

Lecture 20: Matthew's Jesus

Matthew's portrayal of Jesus' opposition to the Pharisees – who are, in reality, the proponents of a reshaped Judaism in Matthew's own day – as well as his delineation of Jesus' more rigorous interpretation of the Torah, prompt the question of who Jesus is for Matthew. After all, Matthew writes to portray Jesus of Nazareth, not to provide commentary on the Torah. So who, for Matthew, is this Jesus who demands a rigorous righteousness based on what he claims is the highest standard implied in the Torah?

Riches has introduced you to the titles Matthew uses for Jesus, among which none are more prominent than “Messiah” and “son of God,” the first of which appears in the initial verse of Matthew: “An account of the genealogy of Jesus the *Messiah*, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” The verses that follow this are Matthew's genealogy, which culminates in the birth of Jesus, the one (Matthew says) “who is called the Messiah.” Along the way, Matthew's genealogy reiterates his assertion that Jesus was descended from David and Abraham, especially by annotating his genealogy in a summary segmenting it into three sets of fourteen generations, each of which establishes one of the lines of descent Matthew cited in his introduction. The first segment spans the period from Abraham until David, echoing the epithet, “son of Abraham”; the second covers the generations from David until the people's deportation to Babylon, echoing the designation of him as the “son of David”; and the final segment leads the reader from that exile down to the Messiah. Intriguingly, the verse immediately before this, the culmination of the genealogy, reads, “and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.” Note that in v. 17 the proper name “Jesus” stands first in the list of names, and only then does Matthew indicate, by the use of a formal phrase, that the title “Messiah” applies to him. In v. 18, on the other hand, the title “Messiah” stands by itself as the sole designation, equivalent (for Matthew) to his proper name, “Jesus.” For Matthew, Jesus constitutes the pinnacle of Israel's history and does so by virtue of his office as “Messiah.” Thus, this title seems to be pivotal for Matthew's understanding of Jesus.

The importance of this category for Matthew is equally evident in at least one other passage. Chapter 11 opens with John the Baptist sending envoys to Jesus, conveying a question: “²When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples ³and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” ⁴Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. ⁶And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

Obviously (given the layout I have used), this is double tradition material; its parallel appears in Luke 7. The most noteworthy difference is that Matthew has streamlined the narrative's start, omitting what I also have omitted to save space: viz. Luke's version reports not only John's summons of his disciples and what John instructs them to say to Jesus, but also the envoys' relay of those words once they arrive, after which we find a report that at that moment Jesus had just treated people with various afflictions. In Luke it is on the basis of what the messengers have seen and heard that Jesus instructs them to go tell John what they have witnessed. One can easily perceive why Matthew drops the redundant report of the messengers' question; but what of Luke's reference to the deeds Jesus had just performed that John's messengers had occasion to observe?

Let's notice what seems, on first blush, an inconsequential difference of order in Luke's phrase, "what you have seen and heard"; in Matthew this becomes, "what you hear and see." The first 16 verses of this chapter in Luke report the healing of a Centurion's boy and the restoration to life of the only son of a widow. At the conclusion of those events, Luke reports the amazement these wonders inspired and tells us, "This word [report] about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country." – Accordingly, Luke's note in v. 18 that John's disciples "reported all these things to him" refers to the deeds of Jesus that were causing such a buzz in the countryside; and it is these that prompt John to send his query to Jesus. Corresponding to this, Luke has Jesus point to the wonders he has just performed, telling John's disciples to report these to John as signs of his authenticity.

Now, when we turn to Matthew we find he has given the story a different setting. On the one hand, this episode, rather than being preceded by a series of wonders, follows on Jesus' discourse on discipleship in chapter 10, which (of course) is preceded not only by the 9 miracle stories of chapters 8 & 9, but also the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5-7. More-over, Matthew's conclusion to chapter 10's discourse stands as the first verse of chapter 11: "Now when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and proclaim his message in their cities." – So the last unit Matthew relates prior to John's question portrays Jesus teaching *and* heading out to do *more* teaching.

As a result, when Matthew says that John sent messengers in response to what he had heard Jesus was doing, what's in view is not only wonders, as in Luke, but at least as much Jesus' *teaching*. And that likely accounts for why Matthew transposes the verbs "hearing and seeing": Matthew places John's question against the backdrop of what he has heard about Jesus, which (in Matthew) has to do, above all, with Jesus' teaching. Even though Matthew, like Luke, utilizes allusions to several verses from the book of Isaiah pointing to Jesus' *actions* constitute proof that Jesus is the one who has been anticipated, the framework Matthew has

provided for this message emphasizes, even more so, Jesus' teaching, his proclamation of salvation to the poor.

What makes all of this even more significant is that rather than speaking of John hearing of *Jesus'* activity, Matthew refers to John hearing in prison what the *Messiah* was doing. Here, as in 1:18, the title "Messiah" is used instead of the proper name, "Jesus." Thus in Matthew, more explicitly than in Luke, the question concerns *messianic* deeds. And since Matthew, in the chapters leading up to this, specially spotlights Jesus' teaching, it is a matter of Messianic *teaching* as much as Messianic wonders.

We have evidence, in fact, of strains of thinking about Messiah in Jewish circles that emphasize his role as teacher. Intriguingly, in John 4, at a point in Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well, she exclaims, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us."

Even prior to John's gospel, however, we find the notion of the Messiah expounding truth in documents such as the (first century B.C.E.) Psalms of Solomon, whose 17th chapter extols the virtues of the Messiah, including this facet of his work: "His words will be purer than the finest gold, the best. He will judge the peoples in the assemblies, the tribes of the sanctified. His words will be as the words of the holy ones, among sanctified peoples."

Similarly, chapter 18, v. 8 asserts that the Messiah will "direct people in righteous acts, in the fear of God, to set them all in the fear of the Lord." Thus, the anticipation that the Messiah would be an authoritative teacher was a motif current in Jewish literature around the turn of the era.

Moreover, the notion that the Torah itself would receive a definitive and deeper exposition in the age of the Messiah is attested in some parallel strains of Jewish thought whose written forms are later than the first century C.E. E.g. the Midrash or expositional commentary on Qoheleth/Ecclesiastes says, in 11.8, "the Torah which a man learns in this world is vanity compared with the Torah of the Messiah." What makes this talk of a higher, messianic Torah especially intriguing is a phrase we find in one of Paul's admonitions to the Galatians, chapter 6, v. 3: "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." The affinity between Paul's "law of Christ" and Midrash Qoheleth's "Torah of the Messiah" is provocative. Just prior to this, Paul admonishes the Galatians against construing his argument that they, as Gentiles, are "free from the law" as a pretext to behave lawlessly: "do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. ¹⁴For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Far from suggesting that these Gentiles, who are "free from the law," should flout its requirements, Paul exhorts them to love one another and thus fulfill what

stands at the heart of the law. Notice how close Paul's exhortation to be slaves of one another in love, and thus fulfill the law, is to his subsequent command to "bear one another's burdens" in fulfillment of "the Law of Christ" – i.e. "the Torah of the Messiah." And when you recall that we saw Matthew's Jesus summarizing the Torah's demands as love of God and others, it is quite reasonable to perceive Paul's "Law of Christ" as designating Jesus' interpretation of the Torah, which is parallel to Matthew's Messiah as the interpreter of the Torah.

But this image of Jesus as the Messianic teacher of the Torah is overlaid with another image Matthew invokes: that of Jesus as a new Moses. You'll recall, for example, the various traditions about Moses Matthew used in constructing his infancy narrative, including the parallel between Joseph's consternation over Mary's pregnancy and Amram's trepidation over engendering a child in the face of the crisis of his day; and both received reassurance from heaven. There were also, as we saw, strong similarities between the story of Herod's plot against the infants of Bethlehem, together with the flight and return of Joseph's family, on the one hand, and the accounts of threats to the life of the infant Moses, his flight from Egypt and his subsequent return. While Riches is right to point out that Josephus is Matthew's contemporary, and thus could not have been Matthew's source for these stories, Josephus undoubtedly did not concoct them, but used stories in circulation in his native land, and thus would have been current in Matthew's day.

Furthermore, the claim that he was relying on such stories is strengthened, not only by the strong similarities between elements of those stories and Matthew's infancy narrative, but also by Matthew persistent infusing of such parallels into his narrative throughout his gospel.

E.g. Matthew shares with Mark and Luke the report that, after baptism, Jesus journeyed into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. All three portray this confrontation as not something Jesus elected to do, but something the Spirit compelled him to do.

The three also agree that this period of temptation spanned forty days. Matthew and Luke uniquely agree that, during this time, Jesus went without food, leaving him famished. And yet, distinctive to Matthew is his incorporation of the 40 day period into his statement about fasting, so as to specify that his *fasting* (not just his stay) lasted 40 days. Not only that, but he stipulates that the fasting lasted 40 days *and* forty nights.

The phrase, "forty days and forty nights," appears infrequently in the Bible. In fact, it is found in connection with only three other figures or events. The first is the story of the flood in Genesis 7, where the rains fall for forty days and forty nights. It is found next in Exodus 24's report of Moses' stay on the holy mountain, a report reiterated ten chapters later, but with a new detail: "he neither ate bread nor drank water." This 40 day period of fasting is recalled by Moses in

Deuteronomy 9, where he recounts having spent forty days and forty nights on the mountain without food. Later in that chapter he speaks of another period of forty days and nights not long after the first when he lay prostrate on the same mountain, again without food, seeking to dissuade the Lord from destroying the people for their worship of the golden calf.

The third reference to forty days and forty nights in the Bible appears in connection with Elijah, in 1 Kings 19's story of the prophet flight from what he perceived as a threat to his life from Queen Jezebel. The narrator tells us that, after fleeing for a day, Elijah collapsed, wishing he might die, and fell asleep. He was abruptly wakened by an angel who presented him with food and water, and urged him to eat so as to have strength for the journey ahead. The narrator reports, "He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God."

Of these three only other places the phrase "forty days and forty nights" appears, Genesis 7 has nothing to do with fasting; and even though 1 Kings 19 reports Elijah journeying forty days and nights on a single meal, it doesn't provide as close a parallel as Moses fasting on the divine mountain for forty days and forty nights. It is likely the experience of Moses alone on the mountain that Matthew subtly recalls for the reader in connecting the period of 40 days with fasting, and then adding "forty nights."

Confirming this suspicion is another reminiscence of Moses that Matthew has woven into his narrative of Jesus' temptations. Many have observed that the story of Jesus' forty days of temptations in the wilderness closely parallels the story of Israel wandering in the wilderness for forty years, during which time they fell prey to temptations that, again, are eerily echoed in those narrated for Jesus by Matthew and Luke. The initial temptation reported by Luke is the devil's summons for the famished Jesus to turn stone into bread, which he refuses to do, citing Deut 8.3: "One does not live by bread alone." – This predicament of a hungry Jesus being tempted to create bread for himself echoes the failure of Israel to show the sort of reliance on God that Jesus displays, demanding (with complaints), that God provide them bread in the wilderness, to which God responded with manna.

The second temptation has Jesus led up to a high place from which the devil shows him all the kingdoms of the world, promising to give them to Jesus if he merely worships the devil. Jesus' response is again from Deuteronomy, this time from chapter 6: "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." – In contrast to ancient Israel, which forsook fidelity to the Lord and worshipped the golden calf, Jesus vows to worship the Lord alone.

The final temptation in Luke finds Jesus transported atop a pinnacle in the temple, from which the devil challenges him to jump, trusting that the angels will catch him, as certain scriptural passages seem to guarantee. Jesus responds with

another quotation from Deuteronomy, chapter 6, v. 16: “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

The story of the people’s journey through the wilderness, as told in the book of Exodus, is replete with episodes in which the people are said to “test the Lord.” This sin of “testing the Lord,” to which Israel fell prey, is one that Jesus steadfastly shuns.

In these incidents of Jesus’ conflict with the devil, he not only replicates Israel’s 40 years in the wilderness, but also proves himself an improvement on Israel’s record by his refusal to fall prey to their failures in the wilderness. In keeping with Dale Allison inference (as reported by Riches), in this and other parallels drawn between Jesus and Israel, Matthew offers a portrayal of Jesus as God’s obedient son that Israel proved not to be.

In fact, this is emphasized in a significant wrinkle Matthew introduces by filling out the quotation of Deut 8.3. Luke’s quotation of just “One does not live by bread alone,” might suggest that food isn’t a high priority for Jesus. But by appending the rest of Deut 8.3 (“but by every word that comes from the mouth of God”), Matthew makes this an issue of *relative* importance: what God says is *more* important than food. Jesus is the one who obeys God’s commands completely, valuing them more than his own needs – even as later he will say that he has come not to abrogate the Law, but to fulfill it.

Another change Matthew makes in this narrative is that, *rather than* next taking up the devil’s offer to cede to Jesus all authority and power in exchange for worship – which is next in Luke’s sequence – Matthew next relates Jesus’ transport to the top of a pinnacle at the temple. (The minor differences between Matthew and Luke here are insignificant.)

Obviously, since Matthew placed second what Luke has as the final temptation, Luke’s second temptation stands as Matthew’s third. The major differences are found in the middle of the narrative, which Matthew seems to have condensed, in part by integrating into the description of what Jesus saw the words “their splendor,” which translate the same words found later in Luke, translated as “their glory.”

More significant, however, is Matthew’s specification that the devil took Jesus to “a very high mountain.” While we might normally be inclined to describe this simply as Matthew’s way of giving greater specificity to Luke’s vague language about “leading Jesus up,” the prominence of mountains throughout Matthew urges us reason for a second thought. I will take us on a little excursion that will help elucidate Matthew’s insertion of “mountain” here.

Most notable are the places Matthew has Jesus climb a mountain for a particular scene or event. As you know, Matthew sets the scene for the Sermon on the Mount as follows: “When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and

after he sat down, his disciples came to him.” As you also know, Luke gives a different setting for the Sermon: “He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people.” – As we’ve seen, Matthew draws this setting from Mark’s report of Jesus ascending a mountain to choose the 12. What’s more, Matthew reminds us of this mountain setting in transitioning to his 9 miracle stories in chapters 8 & 9: “When Jesus had come down from the mountain, great crowds followed him.” – Luke lacks any such portrayal of Jesus shifting locations after concluding his sermon.

Matthew’s report that Jesus descended the mountain before healing those ill makes the mountain serve solely as the place of teaching. And if we recall that on the mountain Jesus expounds the Torah that Moses received *on a mountain*, the explanation for the setting Matthew provides seems obvious: he is again evoking a parallel with Moses.

What’s more, there is likely a further reminiscence of Moses on the divine mountain in the report that Jesus “sat down” to teach. In Deuteronomy 9.9 Moses recollects, “When I went up the mountain to receive the stone tablets, the tablets of the covenant that the LORD made with you, I remained on the mountain forty days and forty nights.” The Hebrew verb translated “I remained” (שָׁבַט) can legitimately mean “I sat.” And the Talmud records debates between the rabbis over what posture Moses assumed on the mountain, based on this ambiguity, with some of the rabbis contending this means that he *sat* on the mountain. The book of *4 Ezra* (from the end of the first century C.E.) seems already to be familiar with this tradition. Its 14th chapter, which is replete with parallels drawn between Ezra, the scribe, and Moses, opens with a voice summoning from a bush, “Ezra, Ezra,” just as Moses was called by name from a burning bush. And Ezra answers the call as did Moses, saying, “Here I am!” He is instructed to enlist five scribes to write down a series of revelations he will receive. Vv. 42-43 then report that the scribes *sat* for forty days and forty nights, recording the revelations Ezra relayed to them. Given the parallels with Moses’ reception of the Torah over forty days and forty nights, it is clear that the seated posture of the scribes is meant as another echo of Moses’ behavior when he received the Torah on Mt. Sinai.

In fact, it is noteworthy that when Jesus refers to the role of the scribes and Pharisees as teachers in Matthew 23, he speaks of them as “*sitting* on Moses’ seat.” Even if this is just a figure of speech (we have no evidence of any synagogue appurtenance called “Moses’ seat” in the first century), it nevertheless seems to rely on the notion that those who fill Moses’ shoes teach while sitting. And so, when Matthew reports Jesus ascending the mountain and taking his seat prior to teaching, it is likely meant to associate Jesus with Moses.

Accordingly, when Jesus utters a series of contrasts between what the people have heard said and what he says (in chapter 5), the intent is not (as Riches

supposes) to contest the *standards* laid down in Moses' teaching, but to deepen and radicalize them. Accordingly, the report at the end of the Sermon, just before Jesus descends the mount, is that "the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes." – Jesus speaks with an authority to which his hearers are not accustomed and one he uses to extend Moses' legislation. He is something of a new Moses.

Well, how does all this relate to Matthew's insertion of "a very high mountain" to specify the place the devil took Jesus to survey all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor? The importance of the mountain as the setting for Jesus' sermon make it unlikely Matthew was simply providing a more specific place than Luke for this temptation. More likely, Matthew seeks to evoke memories of another event involving Moses on a mountain.

What Jesus sees from that mountain, again, is "all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor." Recall that at the conclusion of Deuteronomy, just before his death, Moses ascends Mt. Nebo in Moab, from the top of which "the LORD showed him the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan, all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, the Negeb, and the Plain – that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees – as far as Zoar. The LORD said to him, 'This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants.'"

Intriguingly, some early Jewish traditions assert that Moses, on Mt. Nebo, saw much more than this. *Sipre Deuteronomy* (the Midrash on Deuteronomy) says that Moses was granted a vision of the whole world and saw everything that would occur until the last day. What's more, midrashic literature incorporates into this scene a confrontation between Moses and Sama'el, the angel of death, whom he rebukes by saying, "Away, wicked one," even as in this last temptation Matthew's Jesus dismisses the devil with, "Away with you, Satan!"

These parallels are strong indications that Matthew has infused his temptation narrative with reminiscences of Moses, both by expanding "forty days" into "forty days and nights," which he links explicitly with Jesus' fasting; by specifying a mountain as the location for Jesus' vision of all the kingdom's of the world; and by having Jesus rebuke the devil in words similar to ones attributed to Moses midrashic tradition.

By the way, another noteworthy instance of Matthew dressing Jesus in "Moses' clothing" is the scene at the end of chapter 28, where Jesus commissions his disciples: "¹⁸And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

The only other gospel to report Jesus' commissioning his disciples is Luke, which shows at least tangential similarities: “⁴⁶and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

The most salient similarity is that in both Jesus sends his disciples to “all nations.” At a more general level, both promise the disciples sustenance for their work, with Matthew's Jesus assuring the disciples of his ongoing presence, while Luke's Jesus promises that they will be “clothed with power from on high” to execute their mission.

Given the sparseness of parallels, we'll set aside Luke's scene to note some intriguing, distinctive features in Matthew. But to do so we need to back up and notice the setting Matthew provides: “¹⁶Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.”

Given Matthew's use elsewhere of Jesus on a mountain to evoke memories of Moses, this setting stands out. However, the specification of this as “the mountain *to which* Jesus had directed them” is perplexing, since nowhere has Jesus done this. The angels who meet the women who arrive to anoint Jesus' body at the tomb instruct them, “Go quickly and tell his disciples, “He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.” – Then, while fleeing to carry out these instructions, the women encounter Jesus himself, who tells them, “Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.” – Not a word is mentioned about a specific mountain; and nothing has been said about it prior to this. So why does Matthew speak of meeting Jesus on “the mountain to which Jesus had directed them”?

While it's possible that Matthew has simply overlooked coordinating this recollection by inserting a story that has Jesus directing the disciples to meet him on a particular mountain, another translation has been suggested and is possible, and it's one that makes greater sense by taking this phrase to mean “where Jesus had given them commandments.” I.e. they were to meet Jesus on the mountain where Jesus had delivered the Sermon. And this, in turn, gives a more precise referent for Jesus' subsequent instruction to teach people “to obey everything that I have *commanded* you.” These commandments certainly embrace everything Jesus had taught them, but the association of this mountain with the Sermon as a place of commandment rightly sees it as the epitome of Jesus' instruction.

So there is good warrant, from several angles, for accepting this alternative translation. Of course, this translation, by itself, emits waves of associations with

Moses, since that mountain was, in essence, the one where a more profound Mosaic revelation took place. But there are even stronger implicit associations of this commissioning scene and Moses' era.

This sort of commissioning narrative, in which orders for a mission are issued, has roots deep in the Hebrew Bible. It is noteworthy that the phrase to obey “everything that I have commanded you,” is found four times in such commissioning narratives of the Hebrew scriptures, each of them related, in one way or another, to Moses.

I'll cite the texts that seem most germane here, the first from Exodus 7, spoken to Moses as he prepares to go before Pharaoh to demand the people's release: “You shall speak *all that I command you*, and your brother Aaron shall tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go out of his land.” – And it's worth noting that there is a striking similarity between the Greek used in the Septuagint's translation of the Hebrew phrase here and the Greek of Matthew 28.19.

The other commissioning narrative I want to adduce has the Lord speaking words to Joshua as he prepares to take charge of the people after Moses' death: “Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you.” – The LXX lacks the words “all the law” and so comes closer to the phraseology found in Matthew 28.19, providing a translation that reads (in English), “being careful to act *just as* my servant Moses commanded you.” While this isn't as close a correspondence with Matt. 28.19, its theme is nevertheless parallel.

In fact, what makes it likely that the scene of the commissioning of Joshua provided one model for Matthew's use of this language is that Matthew 28 has two other features found in Joshua 1. In Joshua 1.2 the Lord commands Joshua to lead the people into their land, using these words: “Now rise, cross the Jordan” – even as Jesus sends his disciples out on their mission. Even more striking is the parallel between the encouragement to Joshua that the LORD will be with him wherever he goes and Jesus' reassurance of his disciples that he would be with them always.

It would appear, then, that in his commissioning narrative, Matthew is insinuating, one last time, words that resonate with the story of Moses, so as to create, from the infancy narrative through the conclusion of his gospel, an image of Jesus as a second Moses. While certainly Matthew portrays Jesus as superior to Moses – if for no other reason that Jesus expounds the Torah more radically – the point of drawing on the imagery associated with Moses is to associate Jesus with the sort of authority with which Moses was endowed.

There is one other feature in Matthew's description of Jesus I want us to consider: his use of the title, “Son of God.” Following Jesus' baptism in Matthew, the heavens open and the divine voice declares, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” – As I've pointed out previously, in contrast to Mark

and Luke, where these words are addressed directly to Jesus, Matthew phrases them as a public proclamation: “*This is my Son with whom I am well pleased.*” – Clearly this announcement is key for Matthew’s understanding of Jesus, but what does he take it to mean?

On the one hand, we should note that Matthew applies this title to more people than just Jesus. In 5.9 Jesus says, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” “Children of God” is the inclusive language equivalent for what is, in Greek, “*sons of God.*” Similarly, in chapter 5 Jesus commands, “⁴⁴Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵so that you may be children (literally: *sons*) of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.” – From these passages (found only in Matthew) it appears that the title “son of God” is applicable not just to Jesus, but to anyone who follows his teachings.

And yet, Matthew seems to have applied to Jesus the title “son of God” in a way that is distinctive. You’ll recall that in Mark, Peter’s response to Jesus’ question about his identity is, “You are the Messiah,” to which Luke adds the qualifier, “*of God.*” When we turn to Matthew, however, we find a still more substantial expansion: “You are the Messiah, *the Son of the living God.*” – The fact that Matthew adds the title “Son of God of the living God” to Peter’s decisive recognition of Jesus’ identity suggests it was as weighty and distinctive a title for Jesus, in Matthew’s mind, as “Messiah.”

The passage most instructive for how Matthew conceived of this title stands in his passion narrative. We’ve noticed previously that Mark’s narrative of Jesus’ crucifixion concludes with the centurion’s exclamation, “Truly this man was God’s Son!” Mark tells us that the centurion’s exclamation was based on how Jesus “breathed his last.” The *manner* in which Jesus died prompted the confession. And as we’ve noted, this is related to the fact that this is the first time in Mark that any human has recognized Jesus’ status as “son of God.” Not even the disciples have done so prior to this point. Mark stresses that Jesus’ status as “son of God” is to be recognized only in his death: his deepest identity was revealed in his death – a meaningful message for those facing persecution.

In Matthew, however, Jesus’ identity as “son of God” has been public information since his baptism. And even though the centurion makes the same confession upon Jesus’ death, it is prompted by something other than how Jesus died: “Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, “Truly this man was God’s Son!” – Not only is the confession based on different events, but events not found in Mark, who reports no earthquake.

Mark and Matthew agree that, following Jesus’ death and prior to the centurion’s acclamation: “the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to

bottom.” However, whereas in Mark that is followed immediately by the Centurion’s confession, a further set of events intervenes in Matthew: “⁵¹The earth shook, and the rocks were split. ⁵²The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. ⁵³After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many.”

You’ll notice that the verbs in this series of statements are in the passive voice: the rocks *were* split; the tombs *were* opened; the bodies *were* raised. The passive voice is a standard device in early Jewish literature to avoid mention of God’s name; the *implicit* actor is God. Thus, these events are not simply things that occur automatically upon Jesus’ death; they are God’s *response* to his death, so that the centurion’s confession is prompted by the divine response. But the set-up for this scene starts earlier, in features inserted by Matthew.

As Jesus is being executed, those nearby twice challenge him to prove that he is the “son of God.” The first challenge is voiced by passersby: “³⁹Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads ⁴⁰and saying, “You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” If we compare this to Mark, we discover Matthew has inserted the taunt, “*If you are the Son of God.*”

The second challenge is voiced by religious leaders, most of whose words Matthew and Mark share: “⁴¹In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, ⁴²“He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him.” – But Matthew adds this to their words: “⁴³He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, ‘I am God’s Son.’” – Matthew has supplied a challenge to Jesus’ status as “God’s son” based on a similar challenge found in the Wisdom of Solomon 2.17-18: “Let us see if his words are true, and let us test what will happen at the end of his life; for if the righteous man is God’s son, he will help him, and will deliver him from the hand of his adversaries.” – As in Matthew, the speakers see the end of this person’s life as a test. Their assumption is that one who claims to be “son of God” will be delivered by God. In both Wisdom of Solomon and Matthew “son of God” denotes one whose implicit trust is matched by God’s claim on them. And it’s that sense that Matthew assumes in this taunt: will God claim Jesus as his “son”; has Jesus gained God’s approval? Those taunting make the crucifixion a test of Jesus’ claim to be “God’s son,” even as in the Wisdom of Solomon, the speakers see the perilous situation of the righteous man as a test of whether his claim is true.

For Matthew, vindication comes in the centurion’s acclamation, based on witnessing God’s response to Jesus’ death. God demonstrates his claim on Jesus as his son in a way so apparent the centurion cannot help recognizing it.

However, the elaborate set of signs Matthew has accompanying Jesus’ death –

complete with resurrection of dead saints – does not seem likely to be an expectation Matthew wished to raise for everyone who, by obedience to Jesus' teaching, could be called a "son of God." Matthew seems to imply in this something unique about Jesus' sonship status vis-à-vis God.

And it is in this connection that you can perceive what Riches has in mind when he speaks of both a horizontal and vertical dimension to Matthew's portrayal of Jesus as "Son of God." The horizontal dimension exists in Matthew's use of "Son of God" for anyone living in complete trust and obedience; thus those who love their enemies are "sons of God," even as Jesus is son of God by virtue of his obedience. The vertical dimension, on the other hand, arises from the fact that Jesus is confirmed as son of God in a distinctive way: it is the distinctive response of God to his death that attests for the centurion and his band that Jesus is God's son, and that in a sense obviously higher than anyone else.

Indeed, as Riches notes, Jesus' proclamation in commissioning his disciples, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me," and the consequent sending of them to all the nations, unmistakably places Jesus in a category distinct from anyone else, so that in the end, Matthew's Jesus occupies a position without parallel, even in comparison to Moses.

For Matthew, Jesus is a teaching Messiah who takes up Moses' role in a way that makes him Moses' successor, but also more. While Matthew can speak of Jesus' followers as "sons of God," he accords Jesus a *unique* role as "son of God" that they cannot replicate. For Matthew, Jesus is the Messianic teacher who deepens the Torah's demands and shows himself uniquely bound to God, so that his status surpasses that of even Moses.