

STUDENT ESSAY



Gethsemane – Photo by Jerzy Strzelecki

**The Ruler Who is to Shepherd My People Israel:
Matthew's *Diorei Torah* and the Messiahship of Jesus**

From beginning to end, in both its structure and content, the entire Gospel account of Matthew may be viewed as an extremely rich, multi-faceted and multilevel teaching on the meaning, purpose, and fulfillment of the Mosaic Torah. At the very heart and center of the Matthean account is the assertion that in order to fully understand the Torah, one needs to understand the true identity and mission of Jesus; and that in order to fully understand Jesus, one needs to first understand the Torah. It is with the purpose of bringing us with him on a journey of faith through the Torah—from his Infancy Narrative's consideration of Jesus as One "Who is *called* the Messiah" (1:16), to the sharing of Peter's full profession of faith in Jesus as "the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (16:16), who "*must* go to Jerusalem and suffer greatly...and be killed and on the third day be raised" (16:21)—that the author in turn sets out to teach us all that he has learned.

On a purely literary level, in choosing to open his narrative with the genealogy of Jesus, Matthew harkens us back to the very beginning of the Book of Numbers, to the census of the people and the counting of the twelve tribes. Matthew's practice of interspersing Jesus' teachings on the Law with accounts of His works also seems to echo Numbers' structure in its pronouncement of numerous legal ordinances interspersed with content describing the Israelites' experiences as they journeyed. Thematically, Matthew's presentation of Jesus' mission as a continual journey, beginning with His baptism, His forty days in the desert, His itinerant ministry that finally culminates in His passion, death and resurrection, seems to parallel the story of the Israelites' journey in the desert, beginning with their encampment at Sinai and ending with their arrival at the border of the Promised Land. But, more profoundly, it is in how Matthew's text emphasizes Jesus' roles as both teacher and judge that we see the author's theology and presentation of Jesus as the Messiah—that is, as the foretold “ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel” (2:6; Num. 24:17).

It is through five separate discourses (5:1 – 7:29; 10:1-11:1; 13:1-53; 18:1-35; 24:1-25:46) that Matthew presents Jesus as both teacher and judge. These discourses are readily identified, as each block of text consistently begins with phrases such as, “You have heard that it was said to your ancestors,” followed by, “But I say to you,” and finally each block of text concluding with, “When Jesus finished these words....” The discourses by Jesus correspond not only in number with the five books of the Torah (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy), but also in their content and nature, as reiterations of the Law and of God's covenant with His people.

In the first discourse (5:1-7:29), Matthew places Jesus on a mountain teaching crowds of people, drawing us back to God's pronouncement of the Law to the people through Moses on Mount Sinai. In this setting, Jesus' teaching of “The Beatitudes” then becomes a reiteration of the Ten Commandments, and with their fulfillment one merits “the kingdom of heaven” (5:3); that is, the everlasting kingdom where God reigns. But Matthew also presents Jesus as an interpreter of the Mosaic Torah unlike any other before Him. Jesus teaches that true righteousness lies not only in not killing or committing adultery, but in ridding ourselves of their underlying vices of hatred and lust (5:21-26 and 5:27-30).

He teaches that the God before whom we should have no other is our “heavenly Father,” One on Whom we should be completely dependent, and with Whom we meet intimately and in secret when we pray (6:5-8). Jesus as “Emmanuel” then not only fulfills God's covenant promise that if the people will keep the commandments, “I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people” (Lev. 26:12), but with God as Father, the covenant becomes a

relationship, and God's promise for faithfulness then effectively becomes, "I will be your Father, and you will be My children." As Jesus teaches the people, here, and later through the parables (the whole of Chapter 13; 18:10-14, 21-35; 21:28-22:14; 25:1-30), at the heart of the Law is the heart of God the Father, and to not keep the Law—and to die as punishment—is to lose our relationship with the Father.

In exhorting the people to "be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect" (5:48), Jesus reiterates the command in Leviticus (19:2), "Speak to the whole Israelite community and tell them: Be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy," teaching them that to be like God is to show mercy, to forgive the sinner, and to love those who hate us (5:20-6:15).

The crowds are "astonished" at Jesus' teachings, "for He taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes" (7:28-29). On this basis, Jesus could be seen as the prophet God had promised Moses that He would send, "from among their kinsmen, and [I] will put My words into his mouth; he shall tell them all that I command him" (Deut. 18:18). But in the midst of bringing a yet unknown interpretation to the Law, Jesus also presents Himself in a manner yet unknown to man: as One who not only teaches with authority, but as One Who has come to fulfill the Law (5:17). Further, as the Law finds its fulfillment in Him, Jesus teaches that the way to true righteousness, the way for the people in turn to fulfill the Law, is to follow Him; that is, to be His disciples. Just as the Torah promises reward for those who "keep His decrees and commands" (Deut. 4:40), Jesus, throughout all five discourses, teaches that there is also great righteousness and reward for His disciples in the fulfilling of His commands.

In the second discourse (10:1-11:1), Jesus teaches his twelve apostles the meaning of discipleship in all of its fullness. He empowers and commissions them to go out and to literally do the work that He Himself has been doing: to proclaim that "the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (10:7), and to work the same miracles He has worked among the people. In doing so, Jesus seems to fulfill the very will of God spoken at the creation of man: "Let us make man in Our image, after Our likeness" (Gen. 1: 26), with the powers of dominion over creation now given to the disciples—to "cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers and drive out demons" (10:8)—like the very powers of God Himself.

As disciples of Jesus, not only have the apostles been given the power to speak and to act as He does, but Jesus teaches them that the people to whom they proclaim the kingdom of heaven will be judged particularly according to how they receive and treat the apostles—not in and of themselves, but because they speak and act on Jesus' behalf. In declaring to His disciples, "Whoever receives you receives Me, and whoever receives Me receives the One who sent Me" (10:40), Jesus seems to echo the second half of God's promise to Moses about the

prophet He will send, "If any man will not listen to my words which He speaks in my name, I myself will make him answer for it" (Deut. 18:19). Perhaps at this point in the narrative, the people of Matthew's community were asking themselves and each other, "Who alone but God could give such power and authority to men? Who else then could this man Jesus be but the Son of the living God?"

At the same time, Jesus also has much to say about the future suffering and persecution of His disciples within the text of the discourses (5:11-12; 10:16-39; 24:9). However, by contrast, Matthew places Jesus' predictions of His own passion elsewhere in his narrative, apart from those texts (16:21-22; 17:22-23; 20:17-19). Perhaps the intent of the author in doing so is to emphasize that this particular work of Jesus was His alone to accomplish as Messiah.

In reviewing Matthew's portrayal of Jesus within the teaching texts, we find that through these texts, there is a progression in the author's unveiling of the full nature of Jesus' Messiahship: first as teacher; then as judge of the people of Israel; and finally, in the last of the discourses, as the One who will judge the nations at the end of all things, as "the Son of Man." It is not without purpose that immediately following Jesus' "end-time" teachings on judgment, with reward and punishment based upon the receiving or rejection of Jesus, even down to treatment of His "least brothers" (25:40), Matthew presents his passion narrative, wherein he resounds these same final discourse themes, not only with the intent of showing that Jesus' Messiahship is not fulfilled until His death and resurrection, but also so that through the events of the Passion, Jesus might continue to teach the people about true righteousness and the fulfillment of the Law.

In contrasting the account of the woman who anoints Jesus at Bethany (26:6-13) with that of the betrayal by Judas (26:14-16, 20-25), Matthew allows Jesus one final teaching parable on the consequences of His acceptance or rejection by the people. Here Matthew allows Jesus to also continue His role as the judge of souls, as He says of the woman who anointed Him, "Amen I say to you, wherever the Gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be spoken of, in memory of her." (26:13) In stark contrast stands Jesus' judgment of "that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed. It would be better for that man if he had never been born." (26:24)

In his passion narrative, Matthew shows that the greatest discourse of Jesus was given, not when He deliberately sat down to teach the people on the mountain, but when He fell prostrate in the garden at Gethsemane, in the throes of "sorrow and distress," praying, "Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will." (26:39, 42) It is only in the passion narrative that Matthew demonstrates how Jesus came to fulfill the Law: in His

perfect obedience to the Father's will; in following every one of the same precepts He taught the people with astonishing authority and power, even unto a death that gave the appearance of complete powerlessness, of utter disgrace and defeat. And as a reward for His perfect obedience, the Father also fulfilled the eternal covenant He made with His people: He raised Jesus to life everlasting and gave Him "all power in heaven and on earth." (28:18)

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