessness conversion is possible. Matthew reckons that even Romans can become disciples and brothers and sisters in the ἐκκλησία of Jesus. Thus Weaver has shown that "Matthew's overall portrait of the Roman characters within his narrative is 'round' and realistic rather than 'flat' and ideologically driven" (p.126-127).

²⁶ Weaver (2005, p.124) does not point this out, but these soldiers are a striking parallel to the way Pilate makes himself subject to the will of the Jewish leaders and crowds.

Summary

The now decades-long push to see the Gospel of Matthew within the larger social framework of Judaism reconfiguring itself after the destruction of Jerusalem has been a healthy and necessary corrective, although one might argue that some have gone too far in placing the gospel within Judaism.²⁷ Carter and Sim have drawn attention to another dimension of Matthew's world by asking how this gospel would have been read within the wider context of a culture colored by the everyday experience of life under Roman rule. Yet Carter's and Sim's wholesale claims of an entirely negative attitude towards Rome are certainly overstated. The claim that the world under Rome is a sick place is not nuanced enough to be convincing. This observation also calls into question Carter's claim that Matthew's end-time language reveals a tit-for-tat revenge mechanism which discredits the gospel's eschatology. It is perhaps fair to state that just as the case for Matthew's Jewishness can be overstated, so can the case for Matthew's opposition to Rome.

At this point Weaver's observations become a necessary corrective. Her approach of looking at individual Romans within Matthew's narrative proves that the gospel, far from advocating a wholesale condemnation of Rome, is much more nuanced in presenting Roman characters. When she asserts that Matthew's portrait of the Roman characters "is 'round' and realistic rather than 'flat' and ideologically driven" (p.127) she puts her finger on the weaknesses of Carter and Sim.

If Carter and Sim are right in pointing out the political overtones of Matthew's gospel, and if Weaver is right in her caution against a wholesale condemnation of the Roman empire, then the question arises again: Does Matthew have something to say about Roman power, and if so, what precisely does the gospel want to say?

²⁷ Such criticism might be levelled at Blanton IV (2013) who tries to limit salvation to Torah obedience preached by Jesus, or Runesson (2016), who argues for an inclusion of Gentiles into the Matthean community with the obligation to keep Torah and circumcision: "For Matthew, being a disciple takes one form only, and that form is Jewish, a religio-ethnic position..." (p.36). While this is not the place to discuss such claims, it may be permissible to observe that such studies miss the massive christological claims of the Gospel right from the beginning which go way beyond any Jewish messianic categories. There is a major difference between establishing a supposedly perfect obedience to Torah and establishing Jesus as the perfect interpreter and fulfiller of Torah which such approaches ignore (Repschinski, 2014). In the end, the risen Jesus commands his disciples to teach the whole world all that he has commanded them, not what is written or given in the Torah (Matt 28:20).

2 Two Ways: Power or Service

A good starting point for an investigation into Matthew's attitude towards Rome is 20:25-26. The passage fits into a series of pericopae dealing with the question of authority. In 19:13 children are brought to Jesus, to the dismay of the disciples. Jesus rebukes his disciples, for the kingdom of the heavens belongs to such children (19:14). From 19:16 onwards, Jesus engages in a discussion about earthly wealth and its usefulness for entering into eternal life (19:17). This eternal life is about accumulating treasure in the heavens (19:21) and seems to be related to entering the kingdom of the heavens (19:23) which is synonymous with the kingdom of God (19:24). The ensuing dialogue with the disciples ends with the saying about the last and the first.

The kingdom of the heavens is then compared to the οἰκοδεσπότης (20:1) who proves so generous to those who work in his vineyard that some workers grumble and develop ὁ ὀφθαλμός ... πονηρός, the evil eye contrasting with the goodness of the householder (ἀγαθός, 20:15). It is this contrast which is capped with another reference to the first and the last, thus holding the parable and the account of the rich young man and the discussion about wealth together. The householder exemplifies the attitude to wealth and money that eludes the rich young man.

Into this context Matthew places the third passion prediction (20:17-19) which describes the fate of the Son of Man as one being handed over to Jewish authorities who will judge him and hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified.²⁸ Yet on the third day he will be raised. Taken together within the context, the passion prediction prophesies what has been stated before: somebody who is considered last in human terms will be first. The dialog with the mother of Zebedee's sons reinforces this notion. She applies what is known about places of honor at a king's table to the kingdom of Jesus. Yet Jesus points out that such a question is really beside the point. Instead, he asks the two disciples whether they can drink the cup he is to drink, obviously a reference to the coming passion of Jesus (cf. 26:39). Furthermore, he points out that even discipleship unto death will not secure places of honor (20:23). Thus,

²⁸ There are a number of Matthean redactional changes compared with Mark 1:32-34. Most are relatively minor, concerned with lessening the disciples' fear and clarifying who mocks and flogs and finally crucifies Jesus. The most significant change is the insertion of the parable of the generous vineyard owner between the rich young man and the passion prediction.

the Matthean Jesus separates the usual trappings of honor connected with well-known kingdoms from discipleship and its rewards in a kingdom of Jesus.

The narrative then develops into a summarizing teaching for all disciples. It offers a stark contrast between earthly rulers on the one hand, and the disciples on the other hand: οἴδατε ὅτι οἱ ἄρχοντες τῶν ἐθνῶν κατακυριεύουσιν αὐτῶν καὶ οἱ μεγάλοι κατεξουσιάζουσιν αὐτῶν. οὐχ οὕτως ἔσται ἐν ὑμῖν (20:25-26). Matthew may or may not imply an abuse of power by the intensification with *κατά* of both verbs describing the activity of the rulers.²⁹ Matthew describes the fact that some people exercise power over others, and that this is a seemingly normal but not ideal condition. Such a situation, however, should have no place among the disciples. Matthew uses the future tense *ἔσται*.

Occasionally, this future tense is interpreted in an imperatival way (Nolland, 2005, p.823). But this is somewhat misleading. While the present tense carries a clearly defined aspect of an action in progress, the verbal aspect in the future tense is much less clearly defined. Morphologically, the future tense is related to the subjunctive.³⁰ This makes it a curious cross between a tense and a mood. Thus, the future tense may be best viewed as the grammatical expression of an expectation that may or may not lie in the future. More important is that it formulates the way things ought to be.³¹ With regard to the passage under consideration, Matthew plays on a contrast between a present and tangible experience dominated by the powerful and an expectation where the powerplays of rulers and great ones have no place in a community of disciples. This contrast is not one between a present and a future state of affairs, rather it is a contrast between how things play out in the present, and how things ought to be from the perspective of the speaker.

²⁹ See the survey of Clark (1980), who finds no connotations of oppression. In the LXX the findings are somewhat different: κατακυριεύειν is used to translate a variety of terms: כבש (Gen 1:28; Sir 17:4), ירש (Num 21:24; 32:22, 29), דדה (Ps 109:2), or משל (Ps 118:133). Some of these instances suggest violence and injustice, others do not. κατεξουσιάζειν does not occur in the LXX. (Luz, 1985-2002, p.III:163 n.25), leaves open whether injustice and oppression are included.

³⁰ And they sometimes occur together in the same clause; in Matthew there are four occurrences: 5:25; 7:6; 13:15; 27:64. Perhaps 24:35 should be counted as well.

³¹ The imperative sense is not completely disregarded, it merely recedes to a subtext. The future tense is an "enigma" and "rather than temporal values, *the future form grammaticalizes the semantic (meaning) feature of expectation*" (Porter, 1999, p.43, emphasis original). This statement raises significant interpretative issues for the row of future tenses in the passion prediction (5:18-19: παραδοθήσεται ... καὶ κατακρινούσιν ... καὶ παραδώσουσιν ... καὶ ... ἐγερθήσεται). A lengthy discussion of verbal aspects in Greek with a special reference to the future tense in chapter 9 can be found in Porter (1993).

The contrast Matthew creates is also defined by a difference in the personnel involved: On the one hand there are the οἱ ἄρχοντες ... καὶ οἱ μεγάλοι who use their powers to their own ends. But Matthew does not seem to suggest that they are going to go away, or are going to be defeated. Rather, they are the negative foil against which a different reality defined by the ideas of service and slavery will be realized ἐν ὑμῖν. Matthew does not speak of one group replacing the other, he speaks of parallel realities.

This, however, implies that Matthew's Jesus does not expect rulers and the powerful to disappear. He merely suggests that their ways have no place within the community of disciples. One may recall that in another place, Matthew's Jesus speaks of the disciples as a lamp on a stand or the salt of the earth (5:14-16). As the disciples are a counter-sign to the world, so here a community in which service to one another forms the principle of common life is designed as a counter-sign to the powerful.

Matthew describes those subscribing to the ways of the rulers and the powerful in very general terms. The rulers of peoples and the great ones (οἱ ἄρχοντες τῶν ἐθνῶν ... καὶ οἱ μεγάλοι) are mentioned in the plural. While Matthew's earliest readers might have had some idea that the Romans and their system of governance are a glaring example of tyranny, Matthew does not name them explicitly. Instead he uses a plural which abstracts from concrete examples and rather puts the finger on structures that seem endemic to the world regardless of the particular group profiting from them. While Matthew does point to a probably abusive exercise of power and authority he does not seem interested in naming particular culprits. Instead he identifies structures to be avoided by the community.

Furthermore, Matthew does not resolve the contrast between power and service. The gospel does not urge resistance, nor does it envision that the contrast becomes a conflict in which the two sides clash violently. The context of the third passion prediction suggests otherwise: Jesus is handed over to chief priests and scribes who are the powerful in Jerusalem (20:18). His victory consists not of resistance but of submission in the trust that God will raise him on the third day (ἐγερθήσεται, 20:19). For the disciples this process of submission becomes an example on which to model their own submission to one another (20:28).

That such a way of dealing with structures of power may not be obvious to everyone is encapsulated in the disciples' misunderstanding. The Zebedees ask

for seats of honor, the others become angry with them as a rather ironic consequence. But serving and being a slave for one another is the way the Matthean Jesus expects his disciples to "drink the cup" that he drinks in his passion.

In the end, one has the impression that Matthew creates two different worlds altogether. On the one hand, there is the world of the powerful who, in the end, will commit violence to Jesus. While the two sons of Zebedee might find at least part of this world attractive, the Matthean Jesus leads them into another world that is characterized by being *διάκονοι* and even *δοῦλοι* to one another. These worlds exist in parallel, but just as the world of the powerful will not be able to overpower Jesus in the end, so the world of the disciples will not reach out to the powerful. Service remains to one another within the community.

The examples of the children brought to Jesus, the discussion about wealth, and the parable of the generous owner of the vineyard all serve as preparatory illustrations of the more abstract discussion of the difference between the ways of the powerful and the life within the community of disciples. At the same time, they point out that the behavior patterns described with *κατακυριεύειν* and *κατεξουσιάζειν* posit a very real temptation to the disciples as well. Jesus needs to teach them repeatedly that their task is to become *διάκονοι* and *δοῦλοι* as the perfect way to enter into life (see 19:17.21).

3 The Choice

So far we have seen that in Matt 20:25-26 Matthew paints a picture of a community of disciples characterized by service to one another which stands in clear distinction to rather generalized rulers and great ones exercising power over others. This generalization in the description of political authority can be found elsewhere in the gospel.

When Matthew's Jesus is tempted by the devil, one of the temptations concerns the power over kingdoms. During the final temptation the devil shows Jesus *πάσας τὰς βασιλείας τοῦ κόσμου καὶ τὴν δόξαν αὐτῶν* (4:8). The first temptation concerning the bread takes place in the desert, the second concerning the fall takes place at the top of the temple, while the third takes place on a very high mountain. Thus the temptation of the splendor of the kingdoms is marked

as the climax of the story by the steady topographical rise.³² Worldly power, so Matthew, seems to be the strongest temptation the devil has to offer. The offer also implies that the kingdoms and their splendor are at the beck and call of the devil; this certainly includes the Roman empire. Jesus refuses the offer seemingly because of the condition attached, namely devil worship. Jesus contrasts the demand of the devil with the scriptural command to worship God, and to serve him. Matthew's specific interests in the dialogue between the devil and Jesus are visible at two quite important points.³³

The request for worship by the devil contains two verbs, one of them in participle form: "πεσὼν προσκυνήσης μοι" (casting yourself down,³⁴ worship me). In the answer of Jesus, again two verbs are employed: προσκυνήσεις ... λατρεύσεις, this time in parallel as predicates in a future active indicative. The two verbs clearly reflect Deut 6:13; 10:20.³⁵ It is quite possible that the addition of the participle in the demand of the devil is an attempt to parallel and contrast the demand and the response. We have a rather symmetrical arrangement: πεσὼν προσκυνήσης (devil) and προσκυνήσεις ... λατρεύσεις (Jesus). In the center stands προσκυνέω, but its meaning is explained very differently by the two protagonists. While for the devil it is the submission implied by πεσὼν, for Jesus worship means λατρεύειν.³⁶ Matthew distinguishes between a devil who commands worship in terms of abject submission, while God commands a worship expressing itself in terms of service. On the side of submission is the

³² It has become usual to look at Q as the source for the temptation in Matthew; see e.g. Stegemann (1985). Comparison with Luke 4:1-13 reveals how much Matthew has shaped the story to his own purposes, including the ordering of the temptations; for some, this indicates Matthean independence from Q (Wilkins, 1982), who detect a Matthean creation of a scribal dispute modelled on the desert temptations of Israel. While the conclusions may not convince, the Matthean redaction of the passage is extensive.

³³ I assume the original material to be part of Q. However, since I am quite sceptical concerning the possibility of a reliable reconstruction of Q, evidence of a Matthean redaction of Q is, to my mind, hypothetical. What is evident, however, is the striking difference in the scripture quotation of Jesus which, in turn, influences the request of the devil. More confident reconstructions of Q exist (Carruth & Robinson, 1997; Robinson, Hoffmann & Kloppenborg, 2000). The arguments of Petrie (1959), however, are still worth considering.

³⁴ This translation follows the suggestion of Liddell (1996, *ad locum*), interpreting πεσὼν as a voluntary act. The word is missing from Luke 4:7.

³⁵ The differences to Deut 6:13 and 10:20 (κύριον τὸν θεόν σου φοβηθήσῃ καὶ αὐτῷ λατρεύσεις καὶ πρὸς αὐτὸν κολληθήσῃ καὶ τῷ ὀνόματι αὐτοῦ ὀμῆ) are easily explained. The LXX has four verbs, yet the context of taking an oath is not relevant here. The substitution of προσκυνήσεις for φοβηθήσῃ is most likely a direct result of the demand of the devil.

³⁶ The verb is demanded by Deut 6:13.20; however, it meshes well with Matt 20:25-26 since its meaning is originally not cultic as suggested by the KJV. Originally it refers to work for hire or slavery (Liddell, 1996, *ad locum*).

devil with all the kingdoms of the world, on the side of service stands Jesus with the authority of scripture, and ultimately God.

It is intriguing that Matthew speaks of kingdoms in general and does not single out the Roman empire specifically, even though such a connection might suggest itself. Rome, after all, did rule the known world at the time, and it did so through a number of client kingdoms and dominions. But in a border province like Syria other kingdoms might have been a constant presence: Parthians, Scythians, perhaps even Ethiopians must have been known empires (Horsley, 2003, p.31-34). But the formulation *πάσας τὰς βασιλείας τοῦ κόσμου* suggests that Matthew is not interested in a statement concerning Rome in particular, but rather in a statement about the way the world is ruled in general. Again, Matthew aims not at a particular instance but at the structures undergirding not just the Roman empire but all kingdoms in general. When Matthew does name kings who exemplify his analysis of worldly power, the gospel mentions Herod the Great (Matt 2) and Herod the Tetrarch (Matt 14) without even alluding to their status as client kings of Rome.³⁷ Perhaps, then, it is fair to say that Matthew here takes a stand on the powers of the world rather than any particular kingdoms or kings governing it (Nolland, 2005, p.166-167). It is a world that needs the light the disciples can provide (5:14) with the gospel (26:13).

This has at least two consequences. Firstly, such a generalization does not seem to leave room for fine distinctions or grey areas. Matthew paints with a broad brush. All the kingdoms of the world are a symbol for the devil's demands of submission, while scripture, and Jesus relying on it, realize that true worship comes to fruition in service. There is no in between. Secondly, there is a distance between the kingdoms of the world and Jesus, and those who will later be associated with him. Jesus offers an either-or decision to his disciples. There is no room for maneuvering. The only contact between those kingdoms and the disciples will be when the disciples will be dragged before kings because of Jesus (10:18).

4 Come In

As Carter has pointed out, the gospels use the kingdom language to provide their readers with an alternative vision that counter-balances the experience of

³⁷ On Herod the Great and his role as client king see Richardson (1996); Vermes (2014).

imperial violence. Matthew's case is particularly striking. Reasons for this are that it contains more references to God's kingdom than any of the other NT writings;³⁸ but beyond this, in 32 instances Matthew shapes the kingdom language by using the phrase "kingdom of the heavens."³⁹ Matthew is most certainly the early Christian text which makes the most out of a metaphor that was central to the teaching of the historical Jesus.⁴⁰

Matthew's preference for the "kingdom of the heavens" is significant for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is quite clear that Matthew adapts this phrase from the Markan phrase "kingdom of God." A telling example is the rewording of the initial proclamation of the Markan Jesus from ἡγγικεν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ (Mark 1:15) to ἡγγικεν γὰρ ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν (Matt 4,17). Furthermore, while Matthew does not avoid the expression "kingdom of God" completely the gospel uses it sparingly and prefers "kingdom of the heavens."⁴¹ Thus Matthew introduces a spatial aspect into the kingdom language that shapes how the gospel can talk about the kingdom and how it can associate or dissociate other parts of the gospels narrated world with the kingdom.⁴²

Secondly, Matthew's use of heavens as the qualifier of a kingdom meshes well with another feature of the gospel: Matthew quite consistently calls God the "father in the heavens" (12 times) or "heavenly father" (7 times). The only one in Matthew's gospel who is in heaven is not a king, even if the heavens are home to a kingdom as well. The language is not imperial but familial. It is the disciples who are to realize that God is their father. They can become children

³⁸ This becomes even more striking if one takes the relative length of the pertinent NT writings into account. The statistics are well known: There are no less than 103 occurrences of βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ and its variants in the NT. Of these, 50 occur in Matthew, 14 in Mark, and 39 in Luke (Luz, 1985-2002, p.1:37; Du Toit, 2000).

³⁹ A significant number of scholars have argued that Matthew wanted to avoid naming God out of respect for Jewish traditions. Yet such an argument fails since in Greek, θεός is not really a name for God despite its occasional use in the LXX to translate יהוה. Pamment (1981), has argued that the kingdom of God language refers to the present, while the kingdom of heaven language refers to an imminent future. Gundry (1994, p.43), proposes that the kingdom of the heavens emphasizes the sovereignty of God more than the kingdom of God. While both arguments fail, they do point out that Matthew creates more than mere stylistic variations on a theme, as argued by Davies & Allison (1988-1997, p.1:391-392). A more recent suggestion (Foster, 2002) sees the formulation as part of a larger heavenly language complex trying "to undermine the criticism of the leaders of formative Judaism by impugning their character and their relationship to God" (p.499), and to legitimize the Matthean community as a credible Jewish alternative.

⁴⁰ On Jesus' teaching of the kingdom see Meier (1994, p.237-507).

⁴¹ The formulation ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν is exclusive to Matthew, while there are merely four certain instances of βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ; Matt 6:33 must remain in doubt because of uncertainty in the manuscript tradition.

⁴² Matthew introduces with the phrase a topography for the kingdom absent from other gospels. Topographies in general are enormously important as a tool to create part of the narrated world of a writing; they have become an intensely studied topic in recent years (Bosenius, 2014).

of the father in the heavens (5:45) and ought to be perfect like him (5:48). The relationship is somewhat exclusive. Those who see the good works of the disciples will give praise to the father in heaven, but the Matthean Jesus adds that it is "your father" (5:16), leaving open the possibility that God is also the father of those who see the works of the disciples. Furthermore, the father is one who sees what the disciples do and pray in secret, quite apart from other Jews or Gentiles who practice their piety in public (6:1-16).⁴³ In times of persecution the relationship becomes so close that the father will speak in defense of the disciples (10:20) and does not wish for even the smallest one to be lost (18:14).

Thirdly, the gospel's use of a spatial qualifier for the kingdom allows for a further development. As we saw before, Matthew puts a distance between the power structures of worldly empires and the demands of service in the community. With regard to the kingdom that distance is reinforced by spatial markers.⁴⁴ Matthew reconfigures the kingdom as one in the heavens where there resides a heavenly father who wishes to relate to the disciples. He knows what they need (6:8.32), he is forgiving in the measure the disciples themselves are forgiving (6:14), and he is willing to give good things (7:11). The kingdom of the heavens and the father within it are at a distance from whatever happens in the βασιλείαι τοῦ κόσμου. The realm of the heavens is removed from the realm of the world. The difference between the two is marked by the way the father in the heavens treats the disciples with care and consideration (5:30-31), while the rulers and great ones of the kingdoms of the world lord it over others. Matthew's stark condemnation of the kingdoms of the world in all their splendor is supplemented by a vision of a kingdom in the heavens where a caring father dwells.

The connection between the caring father and the kingdom becomes tangible in the promises offered to the disciples. During the last supper, after the conclusion of the new covenant with the disciples, Jesus prophesies that he will not drink from the fruit of the vine until he can drink it together with the

⁴³ Foster (2002, p.491), unwisely contrasts this familial relationship between father and disciples with Jewish authorities only. Matt 6:7 indicates otherwise.

⁴⁴ There is some scholarly debate about whether the kingdom as Matthew uses it is to be understood more in terms of a reign of God, present already in this world, or of a realm in a more territorial understanding. Both positions have their strengths (McIver, 2012, p.97-101). I do not think that both meanings should be played against each other. The parables of Matt 13 seem to favor both, with the parable of the sower, or the tares assuming a more territorial aspect, the parables of the mustard seed, of the treasure in the field, and of the pearl favor a kingdom in the sense of a reign. However, Matthew's dominant designation of the kingdom as "in the heavens" certainly reinforces the territorial understanding.

disciples in "my father's kingdom" (26:29). The kingdom of heaven is not just an alternative vision to the kingdoms of the earth, it is a promise to the disciples. This promise is offered in the scene of the last judgment as well: those who are blessed by "my father" will "inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (25:34).

A further marker sets the kingdom of the heavens apart: the κόσμος contains a number of kingdoms which are in competition with one another. When the devil puts before Jesus all the kingdoms and their splendor, Matthew reveals this splendor as transitory. When the Son of Man comes, nations will fight against nations, kingdoms against kingdoms (24:7).

Both, the promise of being in the kingdom of the heavens, and the mutual fights of the kingdoms of the world are connected with the eschatological vision of Matthew which has apocalyptic overtones. Yet the question remains whether it is the kingdom of the heavens which does battle against the kingdoms of the world.

5 No Final Showdown?

There is a palpable tension between Matthew's peaceful moral vision of non-retaliation and love for enemies (5:38-48) and a divine eschatological vengeance meted out in the parables of judgment.⁴⁵ For Barbara Reid, the real question is how to understand the nature of God: "Does God at the end-time set aside compassion and engage in vindictive violence?"⁴⁶ Or, to ask more pointedly, does Matthew's gospel project an end-time in which the kingdoms of the world are vanquished by the greater power of the kingdom of the heavens? Or perhaps it is precisely the divine vengeance and the violent end of the world and its powers that legitimizes a non-violent ethics for the present time? Does

⁴⁵ See Reid (2004), who analyzes eight different parables of which four are unique to Matthew's gospel. The four unique ones are the parable of the tares among the wheat (Matt 13:24-30 and its interpretation in 13:36-43), of the dragnet (13:47-50), of the unmerciful servant (18:23-35), and of the final judgment (25:31-46). The other four parables are of the rebellious tenants (21:33-46), of the wedding banquet (22:1-14), of the faithful and unfaithful servants (24:45-51), and of the slaves entrusted with their master's wealth (25:14-30). Reid discusses possible explanations for the violence in the parables, among them traditional material, teaching material for morally not fully developed disciples, or the denial that the persons acting out violent retribution are not representing God. She finally settles for the thesis that in the face of unrepentant evil divine retribution seems acceptable to Matthew.

⁴⁶ Reid's (2004, p.253) answer to this question is somewhat less than satisfactory; she claims that the gospel does not resolve this tension and calls on systematic or constructive theology to provide an answer. For a fuller discussion and critique see Neville (2013, p.23-32) or Repschinski (2016).

divine wrath at the end of time give hope to those suffering from violence and reacting with non-violence in the present time?⁴⁷ However, there are a number of indications in the gospel that this is not so.

The first point relates to literary genre. The literary setting for these portrayals of divine wrath is that of parables. Parables have the unique ability to present simple images and metaphors or just plain good stories which, on closer examination, reveal themselves to be much less simple to interpret.⁴⁸ Thus the image of a father giving his son a snake instead of bread (Matt 7:10) is a simple image, yet at the same time it is strangely disturbing and provocative. Many parables do not intend to describe reality, they overstate it. This seems particularly true for the eschatological parables and the stories they tell. These parables are certainly harsh to the point of being troublesome and offensive to modern sensibilities, but "they are not realistic descriptions of judgment" (Snodgrass, 2008, p.31). They want to provoke a reaction in the hearers that leads them to view their everyday actions with the urgency of an eschatological perspective.⁴⁹ They teach about human responsibility. In a sense, the violence in these eschatological parables should be viewed as the literary motivation which is designed to lead readers to accept an ethics of forgiveness, mercy, and good deeds.⁵⁰

A second point relates to the Christology of the eschatological parables. As Ulrich Luz noted, in most of the eschatological parables it is Jesus who figures as the judge. However, this Jesus is well known as the one who as Immanuel will bring forgiveness to his people (1:21-23). One might assume that this Immanuel will reveal himself as a merciless judge at the end-time, but it seems more plausible to assume that the expected harsh judge of the end-time will reveal himself as the Immanuel who speaks of the mercy and forgiveness God is prepared to offer (Luz, 1985-2002, p.III:544-561). The Matthean Jesus who preaches a life of non-retaliation and non-violence (5:38-47) and lives it to the point of his violent death only to be vindicated in the resurrection is the hermeneutical frame for the parables of violent judgment. Jesus and his fate are

⁴⁷ "Disciples can endure non-violently in the meantime because, in the end, God will punish the opponents" (Carter, 2005, p.100). The book of Revelation indicates the possibility that martyrdom is an invitation to participate in and precipitate the divine violence meted out at the end of time (Middleton, 2018).

⁴⁸ Classic is the statement of Dodd (1961, p.5): "... arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought ..."

⁴⁹ See Zimmermann (2007), who speaks of an "Apellstruktur" of the parables.

⁵⁰ "For most parables, what comes at the end is the clinching indicator of intent" (Snodgrass, 2008, p.30). See also Repschinski (2016, p.329-330).

the normative frame for the gospel. It puts the stories of violent endings into perspective (Neville, 2013, p.31).

A third point lends credence to the second. The eschatological discourse in Matt 24 is an interpretive minefield. Problems arise because of the disciples' question in 24:3 which seems to address the destruction of the temple in the first half and the coming of the Son of Man in the second. It is difficult to ascertain where exactly Jesus ends answering the first part, and where he begins addressing the second part.⁵¹ Of particular difficulty is the place of 24:29-31 because Matthew suggests that the appearance of the sign of the Son of Man follows εὐθέως (immediately) after the days of tribulation connected with the destruction of Jerusalem.⁵² Yet the connections between 24:30 and the verses in which the παρουσία of the Son of Man is expressly noted (24:3.27.37.39) suggest that 24:29-31 is part of the Matthean end-time vision of the coming of the Son of Man, a theory supported by the extensive quotations of and allusions to texts of the Hebrew bible.⁵³

The final coming of the Son of Man in Matthew 24 does have some apocalyptic overtones. Cosmic signs signal the collapse of the world, and a loud trumpet will sound, apostasy occurs. These are part of "apocalyptic commonplaces" (Carey, 2016, p.87). Yet notably absent from the παρουσία of the Son of Man are notions of judgment, of judge, or of sentence.⁵⁴ Matthew seems to follow a different agenda with the connection of the destruction of the temple and the eschatological appearance of the Son of Man. Obviously, the question of the disciples in 24:3 already connects the two issues. In a further step, Matthew has the signs and persecutions connected with the fall of Jerusalem lead immediately (εὐθέως δὲ μετὰ τὴν θλίψιν τῶν ἡμερῶν ἐκείνων, 24:29) to the catastrophe of cosmic disintegration heralding the coming of the Son of Man. This catastrophe is comparable to the great flood (24:37-39). The catastrophe may be inevitable, yet it is neither judgment nor a sign of some form of divine end-time vengeance.⁵⁵ Even Matthew's version of the Noah reference is muted when compared to Luke 17:26-30. The first obvious

⁵¹ A summary of this discussion and various solutions can be found in Neville (2013, p.32-33).

⁵² This suggests that the destruction of the temple and end-time expectations are closely related.

⁵³ In Matt 24:29: Is 13:10; 34:4; in Matt 24:30 Dan 7:13-14.

⁵⁴ Runesson (2016, p.51-52), thinks differently and includes 24:22.31.37-34.45.51 in his list of judgment texts. The last one is the parable of the faithful and faithless servants. The other texts do not speak of judgment at all, since there is no judge, nor is there a sentence.

⁵⁵ Against Neville (2013, p.35), who takes up an argument brought by Davies & Allison (1988-1997, p.III:380). Neville points to the Noah reference as evidence for eschatological vengeance.

difference is that Matthew's version lacks the reference to Lot and Sodom and Gomorrah with fire and sulphur raining from heaven to destroy all. Secondly, instead of Luke's ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου Matthew uses ἡ παρουσία τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου. Matthew avoids the suggestion that whatever happens will happen during the days of the Son of Man and that the Son of Man is the one bringing this about. Rather, Matthew emphasizes that at the coming of the Son of Man these things will be revealed. There is no judgment, only revelation.

The coming of the Son of Man as a revelation more than a judgment accounts for another peculiarity of Matthew's eschatological vision: there is no final battle between good and evil. While such a battle is often a feature of apocalyptic eschatology, the focus of interest in such literature lies more on the imagining of the world to come as opposed to a hostile world experienced by the readers or writers of apocalyptic literature (Murphy, 2012, p.9-12). Matthew falls into this latter category. The gospel is not interested in the final struggle, it is interested in the end of time as a point at which the Son of Man will send out his angels to gather his elect at the sound of a trumpet (24:31). While the elect are gathered, the fate of the wicked remains unclear at this point.

This accounts for another Matthean peculiarity of the eschatological discourse. The Son of Man and his sign never touch down on the earth. They come on clouds, with great power and glory (24:30), an image owed to Dan 7:13-14. Yet the Danielic vision includes dominion over all peoples, a topic Matthew does not seem interested in. Instead, the Son of Man who remains in heaven, sends out (ἀποστελεῖ) his angels, in order for them to bring up (ἐπισυνάξουσιν) the elect (Murphy, 2012, p.9-12). The distance between heaven and earth remains even in this eschatological vision.

Matthew 24 uses two phrases which have occasionally been interpreted as signs of battle. The first of these is the τὸ σημεῖον τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐν οὐρανῷ (24:30). Such signs can indicate a military standard, and this interpretation has been applied to Matthew as the most plausible interpretation, particularly in connection with the trumpet of 24:31 (Glasson, 1964).⁵⁶ Matthew can connect the angelic host with military metaphors (26:53). However, the activity of the angels here is not a battle but a gathering of the elect who have overcome the times of tribulation. The sign of the Son of Man, like the Son of

⁵⁶ Sim (1996, p.104-105), takes this up as the most plausible explanation: "For Matthew, the return of Jesus and his angels will be like the arrival of a mighty, heavenly army." Sim points to 1QM 2:15-4:17 as a close parallel.

Man himself, remains in the heavens and does not descend onto the earth while the angels gather up the elect. The distance Matthew has established between the kingdoms of the earth and the kingdom in the heavens remains.

But beyond this, it seems that the σημεῖον carries different overtones. In Matt 12:38-39 scribes and Pharisees are asking Jesus for a sign, but they are not given one except for the sign of Jonah. However, the sign of Jonah is not a military standard but is interpreted in terms of the resurrection of Jesus. Matt 16:1-4 repeats the demand for a sign and gives a similar answer. In 24:3 the disciples ask Jesus for the sign of his coming, and Jesus answers first with a warning of others producing great signs and wonders (24:24). Finally, Judas betrays Jesus with a sign to those arresting him (26:48). While it is not impossible that Matthew uses different shades of meaning for σημεῖον, it places a strain on Matthew's general use of the word to assume a military significance here. Consequently, the σημεῖον of the Son of Man is probably not a battle motif at all.

A second phrase is interpreted by Carter in terms of an eschatological battle. After the appearance of false prophets and the warning not to believe them, Matthew inserts the saying about eagles gathering around a corpse: ὄρου ἐὰν ἦ τὸ πτώμα, ἐκεῖ συναχθήσονται οἱ ἀετοί, Matt 24:28. At this point there has been no battle at all, and the sign of the Son of Man has not yet appeared in the narrative. Therefore, a reference to vanquished Romans would not be logical at this point, especially because there is no mention of many dead but only one corpse. Furthermore, there is enough evidence to suggest that eagles and vultures were two animals often confused or exchanged in the literature of antiquity. Particularly in the Greek translations of the Hebrew Bible vultures were replaced by eagles.⁵⁷ If one adds to this the thought that Matthew might have relied on sources here,⁵⁸ and if one takes the proverbial nature of the saying into account (Ehrhardt, 1953, p.68-72), the idea that the gospel is prophesying the defeat of Roman armies and the end of the Roman empire becomes tenuous at best. It is far more plausible to assume that the coming of the Son of Man is as unmistakable and as inevitable as vultures gathering

⁵⁷ See the excellent survey by Speyer (1976), esp. p.439-441 for the general confusion of vultures and eagles in antiquity, and p.454-455 for the list of the substitutions made by the Greek translators of the Hebrew Bible.

⁵⁸ The saying occurs in Luke 17:37 with some differences, mostly regarding word order but also the Matthean πτώμα instead of Luke's σῶμα as the gathering place of the birds in question. Matthew's version, therefore, suggests vultures rather than eagles. This is the usual translation, supported by the fact that the Hebrew נשר may refer to eagles and vultures alike (Dohmen, 2001; Bridge, 2003).

around a corpse. This interpretation also affords the connection with the preceding saying of the unmistakable lightning (Luz, 1985-2002, p.III:431-432).

Thus, the appearance of the Son of Man is not a final confrontation with the Roman empire. It is the separation of the elect from the kingdoms of the world which do battle against each other in the face of the real power coming from the heavens in order to gather the elect. The kingdoms of the world do not need to be defeated, they simply do not matter anymore. They consume themselves in conflict, while the elect are taken up into the heavens, where there is the true kingdom and the father within it. The Son of Man is not the judge of the kingdoms of the earth, he is not the executor of divine vengeance. He is the savior of the elect who delivers them from cosmic disasters, from wars and famines, from the persecution, which serve only to announce his imminent arrival. And when the Son of Man finally does become judge and king (25:31-46), his judgment is one based on works of mercy.

6 Conclusions

Matthew's gospel certainly knows of the hardships that go hand in hand with the forces of occupation. There can be little doubt that Matthew has no sympathy for Rome and its representatives. Certainly, political power is associated with the devil who offers it as a temptation to Jesus. But for Matthew, such an attitude towards the political realities of the time are part of a far larger conflict which goes beyond the Roman empire. Matthew does not envision the disciples of Jesus as people who are submitting happily to political authorities, as Paul might suggest (Rom 13:1-7). The gospel does not take the Roman empire as a given, as Luke might have done. Again, the gospel does not envision a group of enduring disciples waiting for God to take up arms in their defense, as Revelation expects.⁵⁹ While Rome might be the concrete and tangible oppressor for the Matthean communities, the vision of the end-times uses much broader strokes in depicting not a final victory over Rome but an eschatological passing of heaven and earth (Matt 25:35).

Matthew depicts a separation between disciples and political power structures. The disciples are to behave differently from kings and great ones, their community is the countersign to any kingdom or empire. They are to

⁵⁹ For Paul see Stanley (2011), otherwise Pilgrim (1999).

embody a reality which is rooted in heaven rather than in the world. They pray for the coming of a kingdom not ruled by a king but by a merciful father. They strive to become as perfect as their heavenly father, and they do so by exercising non-violence and non-retaliation. They live in the hope that the kingdom of the heavens will come at the end of time when they are gathered up into the heavens by the Son of Man. In the meantime, however, they live by standards of non-violence and non-retaliation which signal their adherence to the kingdom of the heavens while at the same time resisting the values of the kingdoms of the world.

Matthew offers a scathing judgment on political power structures as associated with the devil. But the gospel does not preach violent resistance, nor does it offer some violent, divine retribution at the end of time on behalf of the suffering disciples. What Matthew does offer is the prospect of a heavenly kingdom brought about at the end of time by the Son of Man, the same Son of Man who undergoes suffering, violence, and death on the cross himself. Yet this is not the end of the story: the end of the story is that the suffering and crucified Son of Man is given all power in heaven and on earth (28:18).

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