

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Irish Biblical Studies* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ibs-01.php

Although I have written several times on the subject of Matthew's Christology I cannot claim to be completely satisfied with my findings or, latterly, with my approach. The invitation to contribute an essay to this journal in honour of the memory of a gracious Christian gentleman and scholar provides me with yet another opportunity to consider this topic. The direction of my present thinking owes much to an observation by Birger Gerhardsson in his book The Mighty Acts of Jesus in Matthew (Lund, 1979): but of that I shall say more later

I

It is becoming increasingly clear to sensitive investigators of the New Testament documents that we are expecting, even demanding, that their authors give us a precision, coherence and consistency of view on this or that subject of enquiry which we have no right or precedent for requiring, unless we are dominated by a very stark theory of inspiration. For instance, it is expected that investigation of the letters of Paul will yield the apostle's understanding of the Law and that that understanding will be clear and utterly consistent. Now, given the fact that we do not know with certainty how many of the letters attributed to Paul are genuinely his, that the apostle wrote his letters over a period of roughly fifteen years, that he was writing sometimes on the defensive, sometimes on the offensive and sometimes in the interests of reconciling those who distrusted one another, that we do not really know what Paul said about the Law (or indeed almost anything else) when he proclaimed the gospel in the communities he founded or visited - in the light of these facts can we reasonably expect Paul's written words on the Law (even from the six or seven genuine letters) to provide us with a neat, coherent and entirely consistent view of the place and purpose of the Law in the divine economy for the salvation of Jews and Gentiles post Christum? Of even the most careful systematic theologians in the twentieth century we would not expect that kind of precision and consistency: it is unreasonable to expect it of an evangelist and community-builder who had to cope with misunderstanding, misrepresentation by opponents,

and the very varying circumstances and composition of the churches to which he was writing, to say nothing about the inherent difficulties of the issue for a Jew who had become a Christian. There is therefore nothing whatsoever extraordinary in seeing what is almost a cynical view of Law expressed in Galatians altered to a much more balanced, mature and reflective view of Law in Romans. (Is Paul not to be allowed to alter his emphasis, or change his mind by a fraction?) To demand consistency and coherence is to demand what we would like to find, but, in my view, will not find nor should expect to find.

But it will be said that this is an isolated example because of its peculiar intricacy. That is not so. Ask an even more important question: What is Paul's Christology? Is there a single answer? Of titles used, "Messiah (Christ)" is insufficient. Will "Kyrios" sum it all up? What then of "Son of God", and "Wisdom", and "Second or Last Adam"? And what about those passages which present Jesus as saviour, reconciler, intercessor, and so forth? Is Paul's Christology a sort of pot-pourri, or are we asking the wrong kind of question, or going the wrong way about finding an answer?

Turning now to Matthew's Gospel - and I think it would be true of the other Gospels also - the situation is similar. Considering that the Gospel contains some authentic Jesus-material, passages which may be called "traditional", and the redaction from a theologically-oriented author, it is not very surprising to discover that it is extremely difficult to put together a coherent and consistent Matthean view on the Law and on the mission to the Gentiles. The problem of explaining the presence and purpose in one Gospel of Matt. 10.5-6/ 15.24 on the one hand, and 28.16-20 on the other, is well known. It is not insoluble, but it should make serious readers of the Gospel aware that the questions we put to that Gospel may not always (or even often) receive a clear, coherent and univocal answer. And so to my topic: Matthean Christology. The quest for the Christologies of the Synoptic evangelists has been dominated by the

investigation of the meaning and function of titles such as Lord, Son of God, Son of Man, etc. Probably the most comprehensive recent study of Matthean Christology on these lines is in the work of J.D. Kingsbury. Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom.¹ In this book the author examines each of the major titles in Matthew and attempts to establish some hierarchy and inter-relationship among them. As is well known, he claims that the pre-eminent title in Matthew's Christology is "Son of God": this is the one title which occurs in every major section of the Gospel and correlates with essential features of Matthew's overall theology. I have no wish to rehearse here his arguments for that view, nor my critical reaction to it, but I still find myself asking the question, "Why must one title be deemed 'pre-eminent', 'most exalted', 'foremost'?"² Lately, Professor Kingsbury by using the approach of a 'narrative-reading' of the Matthean story has confirmed, to his own satisfaction, the rightness of his earlier view.³ ("Son of God" is God's evaluative point of view of Jesus in Matthew, and in Mark too, and therefore obviously pre-eminent.) Again I have criticised this work: Kingsbury has replied,⁵ and we seem to be at an impasse. Why? Possibly because of the continued concentration on the attempt to make one Christological title in Matthew pre-eminent. Other writers and commentators on Matthew have claimed that his most important Christological title is "Kyrios", or "Son of David", or "Son of God" and "Son of man" together. All these suggestions cannot be correct nor can they all be said to be wrong. And if each title makes a contribution to Matthew's Christology, that Christology, with such a range of contributing titles, cannot be pre-eminently expressed by any one of them, for that would be to say less than Matthew wants to say and has said. There seems to be a fault somewhere: either in the method of approaching the issue or in the conclusions derived, or both.

Another aspect of Matthew's Christology that continues to have some appeal is his use of Wisdom motifs. This was interestingly developed by M.J. Suggs in his small but important book, Wisdom, Christology and Law in

in Matthew's Gospel (1970)⁶: there he claims that, whereas in Q Jesus would have been presented as one of Wisdom's rejected envoys, Matthew (at least in certain texts such as 11.2-19 and 11.25-30) advances upon this and presents Jesus as the personified Wisdom of God - a quite crucial step in the development of New Testament Christology. Although the hypothesis has some quite serious weaknesses (cf. M.D. Johnston, "Reflections on a Wisdom Approach to Matthew's Christology", CBQ, vol.36, 1974, pp.44-64) it still merits (and will continue to merit) attention. For instance, in The Testament of Jesus-Sophia Fred W. Burnett presses on with some of the issues raised but not addressed by Suggs' pioneering study. Burnett claims that Matthew's entire eschatological discourse (24.3-31) can be understood in terms of Jesus' (i.e. Wisdom's) final testament to the disciples (Wisdom's emissaries) after the rejection by Israel (chap.23). So far, however, the influence of Wisdom metaphors on Matthew's Christology cannot be deemed to be large or obvious.

II

The dominant presence of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7) and the other great discourses of the Gospel, plus the Gospel's concern with Jesus as interpreter of the law, leaves little doubt that Matthew presents Jesus as the definitive teacher. One recalls that the disciples are reminded that there is only one Teacher and one Master, Jesus himself (23.8-10), and the post-Easter Jesus charges the disciples in their commissioning to bring all nations into obedience to "all that I have commanded you". Less obvious perhaps is the fact that Matthew also lays great emphasis on Jesus' role as healer. The Matthean redaction of the miracle stories, especially those in chapters 8 and 9, was brilliantly explored by H.J. Held in "Matthew as Interpreter of the Miracle Stories". By abbreviating Mark's stories (cf. Mark 5. 1.20 with Matt.8.28-34) in order to highlight what Jesus says, the miracle stories become, in Matthew's hands, rather like pronouncement stories and their renarration made a means of providing instruction on Christology,

discipleship and faith. However, the contribution that the stories make to accepted Christological categories is quite small, except in one respect: by inserting fulfilment citations from Isa. 53.4 at 8.17 and from Isa. 42.1-4 at 12.18-21 - both in relation to Jesus' healing activity - Matthew, in my view, deliberately casts Jesus as healer in the role of the Servant of Yahweh.

And now to Birger Gerhardsson's book, The Mighty Acts of Jesus according to Matthew.⁸ This book examines the full range of miracles or dunameis in the Gospel, not just the collection in chapters 8 and 9, but other stories and summaries of Jesus' deeds recorded throughout Matthew's book. Gerhardsson makes a distinction between (a) 'therapeutic' stories, such as the healings which are generally performed at the request or demand of a sick person, are scattered throughout the record of Jesus' ministry and are directed to people or individuals outside the disciple-group; and (b) 'non-therapeutic' miracles (e.g. the stilling of the storm and the walking on the water) which, by contrast, are more occasional, are not mentioned in the summaries of Jesus' activities ("preaching, teaching, healing"), are done at Jesus' invitation and are performed exclusively for disciples. Professor Gerhardsson concludes from this that the non-therapeutic miracle stories have more problematic historical basis and are probably to be located within the Christological reflection of the early Church. Others have, of course, made similar observations and suggestions.

For our purposes it is more important to note Gerhardsson's stress on the importance of the stories of and references to Jesus' miracles for Matthew's Christology. The Gospel uses this material to portray Jesus' "incomparable exousia (authority) as 'the healer of Israel'" (p.93). Rather than a Christology subsumed under and dominated by the "Son of God" designation (as Kingsbury claims) Gerhardsson believes that Matthew's Christology was "many-faceted", a portrayal of Jesus "illustrated with many kinds of material" (p.82). Many titles appear in

connection with the mighty acts of Jesus in Matthew: "Son of Man", "Christ", "Son of David", "Lord", but not "Son of God". Although Gerhardsson agrees with Kingsbury in claiming that "Son of God" is Matthew's most prominent designation for Jesus, he goes on to suggest (and I would certainly agree) that the theme of Jesus as "Servant" is not submerged by the "Son" title, but in fact qualifies Jesus' role as "Son of God". He is "Son of God" precisely in that he is humble, obedient and serving. The fact that the Servant of Yahweh texts are applied to healing stories (8.17 and 12.18ff), whereas the Son title is not, implies that the therapeutic activity brings out a dimension of Matthew's Christology which the exalted "Son of God" title does not. In fact - and this is the very important observation by Gerhardsson to which I referred at the beginning of this essay - none of the titles is essential to the miracle stories: the narratives themselves present Christology by showing Jesus in action.

That significant comment about the miracle stories is, I think, capable of extension. Matthew's whole book, his Gospel, is a narrative, a story (if you like), or a 'preaching' in which Old Testament reflection, vignettes of Jesus acting in word and deed and Christological titles from the emerging tradition are all blended to convey the evangelist's experience of Jesus' presence and meaning within the community. Because he portrays Jesus by means of a story no one category - teacher, healer, Wisdom incarnate, triumphant Son of man, not even Kyrios or Son of God - is adequate to contain that Jesus revered by the Church, the Jesus on whom Matthew reflects in his book.

In his important book The Identity of Jesus Christ⁹ Hans W. Frei argues (if I understand him correctly) that the Gospel narratives render or proffer the identity of Jesus by means of their description of him. He is who he truly and universally is in these narratives which record the intention-action sequence of his life and his self-manifestation in the passion. In other words, the Christology is in the whole story and therefore carried in the activity of Jesus as narrated. For example, Jesus

never says in Matthew (nor in any other Gospel for that matter) "I am the Son of man", but "The Son of man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again". A question of identity is turned into an answer of activity. Likewise, the questions "Are you the King of the Jews?" (Matt.27.11) and "Are you the Christ, the Son of God?" (26.63) are not answered with a clear affirmative (for "the words are yours" is at most a very reluctant way of expressing assent), but in terms of what is or will be going on. What I wish to suggest is that the search after the meaning of titles in order to arrive at Matthew's Christology may be a somewhat mistaken approach to the matter. I am not sure that we can say, on the evidence available, that Matthew had a neat, precise, easily definable position on Christology. If we had him at hand to ask, 'Did, or do you think Jesus is Son of God?' he would say 'Yes': 'Son of Man?', 'Yes', and Lord and Messiah and Shepherd of Israel, and even perhaps new Moses. He does not compose or compile his traditions in the interests of advancing any one or even all of these titles: he wrote a narrative which commences with a birth-story and ends with a great commissioning scene, both of which are distinctive to his work. What they affirm - that in Jesus God was and is with his people for good and for ever: Emmanuel, God with us / I am with you always.... - is confirmed in all that lies between, which Matthew summarises by "teaching, preaching, healing". As Jesus instructs on the behaviour of disciples appropriate to Kingdom-style living and on the intensification of Torah in the double love-commandment: as he proclaims the Kingdom in parables, through which, as through a kaleidoscope, we see the varied, enigmatic, puzzling pictures of what life is or can be like when God is acknowledged and experienced as sovereign in majesty and mercy: as he heals the sick, overcomes prejudice against the outcasts and the marginalised in their society: as he endures the death which miraculously - in God's hands - leads to deathless life - in all this, Jesus is God with his people, and it takes the entire story, the whole narrative to convey that view of Jesus' identity (Christology), and it is

one which is rich, powerful and immediate.

NOTES:

1. Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom (SPCK, London), 1976.
2. D. Hill, "Son and Servant: An Essay on Matthean Christology", JSNT 6 (1980) 2-16.
3. J.D. Kingsbury, "The Figure of Jesus in Matthew's Story: A Literary-Critical Probe", JSNT 24, (1984), 3-36.
4. D. Hill, "The Figure of Jesus in Matthew's Story: A Rejoinder to Professor Kingsbury's Literary-Critical Probe", JSNT 21 (1984), 37-52.
5. J.D. Kingsbury, "The Figure of Jesus in Matthew's Story: A Rejoinder to David Hill", JSNT 25 (1985) 61-81.
6. Wisdom, Christology and Law in Matthew's Gospel, (Harvard Press, Cambridge, Mass.) 1970.
7. F.W. Burnett, The Testament of Jesus-Sophia: A Redaction-Critical Study of the Eschatological Discourse in Matthew, (University Press of America, Washington) 1981.
8. B. Gerhardsson, The Mighty Acts of Jesus according to Matthew (CWK, Gleerup, Lund) 1979.
9. H.W. Frei, The Identity of Jesus Christ, (Fortress Press, Philadelphia) 1975.