MATTHEW’S PORTRAIT OF JESUS AS MESSIANIC SAGE

BY

JEFF SCOTT KENNEDY

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INTRODUCTION

A current trend among some scholars is to characterize Jesus as merely a charismatic sage, a rebel, or a kind of first century exorcist.¹ On this view, Jesus the sagacious teacher predates Jesus the apocalyptic prophet, which must be a later invention of second generation Christians.² Yet, this approach is far too limiting because it reduces the historical Jesus to nothing more than a religious genius or a social revolutionary, while disregarding the unique and varied christological content found in the Gospel accounts.³

It is difficult to see why rigid categories must be pressed here. Instead, we should view these varying aspects as complimentary angles of Jesus that describe overlapping functions. There is simply no good reason why Jesus the sage is incompatible with Jesus the apocalyptic Messiah. Matthew’s Gospel in particular shows that while operating within the Jewish milieu of his day, he assumed an unparalleled authority to speak on God’s behalf.

This study will seek to show that Matthew paints a compelling image of Jesus as a both a typical Jewish sage and as the one true Messianic teacher of God’s people.⁴ This description of Jesus as messianic teacher is captured in the definitive Matthean passage where Jesus states, “…nor are you to be called teacher, for you have but one Teacher, the Christ” (Mt 23:10, ESV).⁵

This study will proceed by first unpacking various aspects of Jesus’ pedagogical functions, and then examining the five major discourses in Matthew’s Gospel.

AN OVERVIEW OF JESUS AS TEACHER

Matthew depicts Jesus as a supreme teacher-sage by arranging his Gospel along five major discourses. The five major speeches show Jesus teaching on the mount with uncommon authority (5:1-7:29), offering practical and prophetic instruction to his disciples for their missions (10:1-42), revealing the mystery of the Kingdom through parables (13:1-53), and challenging the conventional wisdom of his day (18:1-19:2). In Jesus’ final discourse, he exhorts his followers to watchfulness, faithfulness, and benevolence while the “master is away” (24:1-25:46).⁶

Many scholars have noted that Matthew punctuates the major teaching sections in his Gospel with the formula “when he had finished saying these things” (Gk. ἐγένετο ὅτε ἐτέλεσεν, 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). Each of these messianic lectures is critical in the Matthean synthesis because they describe Christ as the supremely authoritative prophet, judge, apocalyptic messiah, and king of a new and unexpected kingdom. However, there are many allusions to Jesus’ pedagogical ministry in Matthew beyond these five principal discourses.

Jesus and His Opponents

First, Jesus is called a teacher by his opponents (8:19; 9:11; 12:38; 13:52; 17:24; 19:16; 22:16; 22:24; 22:36; 23:10; 26:18). Teachers (Gk. διδάσκαλος, Heb. בְּלֵנָה) in the ancient Jewish world were most often scribes or Torah teachers (γραμματεύς, or νομοδιδάσκαλος). The scribe was an executor of legal and judicial matters and some even educated children in the local synagogues.⁷ Though the formal network of Torah education did not see major advances until Joshua ben Gamala’s appointment in the mid 60’s AD, it is also clear that elementary schools

⁶ D.A. Carson, “Matthew,” in The Expositors Bible Commentary, F.E. Gaebelein (ed.), vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 495. Though Carson outlines five major discourses, other commentators see as many as six main discourses including the denouncing of the Pharisaic order and the scribes in Mt 23.

⁷ Craig S. Keener, A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 53.
such as bet sefer (בֵּית ספר) were established as early as the time of Simeon ben Shetah (120-140 BC).

Rabbinic education likely included training in midrashic exposition beyond bet sefer.

In addition to this general emphasis on scribal learning and rabbinic ministry, there existed unusually charismatic leaders who functioned as “wisdom sages.” Keener states:

> It is true that Jesus was not part of what later became the rabbinic movement, nor was he merely a Jewish scribe or ancient Near Eastern wisdom sage. However, many early sages traveled, and it is unlikely that most Galilean Jews who saw themselves as faithful to God’s law would have sharply contrasted charismatic teachers from other teachers of the law as if the former lacked legal wisdom. Most scholars note that many characteristics of Jesus’ ministry fit expectations for sages and scribes, and whatever else Jesus may have been, he was clearly a Jewish teacher of one or both types as well.

Functioning as a charismatic wisdom sage, Jesus would easily gain followers with varying degrees of devotion. Like his contemporaries: Honi the Circle Drawer, Hanina ben Dosa, Jochanan ben Zakkai, and Simon bar Kochba, Jesus would gain a crowd of followers who would come to venerate him as a Messianic figure. Unlike these rabbis, he would attract followers in the tens of thousands instead of just a few hundred. This is likely due to the fact that Jesus’ miracle and exorcism ministry was qualitatively superior to these false Christs.

Another trait that Jesus shared with other would-be messiah’s was that he was likely a tradesman. Safrai notes that in the Second Temple period itinerant sages were also skilled

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8 Shemuel Safrai, *Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum: Section One, The Jewish People in the First Century* vol. 2, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1976), 948. ben Shetah was a Pharisaic scholar and Nashi of the Sanhedrin. Safrai mentions that this tradition is found in the Palestinian Talmud. Though this source is much later than the period it attests, Safrai insists this tradition has not been corrupted because of the particularly strong oral culture of the Rabbis, beginning with ben Sirah the priest and scribe during the intertestamental period.

9 Ibid., 905. The Sermon on the Mount is evidence that Jesus engaged in a sort of bet talmud, or education in oral tradition for his own disciples. Safrai sees evidence of Jesus engaging in a similar bet midrash to that of the later Jochanan ben Zakkai, who used to teach his pupils in the “shadow of the sanctuary.” Jesus teaching in the Temple, and the disciples continuing to meet there could be evidence of this tradition of rabbis leading their schools in a corner of the Temple edifice.

10 Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 54. Keener refers to the fact that the ordained rabbi (Tannaim 70-200 AD) did not formerly exist until after the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem in AD 70. Although many of the later rabbinic traditions formalized at that time likely existed in some informal way during the 2nd Temple period of Jesus’ day.

11 Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, book XX, (Great Britain: Wordsworth Editions, 2006), 866-867. Josephus lists as many as 10 would-be messiah’s who were met with the iron hand of Roman suppression.

12 However, questions regarding with whom Jesus had apprenticed do surface later on (Jn. 7:15ff). Jesus’ opponents are dumbfounded that he teaches with authority, knowledge, and wisdom, without quoting previous rabbinic rulings and without having formally studied in the rabbinic academies. Jesus’ response is that his Halakhic (הלכתי) authority is from God alone and not a rabbinic school. Sigal mentions that Jesus’ rejection of the Pharisees halakic authority was most definitely a bold counter-offensive against a corrupt purishim, see Phillip Sigal, *The Hallakah of Jesus* (Atlanta: SBL, 2000), 143.
tradesmen including smiths, potters, stone masons, tent makers (lit. “weavers”) and artisans of all
kinds. In this way, Jesus the son of a carpenter (Gk. τέκτων, or “woodsmith”) from Galilee
would be well suited for this itinerant teaching ministry.

In addition to the teachers and scribes in the synagogues, Matthew also mentions the Pharisees
(φαρισαίοι) who are often paired in Scripture with the Sadducees or the teachers of the law.
Though the origin of the Pharisees remains somewhat unclear, Carson concludes that they were
“generally learned, committed to the oral law, and concerned with developing Halakah (or rules
of conduct based on deductions of the law). Most teachers of the law were Pharisees.”

Therefore, Jesus’ teaching ministry, as described in Matthew’s Gospel, fits well into the
messianic climate of his day. Far from being some illegitimate self-appointed wanderer, Jesus
was recognized by his rabbinic competitors as a teacher. He was welcomed in the synagogues
and was an active member of their robust and vigorous culture of Torah study. Safrai remarks:

The study of Torah, however, was not only to learn proper conduct and action; it was also
an act of worship, which brought the student closer to God. The study of Torah was a
holy duty which became a religious experience. It was cultivated in public worship in the
synagogue…in the Temple, at all public meetings, and in individual and private
gatherings. Almost all of the literature of the second Temple period manifests the aim of
Torah study…All stages of education are (sic) centered around the Torah. Even the
initial learning of letters of the alphabet was considered a religious act, as was children’s
further study.

As a Jewish teacher, Jesus was fully engaged and vitally connected in this environment of
learning and worship through Torah education. And, though the Pharasaic order may have

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13 Safrai, The Jewish People in the First Century, 576. Safrai notes that after elementary education around age 12, the
student would usually return to the family business to apprentice and learn a trade.
14 Carson, “Matthew” in The Expositors Bible Commentary, 34. It is likely that the Pharisees were the spiritual
descendants of the Hasidim (הָסִדִּים) during the Hasmonaean era. Carson argues that we should not see rigid categories of Jewish
leadership; instead, we should see many of these roles as overlapping spheres of activity. The exception would be Sadducees who
were mostly professional clergy (priests), and many Pharisees were “scribes” or Torah teachers, and thus distinct from the elders
of the Sanhedrin. 36.
15 Safrai, The Jewish People in the First Century, 945-946. Quoting Mishnah Aboth 5.21 Safrai notes the fixed ages of
school students. “At five the age is reached for the study of scripture, at ten for the study of Mishnah.” It was also common,
according to Amoraic lit., for children to attend school up to the age of 12 or 13, and after this to learn a trade. Though adults
training to be scribes, judges, and synagogue officials continued
disagreed with Jesus’ *midrash* (מִדרָשׁ) or his *Halakah* (הלָכָה) on fasting, divorce, and paying taxes, and though they bristled at his presumptive forgiveness of sinners, they were nevertheless compelled to respectfully address him as “teacher” before haranguing him for his light and easy “yoke.”

**Jesus’ Self-designation and Matthew’s Editorial**

In addition to being addressed by his interlocutors as “teacher,” Jesus refers to himself this way (10:24-25; 26:55), and Matthew includes editorial comments regarding Jesus’ teaching activity (4:23; 7:28ff; 9:35; 11:1; 13:54; 21:23; 22:33). Witherington notes:

> The image of Jesus as sage or teacher is so crucial for Matthew that in editorial summary passages, he cites teaching ahead of preaching and healing as Jesus’ chief task (4:23; 9:35; 11:1). This is all the more striking when one compares the parallel Markan summary at Mark 1:39 where there is no mention of teaching, and when one compares Matthew 11:1 to Luke 7:1 where in the Lukan passage there is no use of the term “teaching.” The content of this teaching is seen repeatedly to be parables, aphorisms, and wisdom discourses. This image of Jesus as sage or teacher and his disciples as scribes or teachers is crucial and gets at the heart of some of the things that make Matthew’s contribution to the Christological discussion distinctive.¹⁶

In summary, Jesus was recognized by his scribal and Pharisaic adversaries as an important instructor of *Halakah*, and Matthew takes pains to tell the reader that his teaching role took precedence over his other important ministries.

**A Compositional Overview of Matthew’s Gospel**

As Matthew increasingly discloses more about Jesus’ mission in his book, some structural cues begin to appear.¹⁷ Kingsbury sees a very simple structure based on the phrase “From that

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¹⁶ Ben Witherington III., *Matthew*, in Smyth and Helwys Biblical Commentary, vol. 19 (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2006), 19. Witherington also raises the issue of the “New Moses” theme, which he believes to be overplayed. If the theme was in Matthew’s mind, it is secondary for him, and only serves to show that Jesus is superior to Moses because he is the son of David, Son of God, neither of which are Mosaic titles.

¹⁷ The discussion over Matthean structure is a circuitous issue, and there are perhaps as many views on this as there are scholars.
time on…” (Gk. ἀπὸ τότε - 4:17; 16:21). Yet, as mentioned previously, many would structure the Gospel around the phrase, “And when he had finished saying these things” (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). However, Keener accepts both Kingsbury’s structure and the five discourses as literary riffs that move the reader along in the story.

However, R.T. France has proposed an even more interesting solution. Instead of being divided along the above key phrases, he affirms that Matthew’s structure flows along geographical markers in the text. France divides the Gospel into six major sections with the five discourses playing a major role in the training of the disciples along this missional continuum (4:12-16:22; 16:21-20:34; 21:1-25:46; 26:1-28:15; 28:16-20). Thus, the closer Jesus moves his ministry to Jerusalem, the more antagonism he experiences. The five speeches in Matthew show increasing escalation resulting in a complete denouncement and judgment on Israel’s leaders, Jerusalem, and the Temple (chapters 23-25).

However the reader is intended to view Matthew’s internal architecture, the five discourses of Jesus fit well into the geographical framework. They also immediately move the reader into a miraculous narrative that is directly impacted by its preceding discourse. This study will now turn its attention directly to the five major teaching sections in Matthew and what they tell us about Jesus.

**DISCOURSE NUMBER ONE: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT (5-7)**

As noted above, in many ways Jesus’ teaching was very similar to that of his contemporaries. It was common for popular itinerate rabbis to be invited to speak in the synagogues (4:23) or to

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18 Jack D. Kingsbury, *Matthew: Structure, Christology, kingdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1975), 1-3. Still, other scholars are critical of this because when it is used in chapter 16, Matthew doesn’t appear to put this kind of weight on it.


21 Ibid., 2-4; 8.
offer their disciples a kind of field education (5:1-7:29). Additionally, it was customary for Jewish teachers to use a variety of rhetorical devices such as parables, anecdotes, hyperbole, questions, and riddles in order to communicate effectively. Carson states, "Virtually all the statements in chapters 5-7 (sic) can be paralleled in the Talmud or other Jewish sources." An example would be the blessing (μακάριος) statements compared to 4Q525 of the Dead Sea collection, and the well-established Semitic idiom, "he opened his mouth" (5:2). In this way, Jesus appears in Matthew’s text as a typical teacher and preacher in the region of Galilee.

Yet, Jesus’ teachings were far more than midrashic expositions or cleverly worded aphorisms. The impression that emerges from the Matthean sermon is of an important teacher whose authority exceeds that of his contemporary scribal Jews, the pious Pharisees, or for that matter Moses himself. There are several distinctive features of the Sermon on the Mount that illustrate this.

First, the sermon is flanked by extraordinary healings and miraculous activity. After Jesus had relocated his ministry base to Capernaum (4:13), he then set out to proclaim his Kingdom Gospel. Matthew states, “from that time on, Jesus began to preach and say, ‘Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand’” (4:17). Matthew then offers a summary of Jesus’ ministry characterized by teaching in synagogues, proclaiming the gospel of his Kingdom, and healing every kind of sickness and disease among the Judeans (4:23). This is followed by Jesus’

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22 Brad Young, Meet the Rabbis (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), 29. Though, the claim that the Rabbis engaged their students beyond the synagogue in a kind of beth midrash is difficult to establish because the rabbinic writings postdate the destruction of the Temple. Though it is clear that rabbinic Judaism did not pull its traditions out of thin air, and the destruction of the temple may have accelerated their need to formalize and codify already existing traditions. See also Keener, The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 55.
23 Keener, A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, 25. Keener provides a very good digest of the various kinds of Jewish sages and teachers that likely existed in Jesus’ day. However, it is important to note that Matthew himself contrasts Jesus with the scribes (Gk. grammateus), and Pharisees (pharisaious).
24 D.A. Carson, “Matthew,” in The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, 131. Though, Carson states that this is not difficult considering the sheer size of these later rabbinic documents.
inaugural sermon (5-7) and after the teaching on the mount ends Jesus descends to continue his miraculous activity (8:1ff.). Matthew takes pains to tell us that Jesus’ teaching ministry overlaps with his miraculous exploits, thus exceeding the mere pedagogy of his rabbinic peers.

Secondly, the eschatological character of the sermon is unmistakable. Matthew begins the Sermon on the Mount with a series of makarisms or blessing statements (5:1-12). These “beatitudes” are characterized by promises of the meek inheriting God’s new world, the pure in heart seeing God, and oppressed followers being analogous to persecuted prophets, etc. The significance of the makarisms is that they strongly echo Isaiah 61, which is an eschatological passage of the Messiah’s coming. The body matter of the sermon (5:17-7:12) will highlight Jesus’ ethical and practical demands for them, but the prologue (5:1-16) and the epilogue (7:13-29) are striking in their eschatological emphasis. Jesus warns his followers to follow his narrow path, avoiding the way of destruction. He also asserts in the sermon that all other messianic contenders are false prophets who will be ostensibly diagnosed by their rotten fruit (7:15-20). He concludes the address with an ominous warning for those who will be excluded from his Kingdom notwithstanding their compelling resumes of prophetic and charismatic ministry (7:21).

Thirdly, Matthew records Jesus stating that they should not think that he has come to abolish (κατλύω meaning to demolish, or annul) the law, but to fulfill it (5:17). Scholars disagree as to what Jesus meant by “fulfill” (πληρώω). Some commentators take πληρώω as meaning to

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28 Testament of Asher 1.3-5; 2 Enoch 30.14-15; m. Abot 2.9; 1 QS 3.14-4.26. The two ways or two paths were well known in Jesus’ time. One road led to light and the other to darkness. Darrell Bock, Jesus in Context: Background Readings for Gospel Study, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 91.
29 Carson, “Matthew,” in The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, 142.
“validate,” “confirm,” or even “vindicate.” The net effect of this interpretation is that Jesus will uphold the Scriptures even in the smallest of details. According to this view, he was reassuring his Jewish hearers that he had no intentions of casting off the “yoke” of Torah, but would choose to fulfill it by living in obedience to it. This interpretation is based on the potential of an underlying Aramaic qum, which means to “validate” or “affirm” the law.31

However, Carson points out that the LXX never uses πληρόω this way and that the contrast in the text is between Jesus’ own teachings (not his actions) and the OT. Therefore, to say that Jesus fulfills the Scriptures by observing them is to misunderstand Matthew’s point.32 Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets (the Scriptures) because they point to him. As Carson states, “The antithesis is not between ‘abolish’ and ‘keep,’ but between ‘abolish’ and ‘fulfill.’” Moreover, since Matthew liberally applies the term “fulfill” to Jesus it is more natural to interpret the word as Matthew himself applied it, referring to specific prophecies, typology, and realized eschatological expectations (1:22; 2:15,17, 23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 27:9). Instead of annulling the Mosaic law, Jesus would fill it full, bringing it to a startling and dramatic completion.

The fourth way that the Sermon of the Mount demonstrates Jesus’ superiority is that Jesus decisively expands and amends Mosaic laws in his sermon. Again, Matthew goes out of his way to tell the reader that Jesus is a typical rabbi by uttering common phrases such as, “You have heard it said…” (5:1). Another distinctive Jewish feature is that Jesus is seated before offering

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30 W.D. Davies and D.C. Allison, “Matthew 1-7,” in The International Critical Commentary of the Holy Scriptures, 482. See also Keener who cites Ridderbos, Davies, Sigal et. al. This interpretation would be based on the Aramaic qum, which means to “validate” or “affirm” the law. Yet the verb πληρόω in the LXX is rendered “to fulfill” and to “confirm.”


his midrash (תלמוד). However, Matthew asserts that Jesus’ “take” on the Scriptures is more authoritative than his scribal and Pharisaic competitors. For example, Jesus has already stated, “for truly I say to you” (Gk. ἀμὴν λέγω - 5:18). This “amen” saying was extremely rare at the beginning of a teaching and was almost always applied as a benedictory comment at the end of a prayer or speech. Matthew records another thirty times where Jesus begins his teaching with the phrase “amen,” or “truly I say to you.”

Jesus also intensifies six Mosaic commands and appears to address the more ethical and spiritual dimension of those commands (5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43). In no way does Jesus “abolish” or annul these legal principles he addresses. Instead, he charges his followers with fastidious observance of the Scriptures (5:19). Thus, as Keener observes, he upholds the Torah while being “…the decisive arbiter of its meaning. Not one scholar among many.”

Based on Jesus’ expansion clauses to these principles, the disciples now know what it means to have their righteousness exceed that of the Jewish teachers (5:20). Jesus’ teaching exceeds the flat, one-dimensional righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees with both higher standards (5:28) and by addressing the internal disposition of ones heart towards the law (5:22).

Matthew concludes the first discourse with a response from the eavesdropping crowd, “And when Jesus finished saying these things, the crowds were astonished at his teachings. For he was teaching them as one with authority, and not as their scribes” (7:28-29). On the surface, the astonishment of the crowd appears to contrast Jesus’ authority with the Torah teachers lack of authority. This, however, was not Matthew’s intended meaning. Instead, Matthew’s emphasis is

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33 Keener, A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, 182. Keener points out that Paul himself uses this phrase concerning Jesus’ commands in 1 Cor 7:10-12.
34 R.T. France, The Gospel of Matthew, in The New International Commentary on the New Testament, 184-185 France points out the fact that Jesus’ disciples do not follow his example by beginning their teachings with this same phrase, and this does strengthen the view that these sayings are authentic. Mark uses it 13 times, Luke six times, and John 25 times.
35 Keener, A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, 182.
on the fact that he is “one” with authority, and not part of the rabbi’s community of authority.

Keener states:

What amazed them so much about Jesus’ teaching was not his use of proverbs, parables, hyperboles, and other standard pedagogic devices of his day; what astonished them was his claim to authority, a theme that climaxes in 28:18. Other Jewish teachers regularly cited earlier sages’ opinions, and though later teachers sometimes came to regard their tradition as tantamount to God’s word, Jesus’ contemporaries never would have said, like Jesus, that people would be judged according to how they treated a particular teacher’s words. With greater authority than the scribes who expound the law, greater authority than Moses who gave it (5:1), the authority indeed of the one who will judge humanity on the final day (7:21-23), Jesus declares God’s word, and the people recognize that he speaks with authority unlike their other teachers.36

Matthew’s crowd is not saying that Jesus taught with authority while the Torah teachers lacked any real authority. Indeed, it was the scribe’s responsibility to offer authoritative legal rulings in matters of Halakah. As Keener notes above, what is conspicuously absent from Jesus’ teaching is the citing of previous legal rulings. Instead, Jesus teaches on his own authority, given him by his heavenly Father. In his book, A Rabbi Talks with Jesus, Jacob Neusner comments:

Yes, I would have been astonished. Here is a Torah teacher who says in his own name what the Torah says in God’s name. It is one thing to say on one’s own how a basic teaching of Torah shapes the everyday…It is quite another to say that the Torah says one thing, but I say…then to announce in one’s own name what God set forth at Sinai.37

The first discourse ends with Matthew’s Jesus, an otherwise common rabbi, assuming a rare and uncommon authority to speak and work on God’s behalf. He demands no less than exclusive submission to his lordship because he is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. Therefore, those who take a recalcitrant posture toward his teaching will be judged as fools, while those who follow his Halakah will be adjudicated on “that day” (7:21-29).

36 Keener, A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, 256-257. This authority was likely not a recognition of “ordination” but one of many occasions when the crowd would be awed by Jesus’ innate authority.
DISCOURSE NUMBER TWO: INSTRUCTIONS FOR MISSIONS (10:1-40)

The second major Mathean discourse of Jesus is found in chapter ten. At first glance, Jesus appears to simply offer some helpful advice to his disciples before they “try on” a short-term missions project. Yet, this discourse has obvious eschatological aspects.38

The discourse is divided into three useful sections. Jesus tells them to go to the lost sheep of Israel instead of to the Gentile communities (vv. 5-6).39 This first section regards to whom they will be sent. Second, he instructs them about the nature of their ministry (vv.7-8), which is to preach that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand, healing, raising the dead, cleansing lepers and casting out demons. The final piece of his instruction entails the disciples’ reception and rejection by the “lost sheep of Israel” (vv.16-39). On closer inspection, there are several christological keys in the passage that show the reader who Jesus is.

First, Jesus has already chosen twelve men to accompany his mission and to learn from him as disciples. He then calls them to himself and gives them authority to carry out miraculous exploits (10:1). They are called the twelve disciples (Gk. μαθητής, Heb. חלנית), not just “the twelve” as Mark and Luke state.40 Nearly all commentators agree that the significance of Jesus choosing “twelve” is their eschatological role as leaders of the twelve tribes of Israel (19:28). The symbolism is unmistakable. However, Matthew bothers to tell his readers the names of these twelve disciples to make sure his readers know that these “twelve” were a historical reality and not just a symbolic one.

Secondly, the Mathean discourse shows that Jesus had the authority to empower the disciples to carry on his miraculous activity without him being physically present. Jesus’ instruction is practical for their immediate mission and is prophetic with regards to their long-term mission.

Phrases like, “you will be hated,” and “when they hand you over,” are more characteristic of the disciples’ activity in the book of Acts after being empowered by the Spirit for world mission. That Jesus was able to warn them beforehand would demonstrate in yet another way to Matthew’s readers (or hearers) that Jesus was a prophet.

Thirdly, Jesus has sent them to the towns of the lost sheep of Israel (10:6). This directive does not appear to controvert the ultimate Gentile mission of Jesus. Of course, Matthew has already told his readers that Jesus was acknowledged by the Gentile Magi (chapter 2), had established his ministry base near a Gentile area where he attracted a large following of Gentiles (chapter 4), and praised a Gentile Roman Centurion for greater faith than that of his Jewish countrymen (chapter 8). Matthew’s Gospel will close with Jesus commissioning the apostles to disciple the “nations” (chapter 28). Yet, in this discourse, Jesus’ first priority is that of establishing himself as Israel’s promised Messiah before he releases his apostles to carry his message from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. Carson states:

The most important consideration was not pragmatic but theological. Jesus stood at the nexus in salvation history where as a Jew and the Son of David he came in fulfillment of his people’s history as their King and Redeemer. Yet his personal claims would offend so many of his own people that he would be rejected by all but a faithful remnant. Why increase their opposition by devoting time to Gentile ministry?

Matthew’s consistent witness was that Jesus is Israel’s true Messiah and stands at the fulcrum of time, offering his Gospel “first to the Jew and then to the Gentile” as Paul would later state in his letter to the Romans (1:10).

The fourth feature that is significant about the discourse is that Jesus makes the rejection of his disciples’ authority to minister and preach in his name tantamount to rejection of his own

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41 m. Makkot 3.10-12*: This text in the Mishnah describes the disciples flogging by the Jewish authorities, detailing the 40 stripes less 1. Bock, Jesus in Context, 99.
42 1 Enoch 90. 6-10, 15. During the invasion of Antiochus Epiphanes, the Enoch vision depicts Israel as sheep who need to be protected and cared for. Bock, Jesus in Context, 99.
44 Carson, “Matthew,” in The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, 246.
authority. As noted before, how one responds to or rejects Jesus is the deciding factor in the final judgment. Jesus even stated that the towns and cities that reject the disciples would be worse off in the final judgment than Sodom and Gomorrah (10:13-31). To deliberately reject “those who came to them with the message of the nearness of God’s Kingdom could not go unpunished forever. We would not miss the christological claim that is implied.” This christological claim is a recurring theme with Jesus. Reception of his messianic message was critical in order to escape the final judgment.

Fifth, Jesus tells his apprentices that they will be persecuted and maligned because of their testimony concerning him (10:17-40). His Messianic witnesses will be “given words to say” before governors, kings, and the Jewish courts. The reader cannot ignore the supernatural promise in the discourse. The Spirit of the Father will inspire the witness of the disciples when they are tried by men.

Lastly, the discourse ends with the typical eschatological warnings of Jesus to his own disciples (10:32-42). Failing to acknowledge Jesus before men would disqualify any disciple from participation in the coming Kingdom of the Father (vv. 32-33). On the heels of this warning, Jesus teaches them that he had not “come” to bring political peace (at least initially), but instead he had “come” to bring strife and division to the earth. This statement about division among households and families in vv. 34-36 comes from Micah 7:6 which states, “For son treats father contemptuously, Daughter rises up against her mother, Daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; A man's enemies are the men of his own household” (NASB). It is likely that Jesus was aware of the traditional interpretation of this passage, which as Keener notes was

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“applied the familial division of this text to the period of messianic woes, the great tribulation that would precede the Messiah’s coming (m. Sota. 9:15; Pesiq. Rab Kah. 5:9; Song Rb. 2.13, 4, Pesiq R. 15:14/15).”47 Once again, it is reception of Jesus as Messiah that will be the deciding factor in the final analysis of one’s life.48

This second discourse shows that Jesus’ disciples have been handpicked to be empowered and trained to carry out his ongoing Messianic mission. This short-term training mission is both educational for his disciples and eschatological in that Jesus is offering the Gospel first to the Jews. He predicts that the very ones who were offered this message will reject it and reject his new Messianic community. The result of this rejection will be their denial before the Father.

**Discourse Number Three: The Parables of the Kingdom (13:1-53)**

The third discourse begins with large crowds surrounding Jesus at the shore. Once again, he takes the posture of a teacher by sitting, and instead of a hillside, he uses a boat as his platform. Jesus instructs his followers and the crowds using a series of parables to reveal something about the Kingdom that was quite unexpected.

A curious feature of this third discourse is that the disciples want to know why he speaks to the crowd in parables. Jesus responds that this was in fulfillment of the prophet Isaiah (6:9) that the Jews would ever be hearing and seeing but never comprehending despite the overexposure of Torah study and the general climate of Messianic fervor (13:13-15). He tells the disciples, “to you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven, but to them it has not

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48 R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, 184; 408. France does not see a necessary preexistent theology in Matthew, but views this as more significant as a statement of mission (9:13; 20:28; 10:34-35). However, Carson views these “I have come” statements as clear Christological and eschatological self-awareness statements of Jesus, 257.
been granted” (13:11). Jesus speaks to the crowd cryptically (13:1) but the explanation is for insiders (10-23; 36-43). There are several conclusions we draw about Jesus from this series of parables.

First, the eschatological material in this third discourse makes it impossible to simply view these parables as nice earthly stories with heavenly meanings. As noted before, Jesus is not merely a rabbi who used creative and catchy rhetorical devices to illustrate his sermon points. Instead, Jesus’ use of parables in this discourse is directly tied to the coming apocalyptic Kingdom and the secrets about that Kingdom. Carson, partially quoting Ladd, remarks:

For the “secrets of the Kingdom” to be “given” the disciples suggests that to them certain eschatological realities are being revealed… That God would bring in his Kingdom was no secret. All Jews looked forward to it. “The new truth, now given to men by revelation in the person and mission of Jesus, is that the Kingdom which is to come finally in apocalyptic power, as foreseen by Daniel, has in fact entered into the world in advance in a hidden form to work secretly within and among men.”

Implicit in the narrative is that Jesus himself is the King of that Kingdom, and it is his prerogative to reveal its mysteries to his hearers.

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49 R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, in The New International Commentary on the New Testament, 510. France views the Greek term *mysterion*, as a “secret” and sees a link between Matthew’s usage and Dan. 2. The “secrets” that were revealed to Daniel are not mysteries in the sense that with good detective work, one might uncover what they conceal. Instead, these mysteries are “secrets” that cannot be understood without divine revelation. Indeed, this is a favorite term of Paul and does refer in his writings to special revelation.

50 Witherington, “Matthew,” in *Smyth and Helwys Biblical Commentary*, 257-258. Rome responded to these kinds of messianic uprisings with the iron hand of suppression. Therefore, a premature coronation by the eager crowds would likely stunt the longevity of his Kingdom ministry and probably “short-circuit” his messianic mission. Jesus appears to be telling only his closest followers the meaning of the parables and they will be expected later to take what was whispered and shout it from the rooftops (cf. ch 10).

51 N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 175-177. Wright argues that these parables are not Jesus’ way of simply talking about the Kingdom, rather they are helping to bring about the Kingdom. The telling of parables was not a second order activity, but a way for Jesus not only to talk about “mercy,” but also to actually extend that mercy and warn of the consequences of refusing the invitation.

Witherington sees a direct connection here with Ezekiel 12:1-2 in which God is “commanding a prophet to speak to his hard-hearted rebellious people in a way that will make clear to them that they do not understand.”\textsuperscript{53} This is precisely what Jesus sets out to do.\textsuperscript{54}

In the first parable, the sower scattered seed on several different kinds of ground. Witherington recognizes that the parable is “about three sorts of failure and three degrees of success.”\textsuperscript{55} The first type of soil was the well-beaten path and was indicative of the one who failed to understand. Jesus has just stated that the reason for this lack of understanding was a hard and impenetrable heart (13:14-15). The second soil only had a temporary adherence to the message. Community pressure caused the one with “rocky” soil to annul their ties with the message rather quickly. The “thorny” soil produced a crop, but was suffocated by a preoccupation with material gain and worries. It is the last soil that is commended in the parable, not just for “understanding” and “seeing,” but also for actually producing the Kingdom’s fruit. The fruit produced by those who have been given the secrets of the Kingdom more than make up for the wasted seed scattered on unproductive soil.\textsuperscript{56} Therefore, Jesus teaches that critical variable in the productivity of the seed was the condition of the soil.

The second parable is the parable of the weeds (13:24-30), which is similar in theme to that of the net (13:47-50). In both the parable of the weeds and the parable of the net, Jesus’ application appears to be eschatological. Jesus stated, “Let them both grow together until the harvest.” The weeds are sown among the wheat, and they are not distinguished until the final harvest. Jesus uses one of his favorite designations for himself as the “Son of Man” who will send forth his

\textsuperscript{53} Witherington, “Matthew,” in Smyth and Helwys Biblical Commentary, 263. He states, “Parables or allegories in such a circumstance have a judicial function and reveal the people’s distance from God.”

\textsuperscript{54} Keener, A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, 378-379 offers a compelling list of the background information on the “mystery” element in certain interpretations of the law, and Jesus’ possible use of riddles (unexplained parables) and allegory.

\textsuperscript{55} Witherington, “Matthew,” in Smyth and Helwys Biblical Commentary, 261.

\textsuperscript{56} Keener, A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, 378.
angels which are his harvesters (13:41), and evokes images of the Son of Man of Daniel 7:13-14 who rules the nations in an everlasting Kingdom. Likewise, in his parable of the net, the angels will separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them in the furnace on the Day of the Lord.57

This parable is followed by two stories, one of the hidden treasure and the other a pearl, illustrating the urgent need of the disciples to embrace this new Kingdom based on its inestimable worth (vv.44-45). Again, the Kingdom appears to be hidden to those who cannot see its value, and only those who have eyes to see can perceive its worth.

Jesus completes the circle of teaching by asking the disciples if they have understood all these things (v. 51). He then states that every teacher of Torah who has been instructed about the Kingdom will bring out these “new” aspects, as well as the “old.” This seems to show that Jesus is adding a “new” revelation about the Kingdom, while not contradicting some of the “old” ideas. The eschatological nature of Jesus’ teaching is remarkable.

The unmistakable inference of this discourse is that Jesus is the King of this Kingdom, for he alone knows its secrets and reveals its mysteries to the crowd and his disciples. The parables also demonstrate that the disciples are in fact the good soil, the true wheat, the unspoiled fish, and the savvy merchants who have discovered the inestimable worth of the new Messianic Kingdom.

DISCOURSE NUMBER FOUR: CHALLENGING CONVENTIONS OF KINGDOM LIFE (18:1-19:2)

The fourth discourse begins with Jesus using the ἀληθή λέγοντα τιμάω saying at the beginning of his instruction again. In each section of the fourth discourse, Jesus challenged conventional wisdom.

57 N.T. Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God, 181. The third parable in chapter thirteen addresses the issue of a small Kingdom, like a mustard seed, and a small amount of yeast that is worked into the batch of dough (vv. 31-34). The revealed Kingdom secret here is that though this Messianic Kingdom is small at first, it “was to grow like an unobserved seed turning into a plant before anyone had realized what was happening.”
In response to a question put to him by the disciples about who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven (18:1-2), Jesus called a little child to him and challenged the disciples to think of greatness in terms of humility “like this child” (v. 4). He goes on to teach them that when they welcome a child in his name they were welcoming himself, and whoever causes a little child who believes in him to sin will be in danger of the fires of gehenna (vv.7-9).\(^{58}\) Jesus challenges the conventional views of his disciples about positional authority. He follows this by stressing the necessity of focusing on the Messianic community, not on positions of leadership within that economy (18:15-18).

The next convention that Jesus turns upside down regards a “sinning brother” (18:15-20). Jesus establishes an escalating pattern of rebuke and confrontation, beginning with a personal appeal and ending with a community appeal for repentance. This rule of Kingdom correction apparently prompts Peter to ask Jesus how often he should forgive his brother who sins against him (v.21). Peter answers his own question with “seven times” but his braggadocio is apparently premature. Jesus brings correction to a heart that is seeking a ritualistic answer to a relational issue. There is no limit to how much God had forgiven him, and there should be no limit to how much he should forgive others.

Forgiveness “from your heart” is the critical factor. Flat obedience and observance of ritualistic forgiveness would not pass in the Messiah’s new kingdom. Witherington notes, “Unlimited frequency of forgiveness goes with the unlimited scope of forgiveness.”\(^{59}\) Though

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\(^{58}\) Witherington, “Matthew,” in Smyth and Helwys Biblical Commentary, 354. Witherington sees the “little children who believe in me” to be a reference to a new believer in Christ, not necessarily children. Yet this is unlikely considering that Jesus has called an actual child to him to make his point.

\(^{59}\) Ibid., 353.
Jesus is clearly using the language of hyperbole, he does make the point that as long as one is counting they are not forgiving.  

Jesus answers Peter with an astonishing parable of a king and the unmerciful servant. But, the parable reverses what Peter thought would be an excessive act of obedience. “Seven times” would likely exceed the rabbinic consensus on the matter. Therefore, the parable of a King settling matters with a subject is both a graphic and greatly exaggerated story for emphasis.

Jesus follows this with a warning that the King handed that unforgiving servant over to his torturers. “This,” Jesus says, “is what my Heavenly Father will do to each of you unless you forgive each other from your heart.” Normally, Jews did not address God as their father. Though they did consider him the father of their nation and their covenant, they did not believe that God was their own father in any special sense. Morris remarks, “Jesus refers to God as ‘my heavenly Father,’ stressing his special relationship to God and at the same time something of the majesty of God.” Not only did the discourse quell a simmering animosity and competitiveness that Jesus sensed among his followers, it also spelled out the ramifications of a careless disciple who is averse to forgiving his brother. The parable reminded them of the realities of God’s final judgment. Jesus implicitly links himself to these eschatological realities even though he states that the Father will be the final arbiter in the matter.


According to Matthew, the final discourse comes on the heels of Jesus having just denounced the Pharisees and scribes as hypocrites (Gk. \( \upsilon \rho \kappa \rho \iota \iota \' \zeta \) chapter 23). He tells the disciples that

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61 Carson, “Matthew,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 405. See also Keener 456-457. Many scholars have suggested that forgiveness up to three times would be allowed in Jewish society, but none will be given after the fourth.


63 Morris, 477.
they are to avoid the honored title rabbi (נַגְּדָם) and that they were not to be called “teacher for they had but one teacher, the Christ” (23:10). Reminiscent of Jeremiah, he then grieves over the Jews’ rejection of him and states that their house is left “desolate.”

After pronouncing this prophetic “Woe” or “Oy” (Gk. οὐαί, Heb. יָאָה), Jesus makes his way toward the Mount of Olives and the disciples call his attention to the magnificence of the Herodian architecture surrounding the temple complex (24:1). Much to their surprise, Jesus launches into a prophetic denunciation of the Temple as he had previously done to their rabbinic luminaries in chapter 23. "Do you not see all these things?” Jesus asks them. “Truly I say to you, not one stone here will be left upon another, which will not be torn down” (24:2). This eschatological outburst is followed by another occasion where the disciples come to him in private to seek the meaning of Jesus’ sayings, again demonstrating that they are the faithful remnant and the true messianic community who have eyes to see and ears to hear (Mt 13).

While sitting on the Mount of Olives the disciples ask him when this would all take place and what would be the sign of his coming and the end of the age (24:3). The discourse does appear to be structured along the lines of these two separate questions.64 The Olivet discourse is the final major block of teaching in which Jesus prophesies his coming in judgment to Jerusalem and the temple and his coming in glory at the end of the age. The discourse is marked by several ominous warnings and OT apocalyptic allusions.

First, Jesus begins by warning them about the “birth pains” and the false messiah’s who will arise during this period (24:4-26). He then describes the coming of the Son of Man (vv.27-31) with the illustration of the fig tree and its leaves (vv.32-35), followed by an analogy from the

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64 France, 899. France leans heavy on the “time texts” in the passage. It is clear that these time indicators in the beginning of the passage are surely for the fall of Jerusalem. Yet, he leaves open the possibility that the second part of the discourse refers to a future era in which the parousia (coming) of Christ will occur. This is why v.27 regarding the parousia is not attached at least in a temporal way to the fall of Jerusalem prophecy.
days of Noah (vv.36-40) and the need to be prepared for the sudden and abrupt coming of the Son of Man. Finally, there is a charge to faithfulness illustrated by the parable of the master leaving for a long period of time. If the master returns to find those in charge of his Messianic community engaged in abusive behavior towards fellow servants and abandoning their Messianic ethics through scurrilous conduct, the Master would be obligated to judge them and denounce them as well.

Chapter twenty-four is followed by three parables that illustrate Jesus’ directives (Mt 25). The first story is the parable of the ten virgins. In this story, Jesus charges them with watchfulness and to be prepared for his coming. The second parable of the talents illustrates faithfulness and productivity with the Kingdoms message, while the third parable of the sheep and goats revisits the eschatological judgment of God and separation of the righteous from the wicked. The final section involves the need for compassionate and benevolent ministry of the new Messianic community toward others. Jesus warns that those who are turned away from the Kingdom are those who failed to minister to the “least of these.”

It is at this point that we see that the church’s one teacher, the Messiah, is the Lord and Judge. The apocalyptic references in the discourse are hard to miss. Especially considering the editorial remark, “spoken of by the prophet Daniel, let the reader understand” (24:15). If this phrase is original, and there is no reason to doubt its authenticity, then the key to the discourse is Daniel 7:13-14 in which the Apocalyptic Son of Man comes with the clouds to the Ancient of Days to receive all dominion and power and authority.65 Jesus picks up on this Daniel allusion in v. 31 also. After the intense time of distress, the sign of the coming of the Son of Man will appear. He

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65 This assumes that Matthew is derived from Mark for the passage also appears in Mark 13. In any case, there appears to be no problem with the MSS witness of this verse in either text. See the apparatus of Barbara Aland and Kurt Aland, *The Greek New Testament*, 4th rev.ed. (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1994), 93.
will send his angels to call forth his “elect” from all over the earth, Jesus then charges them (the disciples) to be watchful for his coming.

Likewise, the language of a desolating sacrilege in Mt 24:15ff. (abomination that causes desolation) evokes images from Daniel 9:27ff., and Daniel 12:10. Jesus has already told the Pharisees that their house would be left desolate (Gk. ἔρημος – 23:38), meaning “empty, bereft, or uninhabited.” The “house” Jesus is referring to is clearly the Temple. In 24:15, Jesus predicts the destruction of the Temple by Rome, who did indeed leave their house of worship in a state of utter disrepair. In 39 AD, the Roman Emporer Caligula sought to set up a statue of himself in the Temple area. The Romans underestimated the Jewish zeal for the “house” and Caligula was unsuccessful. However, in 70 AD, after the Romans leveled the Temple, they erected blasphemous idols and symbols of Rome all over the Temple mount.66

Jesus draws from several Old Testament passages. He uses the prophetic language of cosmic upheaval quoting from Isaiah 13:10 and 34:4. The only language appropriate to explain what it will be like to be on the wrong side of God’s judgment is this kind of graphic imagery regarding “the sun being darkened and the moon will not give its light…” etc. In the text, Jesus is assuming the role of apocalyptic “prophet,” “Messiah,” “Son of Man,” and their “Lord (24: 30; 36). The ambiguities of “kingdom parables” are gone. Jesus speaks plainly and prophetically to them about both the immediate future (AD 70) and the far future (his ultimate return).

CONCLUSION: THE GREAT COMMISSION AND ONGOING TEACHING (28:19)

After being crucified and raised from the dead, Jesus commissioned his disciples to go into the world and make disciples of the nations, “teaching them to obey all that I’ve commanded you” (28:19). This commission is based on the fact that “all authority in heaven and on earth” had been given to Jesus, the risen Messiah, the church’s one teacher. That they were not to

pattern their new disciples after themselves was a significant break with the rabbinic practice.\textsuperscript{67} Though the disciples would make many structural breaks with Judaism, they would also adopt many aspects of their Judaic heritage as well. After telling them that they have but one teacher, he goes on to prophesy to the Pharisees that he will send them “prophets, and wise men, and scribes” (In Mt 23:34). The New Covenant leaders would carry on Jesus’ authority to make disciples by going, teaching, and baptizing the nations as followers of this divine teacher. When they spoke, the would speak and prophesy on behalf of God himself, and when they ruled on matters it would be as binding as Jesus’ own Halakah for they were his apostolic successors.

This brief survey has shown that every major teaching discourse in Matthew presents Jesus as a superior and supreme teacher in every way. His authority exceeds his rabbinic counterparts because it is God’s authority. His instruction and training of the twelve is prophetic not merely midrashic. He alone could reveal new secrets of the coming Kingdom, and his instructions included eschatological warnings for unbelief, abandoning ones commitment, and failing to “know” him. The final analysis of Matthew’s portrait of Jesus the Messiah is that his role was to authoritatively instruct his followers, and they in turn would assume his authority to instruct his future disciples in God’s new and unexpected economy.

\textsuperscript{67} Keener, \textit{A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew}, 716.
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