CHAPTER 2

Who Do You Say That I Am? A Matthean Response

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The central gospel question – “Who do you say that I am” (Matt 16:15) – is one that has engaged Christians since it was first asked in the gospel narratives (see also Mark 8:29; Luke 9:20). While for some it might seem that there is a clear and unambiguous answer – “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matt 16:16) – an exploration of both the Gospel of Matthew and recent scholarship on this gospel would suggest that its answer is neither clear nor unambiguous but rather opens up multiple dimensions of meaning.

Gospel portraits of Jesus are complex. They are formed and shaped as a reader encounters the web of plot, character interaction, images and metaphors (including titles), and a range of other rhetorical devices. They are informed by the theological or interpretive perspectives that scholars bring to their readings of the narrative. Also, the use of a range of biblical methodologies or interpretive strategies leads to variations in interpretations. Matthean scholarship, with the portraits of Jesus proposed therein during the second half of the twentieth century into the first decade of the new millennium, has been no stranger to this complexity.

Given the wealth of this scholarship, it would be impossible to summarize it in this chapter. What I propose to do, therefore, is to draw attention to the major emphases in the Matthean portrait of Jesus. At the same time, I will note some of the shifts in biblical methodologies that have impacted scholars’ constructions of this portrait across the proposed timeframe and some of the hermeneutical perspectives they have brought to their interpretation. Detailed discussion and extensive critical engagement will not be possible. It is my hope, however, that this chapter will invite readers into the complex map of responses in the Matthean gospel to the Jesus question – “Who do you say I am?” – while at the same time providing a compass that can guide the traversing of this map.

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Titles Given to Jesus

One characteristic of historical critical scholarship on Matthew’s gospel has been and is its concern with the titles given to Jesus: whether “Son of Man,” “Son of God,” “Messiah,” “Lord,” “Son of David,” or others were dominant in the Matthean gospel. This approach has been exemplified in the work of Jack Dean Kingsbury ([1975] 1989; 1984) and others.

Foundational to Kingsbury’s historical critical approach to Matthean christology was his proposed structuring of the gospel. He divided the gospel into three sections (1:1–4:16; 4:17–16:20; and 16:21–28:20) on the basis of the marker “[f]rom that time on Jesus began to ...” in 4:17 and 16:21 (1989, 1–39). Kingsbury drew attention to one set of markers in the Matthean narrative, but it was one among many. The traditional division of the gospel into five major discourses with the key marker “when Jesus had finished ...,” the phrase that concludes each of the five major discourses (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1), was one other (Meier 1979, 45–46), and it focused attention on Jesus as teacher/preacher. On the basis of his emphasis on the formula in 4:17 and 16:21, Kingsbury, however, argued that the Matthean gospel is the unfolding story of Jesus as Messiah (1989, 7–25), a title which occurs sixteen times in the gospel (1:1, 16, 17, 18; 2:4; 11:2; 16:16, 20; 22:42; 23:10; 24:5, 23; 26:63, 68; 27:17, 22). Within his proposed structure of the unfolding story of Jesus Messiah, he claims that “Son of Man” is the way that Jesus designates himself or interacts with the world (Kingsbury 1975; Matt 8:20; 9:6; 10:23; 11:19; 12:8, 32, 40; 13:37, 41; 16:13, 27, 28; 17:9, 12, 22; 19:28; 20:18, 28; 24:27, 30, 37, 39, 44; 25:31; 26:2, 24, 45, 64) but that “Son of God” is a confessional title and hence is central even though it occurs as an explicit title fewer times in the narrative (4:3, 6; 8:29; 14:33; 16:16; 26:63; 27:40, 43). He privileges confession over narrative and a single title over a multiplicity of titles.

Kingsbury does not articulate a particular hermeneutic shaping his interpretation, but it is worth noting that, with the emergence of a narrative approach to the gospels in the mid-1980s, he participated in this shift (1988). While his methodological approach purportedly shifted, his christological focus was still on titles, with the accompanying claim that the title Son of God dominated. In a frequently cited response to Kingsbury, David Hill raises the question as to whether for him the christological probe “was already settled and delivered and would accord with what Kingsbury has strongly argued for elsewhere and by other means” (1984).

John Meier, on the other hand, highlighted the significance of the Son of Man title. He, however, did not claim the dominance of any one title but emphasized that titles function together within the context of the gospel and should not be pitted over against one another (1979). More recently, Dennis Duling (1992) has drawn attention to the contribution that the title Son of David (Matt 1:20; 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30, 31; 21:9, 15; 22:42) makes to the Matthean portrait of Jesus, using three social scientific models to demonstrate the multivalence or plurisignificance of this
term in the gospel. The most recent comprehensive exploration of a Matthean title is that of Joel Willitts, in which he explores the motif of Shepherd-King through the lens of what he calls “concrete-political Davidic Messianism” (2007, 4).

It is evident from the above that these and other titles given to Jesus in the Matthean gospel are multiple and function across the text to develop an understanding of Jesus. However, together with the metaphorical designation of God as Father, especially in relation to Jesus as Son, that occurs extensively across the Matthean gospel, these titles construct an androcentric symbolic universe within the gospel, while titles such as “Lord” and “King” construct an imperial one. Such aspects need to be engaged critically so as not to underpin contemporary justification for ongoing patriarchy, androcentrism, imperialism, or colonialism.

Attention to titles, does not, however, exhaust the gospel portrait. Closely related to the function of titles in shaping the characterization of Jesus are certain motifs that are developed in the unfolding of the gospel story. One such motif is that of Wisdom. Celia Deutsch, for instance (1996; cf. Suggs 1970; Burnett 1981), examines the metaphor of Lady Wisdom in the sapiential literature. She points to the tensive nature of metaphor that enables it to evoke ever new meanings in new situations. She then goes on to examine ways in which the Matthean gospel, especially in 11:2–13:58 and 19:1–25:46, “presents Jesus as Wisdom by ascribing to Jesus qualities and roles attributed to Lady Wisdom in other Jewish sources … Jesus is hidden and revealed, accepted and rejected. He is teacher and prophet” (1996, 42). In a later article, she brings an explicitly feminist hermeneutic to bear on the Matthean portrayal of Jesus as Wisdom (2001). While the Wisdom motif may not necessarily speak from women’s experience in the Matthean communities, it can provide contemporary interpreters with a female metaphor that may begin to subvert the androcentrism noted above.

While Deutsch traced the use of the metaphor of Wisdom to characterize Jesus in the Matthean narrative, Dale C. Allison examined how a Moses-typology that had been developing in the Hebrew Bible and other religious literature available to the Matthean author functioned to inform the gospel’s portrait of Jesus (Allison 1993). For him, this was not a motif visible only in certain sections of the gospel, such as Matthew 2 (the bringing of Jesus out of Egypt) or Matthew 5–7 (in which Jesus is presented as a new lawgiver). Rather, for Allison, it characterized the entire narrative.

All the above studies could be designated as literary-critical in their approach within the context of the broader methodological approach of historical criticism—the scholars who examined titles, motifs, metaphors, and typologies characterizing the Matthean Jesus were seeking the intention of the Matthean author/s in relation to the portrait of Jesus. They explored how these titles and motifs were informed by the variety of meanings emerging from both the Hebrew Bible and other Jewish texts circulating in the late Hellenistic and early Roman empires, an aspect that I have not been able to develop in this brief article. What is becoming clear, however, is that the Matthean portrait of Jesus is multidimensional, informed by a web of such
typologies and titles, motifs and metaphors. What tended to be missing from these studies, however, was the integrating aspect of the gospel story. In the early 1980s, narrative criticism emerged as a way of addressing such a lacuna, and it is to this that I now turn.

### Narrative Portrayals of Jesus

It seems almost a truism to state that Jesus is a character, albeit the major character, in the Matthean narrative, but Mark Allan Powell (1991, 48) makes it very explicit when he says, “[t]he plot of Matthew’s gospel is basically the story of its central character, Jesus.” Turning attention to plot and characterization as narrative techniques has further informed an understanding of the Matthean Jesus. In 1987, Frank Matera, using Chatman’s literary critical theory of “kernels” and “satellites” as constitutive of plot, shifted attention from historical criticism’s identification of markers in the text indicating structure to key events and what emerges from them in the shaping of a story. He summarized his determination of plot in this way. By birth Jesus was the Davidic Messiah. After John was imprisoned, he began to preach, heal, and teach, exclusively among the people of Israel. Though most segments of Israel rejected him, his disciples acknowledged him as the Messiah. After explaining to them that he would suffer, die, and be resurrected, he went to Jerusalem, where his cleansing of the temple brought about his death. His death meant that Israel had rejected its Messiah, and consequently, the gospel was transferred to the Gentiles (Matera 1987, 245–246).

Powell (1991, 48–51) advanced the narrative study of Jesus further, demonstrating the intimate link between plot and characterization. He drew attention to conflict as constitutive of the Matthean narrative (1992a; 1992b), examining how other characters interact around Jesus the main character in the conflict-laden story. In the opening scenes, many bear witness to Jesus: the narrator, the magoi from the East, John the Baptist, and the heavenly voice. This cumulative witness authorizes Jesus for preaching, teaching, and healing roles that draw opposition. The culmination of this opposition occurs in the condemning of Jesus to death and his vindication in being raised up by God. Powell’s final sentence in the section on the character of Jesus seems to suggest, however, that the narrative portrayal falls short of Matthean theology, concluding in relation to 28:20 that “Matthew indicates that Jesus cannot ultimately be understood as a character but must be seen as a living presence in the midst of his church” (1992c. 361). It could be argued, however, that the final aspect of the narrative portrayal of the character Jesus is that he, as risen one, will be with the addressees of the narrative, until the end of time. Matthean theology is conveyed through narrative characterization.

I have dealt further with this issue of the theological function of narrative in constructing the gospel portrait of Jesus (Wainwright 1998), arguing that narrative functions by being heard/read, that narrative makes meaning, including theological
meaning, in and among readers/hearers, and that this was as true for the first century as for the twentieth and the twenty-first. The gospel story of Jesus would have been heard *differently* within the *different* households constituting the Matthean community or communities of the first century, whether they were located in Antioch (Carter 2000) or in northern Galilee—either Tiberias or Sepphoris (Overman 1990, 158–161; Gale 2005)—or whether they functioned as “a rather loosely confederated group of congregations, united by missionaries” across “an arc of settlement that included both the Galilee ... and Pella ... arched into Syria through Antioch and Edessa,” with Galilee and Antioch being two fixed points (Segal 1991, 26–27). Wherever the community or however constituted, although I am inclined toward Segal’s position, its various households would have made theological meaning from the narrative. So too will this gospel story of Jesus be heard/read/received differently, so too will it make theological meaning of Jesus with different emphases in different communities today, be they scholarly or faith communities (Davies 1993, 11–17).

This aspect of difference came to my attention as a result of my feminist hermeneutic. This criticizes the androcentric language and worldview and the patriarchal structures encoded in the biblical text and revisions the gospel storytelling to include the meaning-making of both women and men of the Matthean communities and of today’s interpretive communities. Bringing such a perspective to the task of reading the Matthean Jesus also made me attentive to the ways in which centuries of reflection on christology have influenced interpreters (1) to separate the maleness of Jesus from his many other characteristics, giving it undue emphasis; (2) to fix attention on the titles of Jesus without recognition of how they reflect the dominant androcentric worldview, resulting in many other aspects of the narrative such as the Wisdom motif noted above being obscured; and (3) to read with an isolated focus on Jesus rather than on his functioning as one character among many within the unfolding narrative (Wainwright 1998, 9–18).

I undertook a critical reading of selected texts from the Matthean narrative, attentive to the possibility of different aspects of the Matthean portrait of Jesus being emphasized in different types of households of interpretation. This enabled me to demonstrate, by way of example, that Jesus could have been understood within some Matthean households as coming from the lineage of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, Rachel, and many other mothers omitted from the Matthean genealogy, as well as from the lineage of David and Abraham and the thirty-seven other patriarchs (Matt 1:1–17). He may have been seen as an endangered child of an endangered mother (1:18–25), who needed to be liberated by God before he could take up his role of liberator/savior (Matt 2). Some households may have emphasized his characterization as a doer of deeds rather than a bearer of titles (11:1–6) or as Wisdom justified by her deeds (11:19). I suggested further that metaphors may have emerged from the characterization of Jesus in relationship with others in the text, such as that of the boundary walker of Matthew 15:21–28. On the border with Tyre and Sidon, Jesus encountered a Canaanite woman whose engagement with him brought him to a new understanding of his mission, namely that the bread of the
children belonged to all who would demonstrate the “great faith” that she did (15:28). Jesus’ preaching, teaching, and healing among the “lost sheep of the house of Israel” (10:5–6; 15:24) had been extended through this encounter beyond boundaries of gender, ethnicity, and religion. Amy-Jill Levine (1988) and Anthony Saldarini (1994) both, however, emphasize that such an extension to include Gentiles within the ministry of Jesus does not constitute a rejection of Israel, an important recognition that can counter some of the anti-Jewish characterizations of Jesus and the Jewish leaders that have constituted Matthean scholarship (Levine 2006, 87–117).

As a result of such a reading of the Matthean Jesus, I concluded that “[d]iverse voices of interpretation need to be heard so that the reading of Jesus is not controlled or confined in the hands of a few ... but is available to many ... in communities of Christian faith and praxis” (1998, 119–120). Matthean scholarship in the latter decades of the twentieth century into the twenty-first has contributed to this diversity of interpretation, and I turn now to aspects of the Matthean portrait of Jesus that have not yet been highlighted in this chapter.

Expanding the Portrait

Since the emergence of narrative criticism, at least two approaches have contributed to the expansion of the Matthean portrait of Jesus: namely, social scientific criticism (Neyrey 1998; Love 2009) as well as a renewed focus on the context of the Roman Empire (Carter 2001; Riches and Sim 2005). Diverse hermeneutical perspectives have also shaped an understanding of the Matthean Jesus, among them postcolonialism and an awareness of the explicitly Jewish context and character of the Matthean gospel and the tendency of Christian interpreters to read this through a supersessionist lens (Saldarini 1994; Overman 1990; Gale 2005; Levine 2006). Given the limitations of an article such as this, I will not be able to explore fully this hermeneutical and methodological potential for new understandings of the Jesus of Matthew. Rather, I will highlight aspects of the unfolding story of Jesus in dialogue with such perspectives and methodologies.

The opening verse/s of a narrative are particularly important in engaging the reader, and the opening phrase of Matthew’s story of Jesus, the “book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ,” is no exception. This phrase, “book of the genealogy” (Revised Standard Version), may seem rather mundane until it is recognized that this phrase could have evoked and can evoke for its hearers/readers Genesis 2:4 – the *genealogy* of the heavens or sky and the earth and all they contained, including the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, and all living creatures, including male and female of the human species (Gen 2:4) – and then explicitly the *genealogy* of the human community in Genesis 5:1–2, male and female. In my current research, I am seeking to develop an ecological hermeneutic for reading Matthew’s portrait of Jesus, and from such a perspective, the evocation in the opening phrase of the gospel extends the
genealogy of Jesus far beyond the first named ancestor, Abraham, and even beyond the emergence of the human community that is male and female, to the emergence of the heavens and earth, with all the complexity of this unfolding that we now know through cosmology (Wainwright 2009). The end of the gospel (28:18) also situates the authorizing power of Jesus within the context of the heavens and the earth, thus providing a cosmic frame around the narrative for the reader attentive to this evocation in 1:1. Within such a frame, Jesus is designated as Emmanuel (“God with us”), the one in whom God is with God’s people (1:23; 28:20), inviting ever new reflection on who this God is and how this God is known in the Matthean portrait of Jesus.

Particularity emerges in the second part of the opening verse. The genealogy is of the one designated Jesus Christos. Later in 1:21, an angelic voice announces to Joseph that Mary will bear a son who is to be named “Jesus” (derived from Hebrew “he saves”) because he will save or liberate, as the name indicates. The term “Christos” evokes the multiple expectations and hopes that were circulating around that name in first-century Judean/Galilean/Syrian Jewish communities (Neusner, Green, and Frerichs 1987). For some Christos pointed to an authoritative royal figure who would reconstitute Israel (hence the link to “Son of David”; see Willitts 2007); for others, it may have evoked the popular messianic figures leading liberation movements (Horsley and Hanson 1985, 89–96). Warren Carter demonstrates that the situation of the Matthean households within the context of the Roman Empire, with its religio-political and socio-economic symbol systems, would have also shaped the understanding of Jesus called forth by the opening verse of the narrative (Carter 2005, 147–148). He summarizes the outcome of his detailed investigation in this way:

In the gospel’s opening verse, the aspirations associated with David, the Christ, Jesus/Joshua, and (new) creation evoked in relation to Jesus collide with and contest Roman imperial claims. The verse functions to dispute the truthfulness of the imperial claims, suggesting Rome’s demise, offering some present relief and proclaiming an alternative and just social vision under way now but yet to be fully realized in the future new creation (2005, 165).

I turn next to Jesus’ emergence in the narrative as an adult, who is paralleled with John the Baptist in two carefully structured scenes – in the wilderness and by the Jordan (3:1–4:11). Both John and Jesus are liminal characters, associated with the wilderness (3:1; 4:1), that space which is outside temple, palace, city, or village (Levine 1988, 7–8). John, in particular, is characterized as a prophet (Matt 3:4; cf. 2 Kings 1:8), and McVann argues, using the social-scientific understanding of ritual process and the liminality associated with it, that John leads Jesus through a rite of passage, making him “one of the prophets” (1993).

John and Jesus, the wilderness prophets, are both designated as proclaiming a call to hearers/readers to repent, to change their perspective, their way of seeing the world, because the basileia (kingdom) of the heavens is near at hand (3:2; 4:17). For
John, this preaching culminates in the “fulfilling of all righteousness” when he takes Jesus through the authorizing ritual of baptism in accordance with Jesus’ desire (3:15). For Jesus, the basileia of the heavens, the basileia of God, becomes the core of his proclamation (the gospel of the basileia – see 4:23 and 9:35).

In Matthew, the account of Jesus’ baptism is passed over very cursorily. It is, however, followed by two statements to which the reader’s attention is drawn by the phrase kai idou (and behold) in 3:16 and 17. The one whose birth is from the spirit named as holy has a spirit that is “of God” come upon him as he is being authorized for prophetic ministry, and a heavenly voice, presumably of God, proclaims him as son/beloved in whom God is well pleased. For many Matthean hearers/readers, the narration of the spirit coming upon Jesus may have been understood intertextually with Isaiah 61:1 (Jesus is the anointed one of God) or with Psalm 2 (he is the anointed one who is called “son”). The language and imagery of divine sonship in Matthew 3 and 4 (baptism and temptations) is polyvalent. In the Greco-Roman world, such language or imagery was associated with the birth, the crowning, or the apotheosis of a new emperor (Ovid, Metamorphoses 14.804–851; 15.843–848; see Cotter 2001). In the Jewish world, it designated Israel as God’s beloved (Exod 4:22–23; Jer 31:9, 20; Hos 11:1) or the righteous one (Wis 2:18; Sir 4:10).

One of the first actions of the newly designated prophet and holy one, Jesus, is to gather around him a new fictive kinship, symbolized by the four fishermen: Peter, Andrew, James, and John (4:18–22). Only then, surrounded by this group, does Jesus begin to go “throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people” (4:23; cf. 9:35). There is ambivalence in the narrative at this point. Those whom Jesus gathers are not his own family or kin (see 12:46–50). Rather he invites followers to make a radical break with their families and with all the resources associated with kinship relationships, in order to form a new kinship group around the proclamation of this new basileia vision (4:17). Indeed Jerome Neyrey claims from a sociological perspective, using the cultural code of honor and shame, that it is the members of this new kinship who are proclaimed blessed or honored by Jesus in the beatitudes (1998, 164–189).2

The new kinship group formed by Jesus is all male at this point. I have argued, however, that in Matthew’s gospel the structure of the “healing” of Peter’s mother-in-law is parallel to that of the calling of male disciples in Matthew 4:18–22 and 9:9, except for the phrase “and the fever left her.” Where they follow, she serves, both words indicating discipleship in the gospel.1 This parallel suggests that at least some Matthean households contested the view that disciples of Jesus could only be male (Wainwright 1991, 180–182). This theme of the significant inclusion of women in the unfolding story of Jesus runs like a thread through the Gospel of Matthew, forming a subverted and a subversive narrative, as I have demonstrated elsewhere (Wainwright 1991).4 This theme, together with the general theme of discipleship, helps to characterize Jesus.5
The summary passage of Matthew 4:23–25 forms a narrative transition into Jesus’ preaching of what we call the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5–7). The Matthean imagery of the mountain and Jesus’ teaching from a seated position confirm his authority to teach, an authority conferred in and through his baptism. The Matthean community characterizes Jesus as a lawgiver like Moses (5:1–2, 17–19, 21–48; Allison 1993), thus providing authorization for itself as standing within the tradition of Judaism, albeit in a sectarian struggle according to the studies of Overman (1990, 86–94), Saldarini (1994, 84–167), and Gale (2005). He is also presented as a sage or wise one, a wisdom teacher, seated and interpreting the tradition in macarisms or beatitudes (blessings; 5:1–12) or as the two paths of the wise and foolish (7:24–27; Crosby 1988, 147–195).

The beatitudes that open this first major discourse capture intertextually the characteristics of the righteous ones of God in the tradition of Israel’s scriptures. They are poor in spirit (Isa 61:1–10), meek (Ps 37:11), merciful (Ps 85:10), and makers of peace (Ps 37). The poetry of the gospel storyteller is revealed in the structuring of these beatitudes, that are framed by the phrase “the basileia (or kingdom) of the heavens” (5:3, 10). Interpolated into this frame in vv. 6 and 10 is the notion of righteousness/justice or the right ordering that God desires (Green 2001). Jesus is preacher of a basileia characterized by this right ordering or justice (5:20; 6:10, 33; 7:21; Crosby 1988; see Hannan 2006 for a comprehensive treatment of this motif of the basileia across the gospel).

Jesus, teacher of the basileia, presents scriptural injunctions concerning murder, adultery, divorce, swearing falsely, retaliation, and love of enemies (5:21–48), issues which had an explicit first-century context. The teaching on divorce, for instance (5:31–32; 19:3–12), is addressed to the man only and gives him power over a woman in marriage (Carter 2000, 147–149); it forbids divorce and remarriage after divorce and promotes celibacy for those who do divorce on the grounds of porneia, the exception clause in this ruling, whose meaning still puzzles scholars. Jesus, the teacher, and his teachings may not have been liberating and especially not for women. Levine (2006) warns against interpreting such texts to portray Jesus as “liberating women from an oppressive, misogynistic Judaism” (143) in an attempt to present a monolithic image of Jesus. Rather, today’s communities of interpretation will need to engage with such teachings in the light of contemporary insights and ethics, exploring both the biblical text and today’s multiple and varied contexts.

The frame of 4:23 and 9:35 includes the healings in Matthew 8–9 within Jesus’ basileia ministry. Jesus is cast in the role of an itinerant folk healer (8:1–15; 8:23–9:8; 9:18–34), whose healings are interspersed with other forms of ministry (8:16–22; 9:9–17). He carries on the healing role that is ascribed to God in the Hebrew Bible or is one like the Roman healing deity, Asclepius, about whom narratives of healing, sharing some similarities with the gospel stories, were inscribed on the walls of the Asclepium (LiDonnici 1995; Wainwright 2006, 85–87). In recent years, John Pilch (2000) has brought a medical-anthropological perspective to gospel healings, situating them within a broader regional healthcare system that included varied
practices and beliefs. This approach underscores Jesus’ role as a folk healer, whose healings raised questions about whether his power was from Beelzebul or the spirit of God (12:27–28; 13:53–58). On the other hand, Lidija Novakovic argues that Jesus’ healings demonstrate his messiahship and that they constitute an explicit fulfillment of the scriptures, as Matthew 8:16–17 attests (Novakovic 2003). The healing work of Jesus is not confined to two chapters of the gospel (8–9) but continues up to his healing of the blind and lame in the temple (12:9–14, 22–23; 15:21–28; 17:14–18; 20:29–34; 21:14). It is also reiterated in summary passages (11:1–6; 12:15–21; 14:14, 34–36; 15:29–32; 19:2).

Having provided a developing portrait of Jesus as preacher, teacher, healer within the context of a basileia ministry, the gospel has Jesus passing on this ministry to his disciples, commissioning them to preach in the mission discourse (10:7), although the gospel does not recount any such mission being undertaken. Like John and Jesus, they are to proclaim that the basileia of the heavens, or God’s basileia, is near at hand (3:2; 4:17; 10:7), and they are to continue the healing ministry that Jesus began (10:1–8). One contentious issue in relation to Jesus’ proclamation of the basileia and its continuation by the disciples is that it seems to be limited within the ministry of Jesus to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt 10:5; 15:24), while at the same time Jesus heals a Roman centurion’s servant (8:5–13) and the daughter of a Canaanite woman (15:21–28) as well as commissioning the disciples to make disciples of “all nations” (28:19). Amy-Jill Levine has undertaken a comprehensive exploration of this issue (1988), suggesting that there is a temporal axis along which the mission to Israel and then to the nations can be placed. There is also a social axis, along which those with little social status respond to Jesus, while those with power and prestige, like Herod and Pilate, do not. The Canaanite woman of 15:21–28 is one of those low on the social axis who shift the focus of Jesus’ basileia mission to include whoever is in need.

Matthew 1–10 presents Jesus as a teacher/preacher and healer, interweaving this portrait with titles and motifs within the context of the unfolding narrative, as discussed above. Although there are hints of human opposition and questioning (2:1–12; 9:3, 11, 14, 34), these do not emerge strongly until Matthew 11 and beyond. Indeed, Matthew 11 opens with John questioning whether Jesus is, indeed, the Christos or coming one (11:2–3). The reply given by Jesus confirms his characterization in the narrative to this point. He will be known by what one has seen him doing and heard him saying (11:5). It is not titles (Christos or “coming one”) that best characterize Jesus, but his preaching of the basileia in word and in deed.

Later in the gospel, titles will be used by Peter and the other disciples in response to Jesus’ questions about his identity (16:13, 15), and it is the reply of Peter, “you are the Christos, the son of the living God,” which Jesus affirms (16:16, 17). Jesus will be questioned and mocked under this title later in the narrative (26:63; 27:40, 43). It is important, however, that such titles are not considered apart from the narrative. Rather Jesus’ characterization by a title (16:13–21) functions in tension with his characterization by word and deed (11:2–6) in a narrative context,
demonstrating that the characterization of Jesus must take account of the variety of perspectives that the gospel presents.

As is clear from this pericope (16:13–21) and elsewhere in the narrative, interaction between Jesus and others is one of the key narrative techniques for portraying a character. There are four groups whose responses shape the Matthean portrayal of Jesus. They are the disciples, the crowds, the Jewish leaders (variously named as scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, elders, and chief priests), and the Roman procurator, Pilate, and his soldiers. There have been book-length studies on each of the first three groups (Brown 2002 and Wilkins 1988; Cousland 2001; van Tilborg 1972). I cannot take up this aspect of the characterization of Jesus, except to draw attention to Matthew 23, which pits Jesus over against the scribes and the Pharisees in a series of woes.

This is one of the most difficult chapters in the gospel, in that it presents Jesus proclaiming prophetic condemnation or woes upon the designated teachers/leaders of the Jewish people as a culmination of growing contention and opposition to his preaching and ministry (5:20; 7:29; 9:11, 34; 12:14, 24; 16:21; 20:18; 22:34). If the Matthean community considers itself still within Judaism (see Carter 2000; Sim 1998; and Carter 2007 for a discussion of the problematic terminology “Jewish Christianity” and “Christian Judaism” currently being used by scholars), then this diatribe represents the bitterness of its struggle against Judaism and carries connotations of the woes proclaimed over Israel by the prophets (Isa 3:8–12; Jer 13:27; Hos 7:11–16). If the community has already broken with the synagogue, as Stanton (1992) and Levine (2006, 110–111) suggest, then the words of the Jesus portrayed in the Matthean gospel are not only anti-Jewish but have tragically acted as a foundation for centuries of Christian anti-Judaism.

Carter (2000, 449–450) offers three possible explanations for the invective, thus “limiting its applicability.” First, as noted above, it has a place in the plot of the gospel, which depicts, as he says, a “life-and-death conflict between Jesus and the religious elite as characters in this story,” and, I would add, must be engaged critically. His second point is that its historical context is the post-70 debates within Judaism over the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple and the Matthean community’s claim for the legitimacy of its interpreters of Jesus and the scriptures. Finally, Carter places the invective within “the polemical and stereotypical nature of language” in the Jewish and Greco-Roman world of the first century (note also the violent language attributed to God and directed toward those designated as the “evil” and “unrighteous” who do not respond adequately – 5:45; 13:40–42, 49–50; 18:34–35; 21:41; 22:13–14; 24:51; 25:45–46; see Reid 2004). Critical engagement with this chapter will prevent its being used to fuel anti-Jewish sentiment and will encourage contemporary Christian communities to reflect on how they should respond to these prophetic woes that Jesus preaches to hearers of the gospel.

The narrative of Jesus’ death and resurrection continues and concludes the gospel’s characterization of its central character. Matthew 26–28 is framed by instructions to the disciples (26:1–2; 28:16–20); by the gathering and consulting together
of the chief priests and elders (26:3–5; 28:11–15); and by the response of a woman and women to Jesus (26:6–13; 28:1–10). Despite the impending betrayal by members of his chosen group of disciples (26:14–16, 31–35, 47–56, 69–75) and the fact that all of them will flee (26:56), Jesus eats with them a final symbolic meal, in which he offers his body that has been prepared for burial by the unnamed woman who anointed him with healing ointment (26:17–30; 26:6–13). He prays with them in the agony of facing death (26:36–46), and he commissions the women disciples who stay with him during the crucifixion (27:55–56; 28:10) to send the male disciples to Galilee so that they can be reconciled to Jesus and so that he can pass on the task of continuing to make disciples for the basileia of God (28:9–10; 16–20).

Just as Jesus remained faithful to his basileia ministry, teaching and preaching, faithful unto death when opposition rendered this inevitable, so too must disciples remain faithful.

Titles that previously had been used to proclaim Jesus become contentious in the conflict of the final chapters. Before Caiaphas, the high priest, Jesus is charged as Messiah, Son of God (26:63), and Son of Man (26:64); and in the trial before Pilate, as King of the Jews (27:11) and Messiah (27:17, 22). Also, he is mocked and dishonored as King of the Jews (27:29), Son of God (27:40), King of Israel (27:42), and God’s Son (27:43). Finally, a Roman centurion, seeing the extraordinary phenomena surrounding Jesus’ final breath, calls him “a son of God,” as Roman emperors were named when such phenomena accompanied their deaths. The one, however, who is buried and raised is named simply as Jesus (27:58; 28:5–7, 9–10, 16, 18). For the Matthean community, finally, it is Jesus, the crucified and raised one who has, through the theologizing process of the gospel, been restored to honor and who now commissions disciples, both male and female, to continue the work of the basileia.

Donald Senior (1985, 163–171), who has studied Matthew’s passion extensively, notes four aspects of the theology of Jesus’ death and resurrection: namely, that Jesus’ death fulfills the scriptures and through it he is faithful to God’s will; that it frees God’s people from sin and death; that it is the pathway to life; and that it is an exemplar of authentic faith. More recently, scholars have questioned the ransom theology of the gospel (20:28; 26:28). Such theology has often been used to maintain the subservience of women, of colonized peoples, of the weakest and most vulnerable. If today’s readers are attentive to such a critique of this view of Jesus’ death, then they can read the passion narrative as providing a model for a life lived for the sake of justice and in fidelity to God, lived in a way that could lead to a martyr’s death, especially in unjust imperial situations like that of first-century Palestine.

Jerome Neyrey (1998, 139–162) provides another lens for reading the death of Jesus in a way that seeks to deal with the shame associated with Roman crucifixion. He reads the narrative as an encomium that reverses the shame by way of praise of the person’s death as noble, making use of phenomena such as an earthquake and an opening of a tomb. I do not have the space to engage further with this approach, but it leads us to the close of the gospel. Jesus is raised up by the power of
God symbolized in that very earthquake and the opening of the tomb, and he authorizes a continuation of his basileia ministry by instructing the reconciled disciples to go out into the whole world inviting all nations into a new fictive kinship as Jesus did and teaching all that Jesus taught. The final characterization of the Matthean Jesus, crucified and raised, is that he will indeed be a presence with this expanding group of disciples until the end of the age (28:20).

Conclusion

The gospel question “Who do you say that I am?” has indeed received many nuanced answers in the Matthean gospel, answers reflecting the theologizing processes going on not just in one community but in the different households constituting communities across an arc linking northern Galilee with Syrian Antioch. Struggles over both names and authority, mission and identity, have given rise to the different perspectives that move in and out of focus in the gospel narrative, much more indeed than it has been possible to highlight in this chapter. Contemporary appropriation of this same gospel must deal also with not only difference and conflict over issues that have emerged from centuries of reading the gospel in very diverse contexts but contentious issues in the portrait itself. And so just as story, titles/metaphors, character interaction, plot and other features combined in the context of diverse communities of the first century, so too they continue to combine creatively and critically in today’s myriad contexts of interpretation to provide the rich depiction of Jesus that is the Matthean gospel’s portrait and which answers the gospel’s question: “Who do you say that I am?”

Notes

I wish to acknowledge here the service of my colleague Professor Amy-Jill Levine, who read an early draft of this chapter. Her critique enabled me to reshape it quite significantly, but the final version gives witness to my own insights, and any potential errors are likewise mine.

1 The complex nature of these contexts and of Jewish communities within them during the latter half of the first century add further weight to my claim that the gospel shows evidence of different perspectives on Jesus both in its shaping and its reception, which are interactive in the meaning-making process of narrative. For instance, Jesus Messiah could have been understood by some as messianic liberator of an oppressed people, by others as one with royal power. Such different interpretations would have been particularly operative in settings in which orality was the dominant mode for the majority of the community. Some of the different types of households could have included those with scribal leadership engaged in the Jewish sectarian
conflict/s of the first century (Overman 1990; Gale 2005); the more “egalitarian” households in which women functioned in leadership and contributed to the storytelling (see Beavis 2007 for a discussion of the term “egalitarian” in relation to the first century); and the poorer households suffering under Roman occupation (Wainwright 1998, 35–49).

2 The social-scientific approach used by Neyrey and others draws attention to the function of social codes and the ways in which these are embedded within narrative, honor and shame being one such code. There is a tendency within this approach, however, to study these codes as fixed rather than being constantly negotiated and as overriding other aspects of the biblical text.

3 Matt 8:15; cf. 20:28, in which serving characterizes Jesus, and 27:55, where it describes a group of women faithful to the foot of the cross.

4 I argue that the references to women or stories in which women function as key characters can be read as a sub-narrative, as there is significant narrative development from the role of women in the birth narrative (1:3, 5, 6, 16, 18–25; 2:11, 13, 14, 20, 21) through accounts of women relating to Jesus (8:14–15; 9:18–26; 15:21–28; 20:20–28; 27:55–56, 61) to 28:1–10, when the women who encounter the risen Jesus are commissioned to go and tell the good news that Jesus has been raised and to instruct the male disciples who fled from Jesus’ crucifixion and burial to go to Galilee where they will see Jesus. This sub-narrative is not itself monolithic but is subverted by the story of Herodias (Matt 14:1–12).

5 Stuart Love’s title, Jesus and Marginal Women (2009), suggests that his study of some of the female characters in the Matthean gospel using social-scientific categories contributes to that gospel’s portrait of Jesus. While this study will make an important contribution to Matthean studies, the models used tend to obscure the gospel text as well as most of the earlier work of women scholars on these same texts.

6 Amy-Jill Levine (2006, 112–114) warns that such an approach may obscure the fact that the gospel concludes with a mission to the Gentiles and includes a final Matthean polemic against “the Jews” in 28:11–15. She thus questions whether the community is not more Gentile than Jewish. See also Stanton (1992), who argues that the gospel writer is a “Gentile Christian for whom the relationship of church and synagogue was not a primary concern.”

7 Use of the term “righteous” to describe those who belong to God occurs extensively across the Psalms, the wisdom literature, and the prophets.

8 For another perspective on this issue, see David Sim (1998, 215–256).

References


