

Matthew's Narrative Christology: Three Stories

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Matthew's Christology is theocentric, presenting God's rule as manifest in the life of Jesus as an alternative to the sovereignty and power of this-worldly rulers. This Christology is expressed in the narrative mode. It can be appreciated and appropriated better in the context of the narratives in which contemporary interpreters are embedded.

Matthew writes from the conviction shared by the Christian community then and now that the definitive event in human history is this: God has sent the promised Messiah. Matthew does not compose a "Christology" in the sense of a subheading of systematic theology, a topical discussion of the person and work of Jesus that may be placed alongside his "Ecclesiology," "Eschatology," "Ethics," and such, as though they were separate-but-related chapters in a book. He composes a single narrative that weaves all these together. Matthew's Christology cannot be summarized. It is available only to those hearers/readers who are willing to enter into the story world he has created, and engage the Jesus who is encountered there as Emmanuel, God-with-us.

While Matthew's Christology cannot be explicated as a list of titles or points, it is possible to reflect on how the narrative is read as a way of enhancing our understanding and appreciation of his Christology. Our own reading of the Gospel of Matthew is itself inextricably involved in three interwoven narratives. Our efforts toward a better grasp of Matthew's Christology will be facilitated by getting these three narratives more clearly in mind:

- The Story *about* the Gospel of Matthew—how Matthean interpreters have gone about understanding his Christology
- The Story *of* the Gospel of Matthew—how Matthew came to think and speak of Jesus in this way
- The Story *in* the Gospel of Matthew—the narrative Matthew composed

Of these, Matthew's own narrative Christology is by far the most important, but since our understanding is intertwined with the other two, it is better to begin with them.

THE STORY ABOUT THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW—HOW MATTHEAN INTERPRETERS HAVE GONE ABOUT UNDERSTANDING HIS CHRISTOLOGY

Just as Matthew found his Christian faith expressed throughout his Bible, so Christian theologians prior to the eighteenth century mostly read their Bible, OT and NT, as a homogeneous book of Christian faith. Dogmatic and historical theology were not separated, and the Bible was mined for texts that supported the later teaching of the church. The idea that there was a “Matthean Christology” distinct from that of the other NT writers or from that of later Christian theologians did not occur to churchly interpreters whose Bible spoke directly to the existential realities of their own time. The rise of historicism in the eighteenth century was signaled by Johann Philip Gabler’s 1787 “Discourse on the Proper Distinction Between Dogmatic and Biblical Theology and the Correct Delimitation of their Boundaries.” Biblical theology began to be defined as a purely historical discipline, whose task it was to explicate what the ancient biblical authors thought, in their own terms, without later dogmatic constraints. Biblical theology aspired to be a purely descriptive there-and-then academic discipline, leaving the task of here-and-now normative meaning, if any, to systematic theologians. In theological seminaries, biblical scholarship became a separate field from systematic theology. Bible scholars did not claim to be theologians; theologians deferred to Bible scholars on exegetical matters. Turf was respected. This approach was classically expressed in Krister Stendahl’s 1962 article, “Biblical Theology, History of” and institutionalized in the firm line literally drawn between “exegesis” (what it meant) and “exposition” (what it means) of the *Interpreter’s Bible*, the dominant commentary for a generation among mainline churches.¹

This approach was liberating. It allowed interpreters to explore the Bible without the constraints of church theology or personal faith, which could be bracketed for the purposes of study, whether or not the interpreter was a Christian believer concerned to interpret the Bible as normative Scripture for the life of the church. The “So what?” could be bracketed in the interest of “What?” It seemed valid that the historical question of how to describe Matthew’s Christology was a separable and prior question to what, if anything, this might mean today. This allowed scholars to pursue, for example Matthew’s Christology in comparison and contrast to that not only of Nicean, Chalcedonian, and later affirmations, but to distinguish the profile of Matthew’s Christology from that of Hebrews, Mark, or 1 Clement.

One of the major achievements of this approach was the investigation of the titles attributed to Jesus by each of the NT authors, and their meaning(s) in their historical context.² Matthew uses the following titles, listed in descending order of frequency in their reference to Jesus:

1. *Lord* (34x). The common Greek term *kyrios*, used in the LXX for God, is also the conventional polite term of respectful address, comparable to its English derivative “Sir”. The Jews so

¹ Krister Stendahl, “Biblical Theology, Contemporary,” *IDB* 1:418–32; George Arthur Buttrick, ed., *The Interpreter’s Bible* (12 vols.; Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1951–1957).

² Classic works of this period include Ferdinand Hahn, *The Titles of Jesus in Christology: Their History in Early Christianity* (trans. Harold Knight and George Ogg; New York: World, 1969); Reginald H. Fuller, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology* (New York: Scribner, 1965); and the recently reprinted Sigmund Mowinckel, *He That Cometh: The Messiah Concept in the Old Testament and Later Judaism* (trans. G. W. Anderson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

address Pilate (27:63), and human masters are called “lord” without any connotation of divine status. Matthew uses it a total of 80 times, 34 times with reference to Jesus.

2. *Son of Man* (30x). The expression *ho huios tou anthrōpou* sounds as strange in Greek as “the Son of Man” sounds in English, since it is not a native Greek term but is the literal translation of the common *ben adam* or Aramaic *bar enosh*, both of which mean simply “human being.” Ezekiel uses the phrase 93 times to designate the prophet as a mere human being (NRSV “mortal”) in contrast to God. Under the influence of Dan 7, the figure of the Son of Man was understood in some circles of first-century Judaism to be the apocalyptic deliverer from the heavenly world who will come as judge at the end of time. In Matthew as in the other Gospels, the articular singular is used only with reference to Jesus, and exclusively in the sayings of Jesus, as his self-designation.

3. *Christ* (17x) The Hebrew term Messiah (*māšîaḥ*) is translated into Greek as *christos*; both words mean “anointed,” reflecting the ancient Israelite ritual of pouring oil on the head of one being inaugurated into office. Prophets were anointed (cf. 1 Kgs 19:16; Isa 61:1), as were priests (Exod 28:41; Ps 133:2), but it was especially kings who were referred to as “the Lord’s anointed” (1 Sam 16:1–13; Ps 89:19–20).

4. *Son of David* (10x). Like “Christ” and “king,” this phrase denotes the Davidic eschatological ruler God will raise up in the last times. All 10 occurrences are used with reference to Jesus.

5. *Son of God* or “*my* (=God’s) *Son*” (9x). Like Son of Man, this phrase is used only of Jesus. It has a variety of meanings in the Jewish Scriptures: the people Israel (Exod 4:22; Hos 11:1); righteous Israelites (Wis 2:12–20); divine beings in the heavenly court (Gen 6:1–4; Deut 32:8; Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7); the Israelite or Jewish king (2 Sam 7:14; Ps 2:7). In the Greco-Roman world, divine and semi-divine beings, including the emperor, were called “sons of God.”

6. *Teacher* (10x)/*Rabbi* (4x). These words are used as synonyms in Matt 23:8.

7. *King* (6x). Not counting the allusive use to Jerusalem as the “city of the great King” (5:35) and the metaphorical use in parables that point to God or Jesus, the word is used only for Herod and other earthly kings, and for Jesus, who is referred to 6 times as king of the Jews or king of Israel.

8. *Prophet* (4x). Matthew uses this term 40 times, mostly referring to the biblical prophets (29x). John the Baptist is called a prophet 4 times, including once approvingly by Jesus (11:9). Matthew refers to Christian prophets 5 times, plus two other references to (false) prophets of the end times that may also include Christians (24:11, 24). Crowds and the general population designate Jesus as “a prophet” 3 times, and he once refers to himself with a proverb about prophets (13:57).

9. *The One Who Is to Come* (3x). Although “the one who is coming” (*ho erchomenos*) does not seem to have been a traditional designation for the Messiah in Judaism, Matthew adopted and developed the christological use of the phrase from his tradition, reserving the articular use exclusively for Jesus (11:3; 21:9; 23:39). An additional 3 times he associates it closely with the Son of Man (16:28; 24:30; 26:64).

10. *Son* (2x). The common word *huios* is used 89 times by Matthew in a variety of ways, but only twice does he use the term christologically in an absolute sense, referring to Jesus as “the Son” (11:27; 28:19).

This cataloguing of titles facilitates some interesting observations. Matthew’s Christology utilizes a plurality of titles, and does not seem to bind christological significance to any one title. Some titles important elsewhere in early Christianity are missing (e.g., *Logos* [Word], *Theos* [God], and Priest). There is an obvious focus on royal titles: Christ, king, and son of David are clearly in this category, and both Son of God and Son of Man have royal overtones elaborated in Matthew’s narrative.

There are also problems with the titular approach as such. A catalogue of titles fails to reveal aspects of Matthew’s Christology clearly of major importance to him. The Gospel presents Jesus in numerous roles, functions, and paradigms not bound to any particular title, but indispensable to Matthew’s understanding of Jesus’ identity: new Moses, suffering servant, divine wisdom, healer, definitive interpreter of Scripture, miracle worker, and the one who saves his people from their sins. One key example is Emmanuel, the Christ who represents and mediates the continuing presence of God with the church through history, and is himself its builder and sustainer (cf. 10:40; 16:18; 17:17; 18:20; 26:29; and the climactic 28:20). These roles remain “in solution” in the Matthean narrative and are not precipitated out as titles.

The titular approach tends to isolate “Christology” as a discrete topic that can be discussed by itself. But not only can Matthew’s Christology not be grasped in isolation, neither can other Matthean concerns such as ethics be separated from his Christology. One cannot claim, for instance, to be interested in Matthew’s ethic as focused in the Sermon on the Mount, but uninterested in such “speculative” issues as Christology, for in the Gospel of Matthew, these are inseparably fused.

This approach tended to regard the designations of Jesus as static titles with a more-or-less fixed content determined by their pre-Christian historical setting, which were then “applied” to Jesus, rather than seeing them as dynamic elements in the development of early Christian theology and the formation of the particular documents in which they occurred.

Recent NT scholarship has thus recognized that the titular approach to Christology, taken by itself, is inadequate.³ Before considering that important step in exploring Matthew's own narrative, however, there is another narrative that must be investigated: the story of Matthew's Gospel itself.

THE STORY OF THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW—HOW MATTHEW CAME TO THINK AND SPEAK OF JESUS IN THIS WAY⁴

All contemporary Christology is reinterpretation of Christian tradition. No one today can simply look at Jesus and reflect on the presence (or absence) of God's act in and through him and what this might mean. This was also the case for the author of the Gospel of Matthew, even if, contrary to the view presupposed here, the gospel was written by an eyewitness of some of the scenes in Jesus' ministry. A thumbnail sketch of the story of the formation of the Gospel of Matthew presents the following four stages:

1. *Christological transformation.* Two generations before Matthew wrote, and some time before he himself became a Christian, the fundamental christological transformation occurred, a few days after the crucifixion of Jesus. Stories, impressions, and sayings from and about Jesus of Nazareth were transformed in the light of God's raising him from the dead. While Matthew tells the story of Jesus forward, from birth to resurrection appearances, he sees and writes only in retrospect, beginning from the conviction that God did not let the crucifixion be the end of the story of Jesus. He did not believe that one could have come to a legitimate understanding of Jesus as the Messiah by following him around throughout his life and drawing inferences from the things he said and did. He did not believe anyone could have looked at the "historical Jesus" and seen a "manifestation of God." For the earliest church and still for Matthew, the resurrection was the sole and indispensable christological sign (12:39–40; 16:4). Jesus' true identity is an insight that comes only by revelation (16:16–17). Though plotted within a pre-Easter narrative framework, this disclosure constantly presupposes Easter as the decisive revelation.⁵ This was the first transformation in understanding Jesus, and the emergence of Christology.⁶

2. *Reinterpretation.* When Matthew and his community received the traditions expressing this faith, they had already undergone various degrees of reinterpretation. The christological interpretations inherited by Matthew first become visible to us in the reconstructions of Q. The prophetic missionary teachers who composed Q were active in the formation of new Christian communities in Syria. In Matthew's church, in or near the Syrian capital Antioch, Q played a role in shaping and expressing their faith, including their Christology. Q was not a narrative of the life, death, and res-

³ Leander Keck, "Toward the Renewal of New Testament Christology," *NTS* 32 (1986): 362–77, was a key factor in this development. There has been something of an overreaction, however, that has sometimes neglected the values of the titular approach. The turn toward a narrative approach is documented in Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) and idem, *Matthew as Story* (2d rev. ed.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).

⁴ Here, I sketch what seems to me to be the most plausible outline of the development of the Gospel of Matthew as it bears on his Christology. For further documentation of the perspective presented here, see the introduction in M. Eugene Boring, "Matthew: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (ed. Leander Keck; 12 vols.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 8:89–119. Further supporting evidence and arguments are found in Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; trans. James E. Crouch; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 18–59.

⁵ One might note, for instance, how the missionary speech to the disciples in 10:5–42, set within the pre-Easter framework, modulates seamlessly into the post-Easter situation of the Matthean church (10:18!).

⁶ Udo Schnelle, *Theology of the New Testament* (trans. M. Eugene Boring; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 163–92.

urrection of Jesus, but primarily a collection of sayings arranged to represent the teaching of Jesus. The Jesus who speaks in Q is not merely a sage or rabbi, however; he speaks with the eschatological authority of the transcendent Son of Man. Nor are the sayings of Jesus merely good advice; the radical and authoritative reinterpretation of the Torah embodied in the teaching of Jesus will be the standard of judgment when the Son of Man returns. By far the dominant christological title in Q is *Son of Man*, found 8 times for the eschatological judge and 3 times for the earthly Jesus, and not at all for the suffering/dying/rising savior figure. Apart from Son of Man, titular Christology plays hardly any role in Q. *The one to come* is found in Q 3:16;⁷ 7:19; and 13:35. *Lord* is not used christologically except in Q 6:46; *Son of God* is found only in the devil's false ascription (Q 4:3, 4:9), though the *Son* is found in the Father/Son language of 10:21–22 as the only mediator of revelation. *Christ* is not found in Q.

3. *New narrative form.* Twenty or thirty years prior to Matthew's own composition, a Christian teacher, probably in Syria, had devised a new, narrative means for communicating the Christian faith. The Gospel of Mark combined the kerygmatic focus on the death and resurrection of Jesus basic to Pauline theology with stories about Jesus in which the saving power of God was manifest in his earthly life. Integral to Mark's narrative were several key christological terms not found or not prominent in Q: *Christ*, *Son of God*, *Son of David*, *Lord*, *Teacher*, and *King of the Jews*. Mark added a crucial new category, the *suffering/dying/rising Son of Man*. For a decade or more, Matthew's community of Hellenistic Jewish Christians had been guided by their understanding of the Scripture and Jesus' message as focused in Q. The great transformation in Matthew's Christology came when his community began to use the Gospel of Mark as authoritative Christian tradition.

4. *A definitive reinterpretation.* For some years, Matthew's community used both Q and Mark in catechesis, worship, and preaching, acknowledging both documents as authentic witnesses and guides to the meaning of the Christ event. Matthew and the church in which he was a teacher became very familiar with both Mark and Q, and continued to interpret them as normative for the life of their congregations. But the time came when a definitive reinterpretation was needed.

Matthew could have chosen the commentary mode of updating the meaning of Q and Mark for his church. There is ample precedent for this in his contemporary Jewish context. The Habakkuk Commentary from the Qumran community provides a telling example. In this mode, the original authoritative text is quoted, then its contemporary meaning is given. It is a striking fact that neither Matthew nor any other Christian teacher in the NT period reinterpreted their faith by writing commentaries on authoritative texts. Such a procedure would have disturbed the unity between hearers/readers and sacred text. Instead of commentary, Matthew adopts the biblical mode of *retelling*. His Bible already included books that reinterpret earlier books, but not in the

⁷ I have followed here the convention of designating Q texts by their Lukan location.

explanatory mode that distinguishes primary text and secondary commentary. The two-volume work of the Chronicler reinterprets the earlier narratives of 1–2 Samuel and 1–2 Kings, but by incorporating them into a contemporizing retelling that fuses text and interpretation into an inseparable unity. So also the later strata of the Pentateuch, the Psalms, and the Prophets incorporate later interpretation within the ongoing narrative. Matthew takes up Mark, Q, and other traditions and combines them into one coherent narrative, retold to address the needs of his own Christian community. Matthew's Christology, along with his ecclesiology, eschatology, ethics, and all the other elements of his theology, are available only as grasped together within this story.

THE STORY IN THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW—THE NARRATIVE MATTHEW COMPOSED

I will first summarize his basic hermeneutical moves in representing these traditions.

1. *Matthew adopts the Markan narrative as his basic framework.* In terms of genre, the narrative form devised by Mark was not merely a Hellenistic bios with a Christian spin, but a distinctive narrative combining stories of the powerful, Godlike Son of God with the image of the truly human Jesus who suffers and dies. In Mark, this paradoxical juxtaposition was facilitated by the messianic secret. In adopting and adapting Mark's narrative, Matthew adopted and further interpreted this theological-literary accomplishment, preserving its fundamental christological affirmations without attending to the means by which Mark had achieved it. Matthew can thus relax the messianic secret. His adding the birth story, in which not only Mary and Joseph, but also Herod and the magi, know that the Messiah has been born, means that when Jesus comes to be baptized, John, too, already recognizes him. The voice from heaven declares to all "This is my Son"—not "You are . . ." as in Mark (Matt 3:17; Mark 1:11). The secret disclosure to Jesus has become public revelation to all who will hear and believe. The messianic secret appears only vestigially in Matthew, where it plays a different role than it had in Mark. Matthew, too, believes that Jesus was recognized as the Christ only after the resurrection, but he tells his story in such a way that the post-Easter reality is collapsed into the pre-Easter narrative.

2. *Matthew inserts the Q material into this framework.* The Q sayings become part of the overarching narrative and are interpreted by it. Though Mark had magnified Jesus' role as teacher, he was wary of the sayings tradition that had circulated in collections such as Q. Such sayings of Jesus were too easily heard as separate from the story of the crucified and risen Jesus, and thus liable to be misunderstood as independent wisdom, good advice rather than good news. Such independent sayings collections were too easily expanded and interpreted as sayings of the risen Lord, not

anchored in the history of the crucified Jesus of Nazareth. Matthew's church, too, has Christian prophets who continue to speak in the name of the risen Lord, and he, too, regards them with some suspicion (7:15, 22; 10:41; 23:34). He is not suspicious of the sayings genre as such. For some decades, he and his church had heard in Q the continuing voice of Jesus. Matthew neutralizes Q's potential dangers by including the sayings of Jesus within the Markan story of the crucified Jesus.

3. *Matthew surrounds the Markan narrative with the birth story and the resurrection appearances.* He thus gives the narrative a proper beginning and ending, and brings the gospel form devised by Mark more into line with the conventions of Hellenistic biography. The concluding promise that the risen Christ will be with his church forever forms an *inclusio* with the initial promise that God will constitute Jesus as Emmanuel, God-with-us (1:23; 28:20). The birth story sets the tone and provides the categories by which the following narrative is to be interpreted.

4. *Matthew restructures his traditions to provide an extensive introductory section.* Part One of his narrative (1:1–12:21) provides the hermeneutical key to Part Two (12:22–28:19). Source analysis of Matthew has often noted that Matthew composes freely in the first part of his narrative, drawing material from all his sources and rearranging them according to his own purpose. The second part, from Matt 12:22 onward, joins the Markan narrative at Mark 3:22, and thereafter never deviates from the Markan order. From the point of view of Matthew's narrative Christology, the significance of this arrangement is that the first part of Matthew's Gospel is his own carefully structured guide to his reinterpretation of the community's traditions. By the time Matthew's audience/readership gets to Matt 12:22/Mark 3:22, they are prepared to understand their whole tradition in a new light, and can follow the familiar Markan story line through to the end.

5. *This restructuring is not random, but is in the service of the plot.* Q was not a narrative, though an implicit narrative world can be formulated on the basis of the sayings of Jesus it includes. Mark was truly a narrative, not merely a collection of stories. The stories and sayings in Mark were held together by the plot, which involved Jesus' conflicts with the demonic world, this-worldly authorities, and his own disciples. Matthew takes over this plot and makes it more explicit and focused, restructuring his sources so that the whole narrative can be read in terms of one comprehensive plot.

6. *The plot of the Gospel of Matthew resolves the conflict of kingdoms.* The survey of christological designations above suggests that the variety of titles in Matthew converge on the royal image of Jesus-as-king. Pursuing this narrative thread through Matthew's Gospel tends to confirm this approach, as illustrated in the following incomplete list of comments on particular texts.⁸

Matthew 1:1. Matthew begins with a constellation of christological terms designating his

⁸ The same narrative approach illustrated here with respect to royal imagery can be pursued with regard to other important Matthean christological foci, such as images of the servant, the new Moses, and divine wisdom. It will be found that the narrative weaves the various images together. The important Moses typology, for example, overlaps and is knit together with both the servant and the royal imagery. See Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), 27, 34–35, 70, 74, 275, and *passim*.

composition as the story of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham. *Son of Abraham* designates Jesus as a Jew who stands in the covenant history of the people of God, but the phrase does not become a christological theme. The case is different with *Son of David*. Pairing “Christ” and “Son of David” suggests that Matthew intends that Messiahship should be understood in terms of God’s promise of eschatological kingship (cf. e.g., 2 Sam 7:1–17).

Matthew 1:6b–17. The Matthean genealogy presents Jesus as Son of David, descended from the kings of Israel. This is different from Luke 3:23–31, in which Jesus is descended from David, but not from the royal line.

Matthew 1:23. Matthew’s first “formula quotation” is from Isa 7:14: the son of the virgin will be called “Emmanuel,” God-with-us. Matthew does not relate virginal conception to Jesus’ identity as Son of God (again, contrast Luke 1:31–32) and never refers to it again. The Emmanuel theme, however, becomes a *leitmotif* of the whole narrative. Is this a separate christological theme, or does it, too, fit within Matthew’s royal Christology? In the Isaiah context, the prophetic oracle was addressed to the “House of David” (Isa 7:2, 13); the other such oracles (Isa 9:1–7; 11:1–9) specifically promise the birth of a Davidic king who will bring salvation. To be sure, Matthew does not attend to the context of his citations from Scripture in the same way as modern historical study. Yet he may have been drawn to this text more by the Emmanuel reference than by his understanding of its validation of the virginal conception. Is this a royal name, a throne-name, given by God, expressing the reality that comes into being with the coming of Jesus?

Matthew 2:1–4. Immediately after the birth of Jesus, magi from the east come to Jerusalem seeking the newborn king; in the same context, Matthew identifies “king” and “Messiah” (2:2–4). The plot thickens. A new king has been born. But there is already a king, and there is room for only one king. The status quo ruler attempts to destroy the new king, but God’s intervention preserves him and establishes his throne. This, too, is parallel to the Davidic paradigm, in which the unlikely shepherd boy was *already* the anointed king of God’s people even though he was *not yet* acknowledged as Israel’s actual ruler, and the old regime continued (1 Sam 8–2 Sam 7). Matthew’s readers can recognize in this pattern not only the story of Jesus, but their own situation. They believe Jesus is already God’s anointed Messiah, but the world goes on as before under the apparent control of this-worldly rulers. The confession that Jesus is the Christ is an affirmation about who is ultimately in control of the world.

Matthew 3:2, 15, 17. In Mark, John the Baptist proclaimed baptism for the forgiveness of sins, and Jesus submitted to this baptism (Mark 1:4, 9). This introduced a christological issue that plagued all the later evangelists. Matthew responds by rewriting the Baptist’s message, transferring forgiveness of sins from John’s ministry to Jesus’ (from Mark 1:4 to Matt 26:28), and introducing Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom of God into John’s

message (from Matt 3:17 to Matt 3:2). Thus, in Matthew, when Jesus comes to be baptized, it is a matter of doing righteousness, the revealed will of God—a central Matthean theme (e.g., 1:19; 3:15; 5:6, 10, 20, 45; 6:1, and combined with the kingdom of God in 6:33). Of the evangelists, only Matthew makes doing the will of God a matter of the coming of the kingdom (6:10). The heavenly voice that declares Jesus to be God's Son echoes the coronation liturgy of Ps 2:6–7 that combines the language of kingship with that of sonship. Just as the Davidic king is equipped by the Spirit for his mission (Isa 11:1–5), so the Spirit descends on Jesus, the royal Son of God at his baptism.

Matthew 4:1–11. The devil's repeated "If you are the Son of God . . ." does not question the reality of Jesus' sonship or kingship, but probes the nature of his rule. Will he use his great power to offer the world bread and circuses, in the manner of the rulers of this world? In the final temptation, this becomes blatantly explicit: "Do it my way, acknowledge me to be the master, and you will indeed become the ruler of all the kingdoms of the world" (Matt 4:8–9). Jesus is king, but what will be the nature of his rule? If it has not occurred to the audience before, the question of the relation of Rome's rule to God's rule is now unavoidable.⁹

Matthew 16:13–20. We have seen enough to confirm and illuminate the idea that the meaning of God's act in Christ is discerned from engagement with the narrative itself, and skip now to a key passage. In the pivotal scene in which Peter confesses Jesus to be the Christ (Mark 8:27–30; Matt 16:13–20), Matthew adds *Son of the living God* to Mark's *Christ*. This is not to make the confession more metaphysical, but more royal. The point is not that Jesus is Son of God and not merely human, but that Jesus is God's anointed king. While Matthew has no doubts that Jesus is both truly human and truly divine, these later categories are not important to him. Matthew's Christology does not focus on the metaphysics of Jesus' person, but on Jesus' role in God's restoration of the divine sovereignty of the Creator, the ultimate establishment of God's justice throughout creation. For Matthew, the scene of "Peter's confession" is not the critical turning point in the perception of Jesus' identity that it is in Mark. People have long since known that Jesus is Son of God, and this has already been confessed by all the disciples (14:33). Matthew's retelling is here concerned to relate Jesus' Messiahship to the church and to discipleship. This is one of numerous illustrations that Matthew has no interest in Christology as a separate theme, but only as interwoven into his whole story of the meaning of God's act in Jesus.

7. *What kind of king?* Many modern readers of the Bible, even those who regularly pray "Thy kingdom come," are nonetheless understandably suspicious of kingship language. This language and imagery was omnipresent in the world of the NT authors, and was deeply embedded in their Scripture and religious tradition. Early Christian teachers responded in different ways to the issue of how to deal with the language and imagery of empire as a vehicle of the Christian faith. The

⁹ Warren Carter, *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations* (Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 2001), 53: "Matthew's Gospel is . . . a counternarrative, a work of resistance." Carter's several studies have helpfully illuminated the numerous contacts that Matthew's audience would have made with imperial ideology and theology, while pointing out that "[his] concern is not to argue that imperial theology is the source for or origin of Matthew's presentation of Jesus [but] . . . one influence among others."

fundamental transformation of such language occurred when it was filled with new content by the character of the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth. There was some variety in the ways various writers handled the details of this transformation, a variety reflected in the NT canon. Mark, for example, represents those early Christian theologians who adopted the language of kingship and Messianism, but balked at the specific title Son of David, which he regarded as too closely bound to the imagery of violence and militarism. In Mark, Son of David language appears on 3 occasions: as an address to Jesus on the lips of a blind person before he is healed (Mark 10:47–48), as the misunderstanding of the crowds who hail Jesus as the coming Davidic king (Mark 11:10), and finally when Jesus himself corrects the view of the Jewish scribes that the Messiah is the Son of David (Mark 12:35–36). Mark accepts Messiah and king, but not Son of David as legitimate christological categories.

We have already seen that Matthew is sensitive to this issue. The texts that document the centrality of kingship in Matthew's Christology simultaneously raise the question of what it means for Jesus to be king. The issue is always whether the titles and categories define Jesus, or vice versa. Matthew makes the Markan narrative basic to his own narrative Christology and incorporates practically all of it. But in the process, Matthew continues the process of reinterpretation Mark had begun to include Son of David, which he made into a major christological category. He identifies the Christ as Son of David in his opening line, and provides Jesus with a royal Davidic genealogy. He takes Mark's one positive reference to David in Mark, in which David feeds the hungry (Mark 2:25), and the one instance in which the Markan Jesus is addressed as the son of David who acts with mercy and compassion (Mark 10:47–48), and makes this the fundamental meaning of the term. Jesus is recognized as Son of David because he represents the mercy of God (Matt 9:27; 12:3, 23; 15:22; 20:30–31).

This is part and parcel of Matthew's radical interpretation of kingship: Jesus is the promised messianic king, but he operates with the nonviolent, quiet humility of the Servant of the Lord portrayed in Isa 42:1–4. At the crucial point of the narrative, at the conclusion of Part One, Matthew inserts this text—his longest quotation in the gospel—as the summary characterization of the nature of God's kingship. This is not the introduction of a separate "topic," as though Matthew now shifts from royal Christology to servant Christology. The whole context has to do with the conflict of kingdoms generated by the appearance of Jesus. Nor is the kingdom of God a distinct topic, separate or parallel to the images of Jesus as Christ, king, Son of David, and Servant. The narrative fuses all these images (and more!) into the one story presenting the incursion of God's kingdom into the world of human kingdoms.

Kingship, for Matthew, is a term that ultimately points to God. Jesus' central message of the kingdom of God evokes the mythical picture of the eschatological restoration of the creation to the sovereignty of the Creator. The Messiah is God's agent, whose kingship comes from and is in the service of God-the-rightful-king. The Christ is the anointed one; the Anointer is God. All NT Christology is theocentric, and Christology is not an alternative or supplement to faith in the one God. The issue of Christian faith is whether God is in fact the One who acted redemptively in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Christology is not oriented to the question, "Who is Jesus?" but "Who is God?"¹⁰ For Matthew, this question is not separable from the person of Jesus, who is God-with-us.

¹⁰ Schubert M. Ogden, *The Point of Christology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982).