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MATTHEW AND JOHN FOR LENT AND EASTER

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JESUS CHRIST IN MATTHEW (CHRISTOLOGY)

What Kind of Man is This?

In Matt 8:27 the question is asked: "What kind of man is this?" In 8:23-9:8 Jesus has exorcised demons, forgiven sins and calmed the storm, well beyond the power seen in other leaders of the time. He has actually performed actions which have attributed to God in the Old Testament. Clearly Jesus is no ordinary person. "In these stories are the roots of the later Christian confession about the divinity of Jesus."¹

In *Matthew* Jesus is portrayed as Son of God, worthy of worship, and who fulfils the promise of Immanuel (= "God with us" - Matt 1:23; 18:20 – see Isa 7:14).²

Matt 1:21-23 (NRSV):

*She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for **he will save his people from their sins.**"*²² *All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:*²³ *"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him **Immanuel,**" which means, "God is with us."*

While Matthew does not develop a fully-blown Trinitarian view of the relationship between Jesus and God, nevertheless the commissioning baptismal formula does include an interesting feature. As just noted, Jesus has been labelled "Immanuel" ("God with us"). The baptismal formula states that it is in the **name (singular!)** of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In other words there is a unity of name applied to all three.

Keener sums up Matthew's picture of Jesus (Christology):

Matthew, like John, represents a strain of Jewish Christianity less hellenized than that of Mark or Luke; and like John, Matthew emphasizes Jesus' deity to monotheistic readers. Whereas John uses especially the image of Wisdom to develop his Christology, however, Matthew also focuses on the Shekinah [=glory of God seen in the Old Testament]. Although Matthew elsewhere articulates Wisdom Christology ... he frames his Gospel with the portrait of Jesus as the present, saving God. Jesus is not only God present with his people (1:23), after his exaltation as Son of Man (28:18) equal to the Father and divine Spirit (28:19) and virtually omnipresent (28:20); Jesus is God's presence among his people (18:20), fulfilling a function Jewish teachers ascribed to the Shekinah, God's presence.³

¹ Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 124.

² Clive Marsh and Steve Moyise, *Jesus and the Gospels*. 2nd ed. (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 34.

³ Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 67.

Teacher

Matthew demonstrates Jesus as a good and authoritative teacher. He brings wisdom to the people of God. Thus, at various stages Matthew pauses the movement of Jesus to focus on Jesus' words (e.g. the Sermon on the Mount – chs. 5-7; the mission speech (ch. 10); the speech about community (ch 18). Jesus is contrasted with the Pharisees and scribes who are the false and blind teachers.

When Jesus directs his opponents to what God really requires he prefaces it with “go and learn” (9:13). This in Jewish culture means a prolonged and intense enquiry into the meaning of the Torah and the prophets which affects a person's lifestyle.

Interestingly Matthew's disciples never call him “Teacher”, rather this term of address is used by those who do not follow him (8:19; 9:11; 12:38; 17:24; 19:16; 22:16, 24).

Jesus' closing words for his disciples is to urge them to teach (28:20).

Suffering Servant and the Messianic Secret

Matthew also strengthens the link between the life of Jesus and the Suffering Servant figure of Isaiah (see Isa 52:13-53:12) through the use of formula quotations. He sees the prediction that the Servant will bear the weaknesses of the people as fulfilled in the healing ministry of Jesus (Matt 8:14-17, citing Isa 53:4). After the Pharisees seek a way to kill him, Matthew incorporates a long quotation of Isa 42:1-4 into a transitional episode (Matt 12:15-21). Jesus is the beloved servant of God who bears God's Spirit. Matthew also incorporates a command not to make Jesus known into this transitional passage (v.16). Matthew maintains some of the secrecy commands from Mark, especially in association with Peter's confession (Matt 16:20) and the Transfiguration (17:9). The transitional passage in 12:16 leads the reader to surmise that Jesus' need to steer clear of his enemies was the reason for such restraint.

Saviour

Matthew 1:21 indicates that the name “Jesus” links with Jesus saving people from their sins. This is not developed clearly throughout *Matthew* however.

Deliverance from sin is connected with the people's response to John the Baptist in 3:6 and with sayings of Jesus as the Son of Man in 9:2, 5, 6. At the Last Supper we have Jesus' words over the bread and the cup as he indicates the giving of his body and the drinking of the cup as “this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”

Jesus in *Matthew* has also indicated that he has come with a mission to sinful people (9:10-13 cf. 11:19). “One would naturally think of delivering people from the effects of their sins, but at the same time enabling them not to sin is in mind.”⁴

Jesus elsewhere spoke of the pouring out of martyrs’ blood (23:35) in terms of death, guilt, and impending judgment, a theme *Matthew* develops further in 27:4, 25. But even if the Gospel tradition also plays on the atoning value of martyrs’ deaths (especially attested in *4 Maccabees*) here, Jesus’ death appears as more than that of a *mere* martyr in this earliest tradition. Jesus’ probable allusions to Isaiah 52-53 tell us a great deal about how Jesus viewed his own death.⁵

The references to physical salvation (e.g. rescuing at sea and healing) are also probably intended to be taken at a deeper level of salvation.⁶ The story of the boat on the water in the storm in (8:23-27) has often been interpreted as symbolic of the Church in the storm of tribulation in the world. The disciples in this story in *Matthew* call out to Jesus to “save”. 9:2-8 also suggests that the story of the healing of the paralysed man and forgiving his sins might also have been symbolic of spiritual forgiveness and thus salvation.⁷

In the ancient world there was no firm line drawn between physical and spiritual issues. Thus Jesus’ physical healings could be seen as part of an overall wholeness or “salvation” which Jesus brings.

19:24 refers to salvation on the last day at judgment. Jesus responds to the disciples’ concern about whether anyone can be saved, with the words: “for God all things are possible.” Here in this context it appears to mean inclusion in the heavenly banquet, being welcomed by the Son of Man and being saved from judgment.

In 16:25 there are sayings about saving life and losing life. “... those who are prepared to say ‘no’ to their self, possibly even by dying, for the sake of Jesus ... find that they will ‘save’ their lives in the sense that they will attain to the kingdom of God and enjoy the blessings that are really worth having ...”⁸

Lord

Jesus’ lordship is also given prominence in *Matthew*. It is a term which can be a polite term of address, however in the Greek version of the Old Testament it is a term used for God. In 3:3 *Matthew* refers to Isa 40:3 and in doing so applies to Jesus a passage originally referring to God. In 7:21-22 Jesus is addressed as “Lord” in his role as end-times judge.

⁴ I.H. Marshall, “Salvation I: The Gospels,” in *The IVP Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 1000.

⁵ Keener, *Matthew*, 631.

⁶ Marshall, “Salvation,” 1000.

⁷ Marshall, “Salvation,” 1000.

⁸ Marshall, “Salvation,” 1001.

Jesus calls himself Lord of the Sabbath (12:8) and used the term for himself in his return (24:42).

It is in his resurrection that he has all authority.

Jesus as the New Moses

In keeping with Matthew's picture of Jesus in continuation with the old tradition, Jesus is seen as the new Moses, the Teacher and Law Giver, even more so than the other Gospels. Like for Moses, mountains are significant in Matthew (e.g. Matt 5:1; 17:1; 28:16)! However Jesus is the authentic interpreter of the Law, the fulfilment of the Law and indeed the personification of the Law.⁹

Just as the Law of Moses is divided into 5 books (the Pentateuch), so Matthew includes Jesus' teaching in 5 large sections. Particularly Jesus gives a sermon about righteousness from a mountain (chaps. 5-7) including Jesus' own references to the Mosaic law ("you have heard that it was said ..." – 5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43). Jesus and Moses have similar birth accounts with the slaughter of innocents, and the mention of Egypt.

When Jesus ascends the mountain where he is transfigured his face shines (17:2 – only in Matthew) as did Moses' on Mt Sinai (Exod 34:29-35). Just as Moses brought God's ways to the people so will the new Moses who is righteous interpreter of this Law for the Kingdom of God.

THE OLD AND THE NEW AND THE LAW IN MATTHEW

While Mark's community appears to reflect a group of people who have broken with the synagogue and does not observe the Torah, this is not the same situation depicted in *Matthew*.

Matthew appears to be a much more "Jewish" gospel (using Jewish terminology, often citing scripture, using the rabbinical style of question and counter question, and Jesus' fulfilment of the Law is emphasised). There may be concern in the community particularly in relation to gentile converts who brought with them customs not in keeping with Jewish law.

Murphy argues that Matthew saw his community as the place for the true observers of the Law and that non-Christian Jewish leadership was a rival, "leading Jews astray."¹⁰

Harrington argues that Jesus' life was in perfect harmony with the Scriptures or "the Scriptures are in perfect harmony with Jesus' life" from Matthew's perspective.¹¹

⁹ Luke T. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1990), 184.

¹⁰ Frederick J. Murphy, *An Introduction to Jesus and the Gospels* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 140.

¹¹ Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 17.

In the infancy narrative, Jesus' identity focuses on five quotations of the Scriptures as Jesus is portrayed as the culmination of God's plan for Israel.¹²

Jesus' life and teaching is the fulfilment of the promises as Son of David. This title is more common in *Matthew* than the other gospels. The stress on the royal Davidic line fulfilled in Jesus connects with texts such as 2 Sam 7:14-16; Ps 2; 89; Isa 9:6-7; 11:1-5; Jer 23:5-6.

"...everything that was central in the relationship of God with the people of Israel has now found its true and final expression in the life of Jesus."¹³

Murphy highlights the connection between the title "Son of David" with Jesus bringing salvation, especially to the sick, particularly in 21:12-17 (the cleansing of the Temple):¹⁴

¹⁵ But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they became angry

A similar title is given to Jesus as Son of Abraham in 1:1. Again this highlights the connections with Jewish heritage and fulfilment.

Matthew portrays an interaction between the old and the new. Was it alright to move in new directions now with the advent of Jesus? Matthew demonstrates continuity with the past, and the Jewish traditions are highly valued as indicated by the constant reference to the Scriptures. Jesus came not to destroy but to fulfil (5:17-20):

Matt 5:17-18 (NRSV):

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

And yet a new thing has happened in Jesus Christ. It is still the same God of grace working through Christ, and yet Christ's life, death and resurrection is the inauguration of the new covenant.

As God was gracious to the chosen people of Israel, so now God's grace is exhibited in the person of Jesus Christ.

¹² Murphy, *Introduction*, 175.

¹³ John Drane, *Introducing the Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2005).

¹⁴ Murphy, *Introduction*, 176.

God is “God with us” in 1:23. This is the title given “Immanuel” in Isaiah 7. It is Christ in whom God is well-pleased (3:17; 17:5). See also the addition to Mark’s account by Matthew in 13:52 describing the new and the old treasure. The old still maintains its value.¹⁵

Matt 13:52 (NRSV):

And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

Thus the community is not abandoning their tradition which they have received, but finding its fullest understanding.

Jesus in *Matthew* is seen as the descendant of David who would rule over Israel and “take it on to greater heights.”¹⁶ Indeed Jesus is doing something new (13:52). “There is continuity with the past and discontinuity, profound indebtedness to the scriptures and traditions of Judaism, but also rupture and innovation. The fundamental continuity has to do with God.”¹⁷

The God whose grace to humankind in times past was shown above all in the deliverance of Israel as God’s chosen, covenant people is the same God whose grace is shown now in the person of Jesus whose life, death and resurrection constitute the inauguration of a new covenant people. Jesus, therefore, is ‘God with us’ (1:23). He is the one in whom God is ‘well pleased’ (3:17; 17:5).¹⁸

Jesus proclaims the kingdom of heaven. God’s rule is now with people: “for those who are open to it God is experienced afresh as being in the midst of his people. But its full realisation must await a set of developments that include Jesus’ own suffering and vindication, which includes judgment on Jerusalem and its temple but also the suffering witness of the disciple community.”¹⁹

As noted above, Jesus is the new Moses, however as noted above the old Law is not to be simply discarded.

In 5:21-48 Jesus expounds 6 aspects of the Law. This is typically ethical rather than cultic material. The focus is on attitude, not just behaviour, making love central.²⁰

Jesus and the Law/Scripture in Matt 5:21-48 demonstrates shifting attitudes with Jesus as is shown:²¹

¹⁵ Stephen C. Barton, “The Gospel According to Matthew,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Gospels* ed. Stephen C. Barton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 121-138.

¹⁶ John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 39.

¹⁷ Barton, “The Gospel According to Matthew”, 121-122.

¹⁸ Barton, “The Gospel According to Matthew”, 121-122.

¹⁹ Nolland, *Matthew*, 40.

²⁰ William Loader, *Matthew Resources and Transcripts of Bill Loader’s Powerpoint Presentations*, Uniting Church Centre, Brisbane, 2010.

Shifting Attitudes in Speaking Against

<u>From</u>	<u>To</u>
Murder	Anger
Adultery	Adulterous intent
Divorce	Divorce Exceptional
Oaths	Oathless integrity
Eye for an Eye	No Retaliation
Love Neighbour	Love Enemy

When Jesus says: “You have heard that it was said ... but I say ...” does Jesus mean “the Law said this, however I say ...” or “people hear the Law this way, but I tell you it means ...” (Bill Loader thinks the latter more probable).

“Matthew revises Mark 7 in 15:1-20 to remove Mark’s assertion that Jesus set aside parts of Torah on the basis that they made no sense ‘declaring all foods clean’ 7:19 and ‘nothing entering from outside can make a person unclean’ 7:15”²²

Jesus at times will play one part of the Law off against another (e.g. 12:1-8, dispute over Sabbath observance; 19:3-9, divorce). Luz argues:

According to our interpretation ... Mark and Matthew, to name only two, represent opposing sides on this issue. But Matthew’s redactional rewriting of Mark 7:1-23 in 15:1-20 reveals that he saw no more opposition to Mark here than between 5:17 and the ‘primary’ Antitheses. Matthew thinks in terms, not of opposition, but of complementarity. He appears not to have censored his Jesus sources. On the contrary, he ‘channelled’ them through his own interpretation, safeguarding the Antitheses from an antinomistic [means anti-law abiding] misunderstanding and protecting Mark 7:15-23 from the notion that Jesus fundamentally annulled the law of purity.²³

Would Paul and Matthew reflect different attitudes to the Law? Luz suggests:

The profound difference between the two men becomes symbolically clear in their understanding of righteousness. Paul appropriates ‘righteousness’ as a Christological term. What ‘God’s righteousness’ consists in becomes manifest when men and women experience the way God acts upon them through Christ. To say that God reveals his own righteousness in Christ is to say that he defines himself through Christ. For Matthew, conversely, ‘righteousness’ is that which God in his love demands of men and women. ‘Righteousness’ means the human path which Jesus’ disciples must travel when they allow themselves to be taught, led and accompanied by the Immanuel.²⁴

²¹ Loader, *Matthew*, 2.

²² Loader, *Matthew*, 2.

²³ Luz, *Theology*, 144.

²⁴ Luz, *Theology*, 149.

Luz suggests that Matthew is not proposing a theology of the righteousness of works. In *Matthew* there is more priority given to the story of Jesus over his commandments. Also the theme of 'Immanuel' which frames his entire Gospel does not advocate a doctrine of "works". Luz also notes Jesus' presence in his community, as revealed, for example, in the miracles; the element of surprise in the Last Judgement, rendering impossible any rewards for calculated action.

Luz observes Matthew's theology of prayer and concludes:

The centrepiece of the Sermon on the Mount is the Lord's Prayer; the heart of all human daring is the trusting cry of the weak and frail to the *kyrios* [= the Lord]. Matthew knew full well about the breadth of grace, for he had before his eyes the constant weakness and failure of human beings, Christian and otherwise. Not only Paul but Matthew too understood the priority of grace, although, now that that grace had been preached in his community for half a century, he strengthened the obligations which grace imposes. The primacy of grace in the theology of Matthew's Gospel is also evident in its ecclesiological structures: the idea of the path of righteousness prevents the community from falling apart into 'beginners' and 'advanced learners'. There is no one in the Matthean community who is greater than 'these little ones'.²⁵

THE CHURCH IN MATTHEW

Matthew is the only gospel to use the word *ekklēsia*, a word which has been translated "church". It means an assembly and was used in Greek to denote a gathering of people on a religious, social or political basis. It was used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament as a description of the gathering of God's people. Now in *Matthew* Jesus describes it as "my church" or perhaps better "my assembly". It is in *Matthew* that we may find some indication of church order particularly in 16:13-28 and 18:15-20.

Matt 16:13-28

The blessing on Peter in verses 16:17-19 don't occur in Mark's account but it pronounces for Peter an individual blessing and gives him a particular role.. Peter has made the amazing confession about the identity of Jesus, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." (v. 16) This, according to the next verse, has been revealed to Peter directly from God. This has been revealed at Jesus' baptism and will be confirmed in the next story, the Transfiguration.

Hare writes:

For traditional Roman Catholicism, this text was fundamental to the doctrine that the successive popes, as Peter's legitimate successors, constituted the foundation of the church's authority. In reaction the Reformers understood the

²⁵ Luz, *Theology*, 150.

rock to be Peter's faith, which was subsequently shared by all Christians. Recent scholars, both Catholic and Protestant, are inclined to regard Peter himself as the rock but as functioning in this capacity in an unrepeatable way. In the history of salvation his role is to be seen as foundational in the emergence of the new messianic community. We can compare the role attributed to Peter here with that envisioned in Luke 22:32: "and when you have turned, strengthen your brothers and sisters." Paul likewise attributes a salvation-historical primacy to Peter in 1 Cor. 15:5 when listing the resurrection witnesses, and it was Peter alone among the apostles whom Paul sought to interview after his conversion and call (Gal 1:18). Whether or not Matthew is justified in treating the Caesarea Philippi confession as the basis of Peter's primacy, that primacy is well attested. It is not by accident that Peter appears first in all the New Testament lists of the apostles.²⁶

What is meant by the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. (v. 18)? This is interpreted as the power of death, see Isa 38:10 (NRSV):

*I said: In the noontide of my days
I must depart;
I am consigned to the gates of Sheol
for the rest of my years.*

The new gathering will still continue despite the efforts of the powers of darkness against it.

Regarding the keys of the kingdom Hare suggests:

Revelation 3:7, borrowing from Isa. 22:22, ascribes this function to the risen Jesus. In Matthew's tradition, the Messiah has delegated this task to Peter. While it is perhaps natural for us to seize on the negative side of this responsibility, we must consider the possibility that the positive should be stressed: as chief missionary of the Easter message, it will be Peter's joyful task to lead many into the kingdom. Through his preaching he will open the doors to life. Matthew may even be reminding conservative Jewish Christians that Peter had the right to admit Gentiles to the Messiah's congregation (see Acts 10).

It is not immediately clear what 'binding' and 'loosing' mean. Because of the preceding reference to the power of the keys, it is sometimes proposed that 'binding' and 'loosing' refer to excommunication and readmission. A second possibility is that the terms derive from exorcistic practice, in which Satan (or a specific demon) is 'bound' and the victim 'loosed.' Usually, however, the terms are understood to refer to rulings about what can and what cannot be done by members of the church. Because of the use of these terms in rabbinic Judaism, it has been proposed that Matthew here designates Peter as the Chief Rabbi of Christianity. Although the Acts of the Apostles does not portray Peter as functioning in this way (in Acts 15 the role of the Chief Rabbi seems to be held rather by James), we must assume that during his lifetime Peter remained the

²⁶ Douglas R.A. Hare, *Matthew* (Louisville: John Knox, 1993), 190.

supreme guarantor of the tradition of Jesus' sayings and thus was in a position to make rulings about such matters as divorce and Sabbath observance.

France also speaks of the "tying and loosing" roles:

The metaphor of "tying up" and "untying" speaks also of administrative authority. The terms are used in rabbinic literature for declaring what is and is not permitted. When the same commission is given to the whole disciple group in 18:18 it will be specifically in the context of dealing with sin within their community Such authority to declare what is and is not permissible will of course have personal consequences for the person judged to have sinned, but it is the prior judgment in principle which is the focus of the "tying" metaphor, and there, as here, the objects of both verbs will be expressed in the neuter, not the masculine; it is things, issues, which are being tied or untied, not people as such. The historical role of Peter in Acts well illustrates the metaphor, as it was to him that the responsibility fell of declaring that Gentiles might be accepted as members of the new *ekklesia* (10:1–11:18), though of course the exercise of his disciplinary authority could also have dire personal consequences for those who stepped over the mark (Acts 5:1–11; cf. 8:20–24). Peter's personal authority remained, however, that of the first among equals, and the extension of this commission to the rest of the disciples in 18:18 will ensure that he is kept in his place.²⁷

Hare continues:

While these verses ascribe a unique primacy to Peter, there is no suggestion that this role can be passed on to a successor after Peter's death. To the extent that Peter's functions must continue, others in the church must assume them. Here it is instructive to compare these verses with two later passages in the Gospel. The nearest parallel to verse 19 is found in 18:8, which is addressed not to an individual but to a group. Narratively, the power to bind and loose is promised to the disciples, but in the context (vv. 15-17) this power is vested in congregational leaders or perhaps in the local congregation meeting as a whole. That is, while Peter is given supreme authority in the areas of teaching and discipline, in point of fact this authority will have to be exercised locally, and Peter's removal by death will not alter the situation.²⁸

In *Matthew* Peter is presented both positively and negatively. "In his strengths and his weaknesses he represents ordinary Christians who strive, yet often fail, to be loyal followers of Jesus."²⁹

In terms of the "keys" as symbolic of the steward, France argues:

The steward is not the owner. He has both authority (over the rest of the household) and responsibility (to his master to administer the affairs of the house

²⁷ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 625–627.

²⁸ Hare, *Matthew*, 192.

²⁹ Hare, *Matthew*, 193.

properly). The keys are those of the storehouses, to enable him to make appropriate provision for the household, not those of the outer gate, to control admission. The traditional portrayal of Peter as porter at the pearly gates depends on misunderstanding “the kingdom of heaven” here as a designation of the afterlife rather than denoting God’s rule among his people on earth.³⁰

Peter will originate the movements in his teaching and preaching of the gospel. historically this is what happened. Through that teaching and preaching the judgment of God will come through. Verse 18:18 indicates that this responsibility moves beyond Peter.

Matthew 18:15-20

We now jump to 18:15-20. Were there discipline issues in the church? The context of the whole passage is forgiveness and saving those who are lost. So the previous verse (14) reads:

Matthew 18:14 (NRSV)

¹⁴ So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.

What follows is a passage on forgiveness where it is Peter who asks how many times he must forgive, followed by a parable about the unforgiving servant.

The nature of the process would suggest sins of a reasonably serious nature. Note the corporate effect of sins on the community. It can affect the entire community, thus we have pictured here not just private matters but issues which affect the body.

Verse 15 is similar to Lev 19:17. Notice sin in general is stated, not specific sins. There is a responsibility of the community towards each other. The process in this verse preserves the honour of the offender, as witnesses are not involved. The winning back of the person straying is the important feature.

Verse 16 can be compared to Deut 19:15; and 2 Cor 13:1. The presence of one or two others is for the protection of the sinner. “gained” reflects the shepherd motif of v. 13.

In v. 17 the word here means literally “ignore”.

Clearly the offender is no longer to be considered a brother or sister. But how is one to behave towards one who has become a rank outsider? The kind of shunning to which Mt. 18:17 has frequently led cannot be sustained, given Jesus’ image as ‘friend of tax collectors and sinners’ (11:19...) and given the evangelistic concern for those of other nations which Matthew firmly endorses. [See Mt 10:18; 12:18, 21; 24:14; 28:19 – also the infant Jesus is visited by Gentile magi] The

³⁰ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 625–627.

person is to be related to now as an outsider, but not as one who must permanently remain outside. The spirit to be adopted will be like that involved in the love of enemies, discussed in 5:43-48 ...³¹

And so verse 17 is the end of the process where those who don't accept the decision of the church are treated like a Gentile and a tax collector. These are the ones who need to keep hearing the Gospel. They are the ones to whom the Gospel is going out. It appears then that the shunned brother or sister is to be treated as the object of missionary activity.

Firm action is required against a serious offence, however there is a warning that dealing with such issues can also be sinful if not handled carefully.

For v. 18 Schweitzer argues that this verse envisions that the verdict "be merely pronounced and the left to God to carry out ... but verse 17 presupposes something more, probably the severance of all ties with such a brother (as in 2 Thess. 3:14).

Hagner suggests that here only matters of church discipline are dealt with. "At stake is nothing less than the ultimate welfare of the offending individual."³²

The last sentence promises the whole community what was promised to Peter in 16:19. In the present context, 'binding' and 'loosing' refer to the sinner, and represent conviction and acquittal". Compare with John 20:23. "... In Matthew's mind, therefore, the community is merely exercising a function that was entrusted to Peter merely as an example for all. For the Matthaean community, Peter still represents the authority that transmits Jesus' new interpretation of the Law and makes the life of the community possible in actual practice; Peter is succeeded, however, by the entire community, which draws upon his authority to determine in each new case what is sinful and what is not..."³³

The community does not cause it to be binding but interprets it so.

Above all, the power to bind does not mean that an ecclesiastical inquisition can damn people for eternity... What Matthew probably has in mind is that anyone who promises salvation to another also becomes a judgment upon the individual who rejects the offer, so that the disciple of Jesus is necessarily also a preacher of judgment ... This interpretation is supported by the whole context (vss.10-14,21-22), which deals with responsibility toward one's brother, love for him, and forgiveness. There is not the slightest mention of keeping the community pure ...³⁴

"Although binding and loosing may in the broader context refer to declaring what is permitted or not permitted, here it seems to mean disciplinary action. The

³¹ Nolland, *Matthew*, 748.

³² Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 533.

³³ Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew* (London: SPCK, 1975), 372.

³⁴ Schweizer, *Matthew*, 373.

congregation has the power to punish or exclude. In doing so, it is acting on God's behalf."³⁵

Hagner says: "What the disciples agree to on earth in disciplinary matters of the church may be taken as also the will of heaven."³⁶

It has to do with bringing to bear on the lives of those who would be disciples the significance of all that Jesus was and brought. Having been instructed by Jesus, the church is able to prohibit and command in a manner that is backed by God himself. In the context of the attempt to bring back an erring brother or sister, the specific point will be that the church is able to confirm the standard of behaviour to which the erring one is being called to conform once more. ... The one whom the church declares to be out of step with God is indeed out of step with God!³⁷

This is the language of the law court. Jewish legal issues were normally decided in Jesus' day by elders in the synagogue community (later by rabbis). Many Jewish people believed that the authority of Heaven stood behind the earthly judges when they decided cases based on a correct understanding of God's law. (This process came to be called 'binding and loosing.') Jesus' contemporaries often envisioned God's justice in terms of a heavenly court; by obeying God's law, the earthly court simply ratified the decrees of the heavenly court. In Matthew 18:15-20, Christians who follow the careful procedures of verses 15-17 may be assured that they will act on the authority of God's court when they decide cases.³⁸

Schweizer writes of v. 19 – "The authority of the community's words is thus the authority they gain through prayer. It is assumed, of course, just as in 7:7-11, that the community prays according to God's will, as Jesus taught his disciples to pray in the Lord's Prayer."³⁹ Hagner says "'In my name' is another way of saying 'under my rule'"⁴⁰.

"It can be paraphrased: 'If two of you can come to an agreement regarding any disputed matter, that agreement will be blessed by my Father in heaven.'"⁴¹

While in Deut 17:6-7 the two or three witnesses should be the first to cast stones, in Matthew they are the first to pray.⁴²

Hagner also argues:

³⁵ Hare, *Matthew*, 215.

³⁶ Hagner, *Matthew*, 533.

³⁷ Nolland, *Matthew*, 748.

³⁸ Craig S. Keener, "Exegetical Insight" in William D. Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek Grammar* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 121.

³⁹ Schweizer, *Matthew*, 374.

⁴⁰ Hagner, *Matthew*, 533.

⁴¹ Hare, *Matthew*, 215.

⁴² Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 455.

It would be a mistake to think that in similar circumstances this procedure can be applied today, primarily because excommunication or ostracism today has nowhere near the same effect as it did in the first century, that is, in Matthew's day to be cast out left one with no other options for Christian community. Today a person may simply walk down the street to the next church or next denomination. This is not to say that the church must give up on the possibility of church discipline but simply to say that the process will take on its own character appropriate to the present-day situation... The Christian is always to be accountable to a community. And the importance of the community receives indirect confirmation in the divinely granted authority of its leaders, in the promise of answered prayer in the administration of the church, and in the promise of the continuing presence of the risen Christ in the midst of those gathered in his name. The supreme mark of Christ's community is Christ's presence.⁴³

IS MATTHEW ANTI-SEMITIC?

Matthew's presentation of Jesus appears to be harsh on scribes and Pharisees. Does this reflect an anti-Pharisaic trend in the church itself at the time that Matthew writes? There certainly seem to be tensions. *Mark* certainly contains anti-Pharisaic material, however their role is increased in *Matthew* and Matthew is even harsher in his treatment of them.

Matt 3:7-8 (NRSV):

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance.

(only in Matthew)

In *Matthew* Jesus berates the Pharisees because their lifestyle does not match their teaching (23:2-3). The concern for the details of externals is a heavy burden on the people (23:4). The Pharisees saw Jesus as working with Beelzebul which means that they were sinning against the Holy Spirit (12:22-37). They are accused of murdering the prophets before (23:29-36).

Perkins suggests two reasons for Jesus' harsh onslaught on the Pharisees:⁴⁴

- Firstly they had great influence over the people and so Jesus needed a strong platform for his teaching on righteousness.
- Secondly Matthew's community may have been experiencing the brunt of Pharisees' action against them at a later date in the first century. A generation

⁴³ Hagner, *Matthew*, 534.

⁴⁴ PHEME PERKINS, *Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 185.

before Matthew, Paul had been a zealous Pharisee attempting to wipe out the church (Gal 1:13-14).

In Matthew's critique of the religious authorities there is also a concern that those in the community will act in the same way. While the Pharisees may seem to be treated harshly, of all the gospels Matthew is the most open in its support of Jewish tradition and law. The change is to see how Christ is the true interpreter of the Law

LENT 1 – MATT 4:1-11 – THE TEMPTATIONS OF JESUS

This story follows closely from the previous account of Jesus baptism where it is revealed that he is Son of *God*. In this passage the devil says to Jesus “if you are the Son of God ...” (vv. 2, 6). Jesus is the divine Son, the Immanuel (= “God with us”) in *Matthew* who is still subject to temptation in his humanity.

When we compare this story in *Matthew* with *Mark* and *Luke* we find two immediate things. Firstly *Mark* doesn’t have the detail of the temptations which *Matthew* and *Luke* have. Secondly, it is interesting that unlike *Luke*, *Matthew* uses Greek words similar to the scribes and Pharisees coming to test Jesus in 16:1; 19:3; 22:28, 35.

This story can be seen very much against Deuteronomy 6 – 8 which discusses covenant theology. It has been described particularly as a “midrash” or a Jewish reflection on Deut 8:2-3:

Deuteronomy 8:2–3 (NRSV):

² Remember the long way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. ³ He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.

Jesus, like Israel in the wilderness, was tempted with hunger (Exodus 16), physical danger (Numbers 13-14) and idolatry (Exodus 32). Jesus undergoes the trials that Israel had to endure. Jesus however demonstrates devotion to his call as Messiah in obedience to God.

“forty days and forty nights” – both Moses and Elijah fasted for forty days and nights (Exod 34:28 and 1 Kgs 19:8). Deut 9:9 does make mention of Moses’ fasting and so is the more likely allusion. Here in *Matthew* we find that the Son of God, as *Matthew* has recently proclaimed him to be, is now tested in his sonship. These are the temptations which only the Son of God can endure.

In the first temptation Jesus declines to use his power to satisfy his personal need for food. He places himself in obedience to the word and will of God. The word “if” could probably be translated more “since”.⁴⁵

Later on, when Jesus does use his power to make bread, it is to meet the needs of others, the hungry crowds of 14.13-21 and 15.29-3 and not for his own promotion. For Jesus his messianic role will involve suffering and devotion. His food is to do God’s will.

⁴⁵ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13* (Dallas: Word, 1993), 65.

In the second temptation Jesus refuses to jump into God's safe hands. In other words, he is still in a place of struggle and danger. By refusing, to presume on God for protection from physical danger or, alternatively, by refusing to force God's hand instead of trusting that God will save in God's good time, Jesus is demonstrating that he is prepared to throw his whole life behind his love for God. Now we see a glimpse of the scene in Gethsemane where Jesus commits himself to the will of God (26:36-46). Also, during the crucifixion Jesus refuses to use his power to come down from the cross and save himself (27:39-44).

Finally, Jesus is taken to a 'very high mountain', perhaps reminiscent of Moses' view of the Promised Land from Mount Nebo. In our referent passage in Deuteronomy 6-8 Moses warns the people not to be tempted by Canaan's riches because it is God who gives wealth (Deut 8:18).

Jesus refuses the premature acceptance of the authority that was rightfully his. The trade was idolatry instead of loyalty to the one true God. Jesus now states his love to God with all his might (or possessions). This devotion will be rewarded. When Jesus appears to the disciples after his resurrection (again on a mountain), he announces that God has given him even more than what the devil had offered: 'all authority *in heaven and on earth*' (28.18).⁴⁶

Here we have a stand-off between the ruler of this world and the rule intended for this world.⁴⁷

There is nothing wrong with food and angelic help, but it could be used for the wrong purposes i.e. violating God's will. After this account Jesus does turn out to be ministered to by angels who probably also provided food for him. This was not in God's providence and not for selfish promotion.

Matthew (along with all the Synoptics) has this account early in the ministry of Jesus so that the quality of his relationship to God as the Son of God is tested and found true. It is also a description of that relationship. Jesus' sonship is expressed as a servant in obedience to God. "The goal of obedience to the Father is accomplished, not by triumphant self-assertion, not by the exercise of power and authority, but paradoxically by the way of humility, service, and suffering."⁴⁸

For the Preacher

From this passage we learn a great deal about the nature of Christ. While Israel endured trials early on in their calling, now Jesus goes through trials as the Son of God, and comes through victorious and proven.

⁴⁶ Barton, *Gospel according to Matthew*, 126.

⁴⁷ Witherington, *Matthew*, 92.

⁴⁸ Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 70.

Jesus' temptation to continue living an exalted life is overcome by his devotion to humanity in terms of his willingness to be a suffering and humble Messiah. While Jesus as a beloved child of God is emphasized in the story, so also is his servanthood to God's ways of righteousness.

The testings that we face in life "will not be the same as those faced by Jesus, which relate to his unique identity and mission. But they will in principle be similar in that Christians too are called to self-sacrifice, and for them, too, obedience to the will of the Father alone is the measure of true discipleship."⁴⁹

"... if Jesus had turned stones into bread, thrown himself down from the pinnacle of the temple, or worshipped the devil In order to feed himself, prove himself to the crowds, or gain his kingdom without dying for it, he no longer would have been the obedient Son of God who models godly behaviour for his followers Thus Jesus is portrayed here as not taking shortcuts to glory, but rather following the hard and long path to obedience, living by God's word and resisting temptation as we must by relying on that word."⁵⁰

Jesus is not to be a self-serving, self-interested king. He relies on the word of God and is obedient to that word. Jesus is now confirmed as God's Son in obedience to the Father. Just as Jesus presented for baptism as a model for righteousness so also he endures temptation as a model for righteousness.

The preacher can explore the growing understanding of Jesus as the Messiah as Matthew presents him. One can only be in awe of the Son of God who is not willing to take the "divine shortcuts" as he relates to the world of humanity as he sets himself on the path to the Cross.

Alternatively the preacher can explore the nature of temptation and how we as humans can go about the business of God. There are times we are tempted to take unholy shortcuts to achieve what we think is right.

The follower is encouraged to reflect on attitudes of Ancient Israel in the wilderness as they endured temptation, and also to see how Jesus handles temptation. As we enter this period of Lent what does it mean for us to be self-sacrificing as our Leader proved to be?

LENT 2 ALTERNATE – MATT 17:1-9 – THE TRANSFIGURATION

From a literary perspective, Davies and Allison tentatively propose an inverse parallel structure.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Hagner, Matthew 1-13, 70.

⁵⁰ Witherington, Matthew, 86.

⁵¹ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 684.

- a. Narrative introduction (v. 1)
 - b. Jesus is transfigured (vv. 2-3)
 - c. Peter's response (v. 4)
 - d. The divine voice (v. 5)
 - c' The disciples' response (v. 6)
 - b' Jesus speaks (v. 7)
 - a' Narrative conclusion (v. 8)

If this is the intention then the structuring would highlight the centrality of the voice of God.

From a narrative perspective it can be observed that Jesus only allows the inner circle of disciples to accompany him, Peter, James and John (also mentioned in 26:37). Here they encounter Moses and Elijah, the two great prophetic figures of the Old Testament, representing the Law and the Prophets. Both Moses and Elijah left this earth in mysterious circumstances. Both, according to Jewish traditions, would return at the end of the age (*Deut. Rabbah* 3.17; *Assumption of Moses*; Mal 4:5-6; *m. Ed.* 8:7; *b. B. Metzi'a* 3:5; Sir 48:10).

This story occurs in all three Synoptics. Most scholars conclude that Matthew and Luke rely on Mark.⁵²

We see particularly in Matthew's account the superiority of Jesus over Moses and Elijah. Matthew has changed the order of these two characters to list Moses first (perhaps to further emphasise the new Moses theme, Mark is more interested in the comparison of John the Baptist and Elijah). It is in Matthew's version alone we see that Jesus' face shines (17:2), a reminder of Exod 34:29 where Moses' face shone. Thus similarities are being noted with Moses and Jesus. Matthew often makes these allusions.

"... after 6 days" (v. 1) - God spoke to Moses after 6 days in Exod 4:16. Jesus, like Moses, takes 3 people with him up the mountain (Exod 24:1, 9). The cloud of glory descends on the mountain as it did when Moses was on Mt Sinai. Matthew adds the comment about the brightness of the cloud which probably reflects the Old Testament story of the Shekinah, the glory of God which came into the tabernacle in the wilderness where the people were led by Moses, as the glorious presence of God.

The theme of whiteness of garments carries with it apocalyptic undertones. For example in 13:43 it states that the righteous will shine like the sun in God's kingdom. The whiteness of the clothes of the angel at the tomb is also emphasised. Thus Jesus' glory is truly a heavenly glory and perhaps a foretaste of the end times.⁵³

⁵² Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 684-5.

⁵³ Barton, *Gospel according to Matthew*, 132.

Jesus is revealed as saviour and his death is the new Passover and his resurrection will bring the people in the new promised land. His teaching and word will bring all the authority of God.⁵⁴

Wisdom of Solomon (7-8) speaks of Wisdom as manifesting the fullness of God's glory. Jesus' radiant face reflects the description of Wisdom and so Jesus is seen as Wisdom personified.

Matthew, more so than Mark, connects more strongly Jesus' baptism and transfiguration. God's voice from heaven says almost the same thing in 3:17 and 17:5:

Matthew 3:17 (NRSV):

And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Matthew 17:5 (NRSV):

While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

As we have just seen in *Matthew* it was the Sonship of Jesus which was tested in the wilderness. While there Jesus refused glory offered prematurely and wrongly, now Jesus is bestowed with glory from God.

(Peter is made to look less stupid than in Mark's account. There is no statement in *Matthew* that Peter did know what he was saying.)

The disciples' reaction is emphasised more in *Matthew* than in *Mark*. It is in keeping with responses to apocalyptic visions in Dan 8:17-18; 10:7-9. Matthew also refers to the event as a vision (v. 9). This increases the apocalyptic tone of the story.

Notice that this story follows the confession, the commission, and the prediction of Jesus' death and resurrection. Here is something then that offsets the shock of the prediction of the Passion, reassuring them that Jesus should still be seen as God's Son, even if he was going to be killed.⁵⁵

While calling the disciples in his sufferings there is also an intimation of Jesus' coming Resurrection glory. Also Jesus, while announcing his impending suffering, is situated in the apocalyptic end times, although the disciples cannot fully appreciate and share this until after the Resurrection.

Therefore we have the themes of Jesus as a greater Moses, the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets, a confirmation of Peter's confession about Jesus (16:13-16) and

⁵⁴ Goldsmith, *Matthew and Mission*, 135.

⁵⁵ Witherington, *Matthew*, 325.

also anticipates the Resurrection and the Parousia (the second coming of Christ - see 16:28 and 17:9).⁵⁶

For the Preacher

The passage has much to say about the nature of Christ, now seen in glory and soon to descend to his ongoing mission. The fact that 2 Peter 1:17-18 includes this story, of all the stories that the author could have referred to from the life of Jesus, suggests that this bestowal of glory onto Jesus was important to the disciples and the early church, particularly as an honouring of his divine nature.

As well as Jesus receiving the seal of divine approval, we also see that God has actually come into the human world through Christ. This has happened after Jesus announced that he is to endure suffering. This is a strange feature of Christ's mission and yet this scene emphasises the divine origin and seal of this mission.

Paul would say in 2 Cor 3:18 that as we gaze on Christ we are changed (transfigured) from glory to glory.

As the narrative indicates there is possibly misunderstanding of the ways of God. The disciples must come down to earth from the mountain top, but they will do this with Jesus who also experienced the ups and downs of life.

As Buttrick states, "But the 'high hour' of vision is much more than respite. It is the confirmation of our faith: we know again that Jesus is Lord, and that the seal of God is in him. It is the renewal of our strength: God 'breaks through' once more, and we are empowered."⁵⁷

Just as the three disciples were bamboozled by the experience, and yet empowered, so we too, without always understanding the mysterious and yet glorious ways of God, can be empowered by the mysterious experience of God.

There are times when we too need to have our eyes opened to God's view of things. To see things from the mountain top that we don't always appreciate from down below. We too can be transformed.

Harvard writes: "We may not be able to explain the transfiguration story, but we can tell about the power and purpose of God in Jesus Christ to make all things new."⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 687.

⁵⁷ George A Buttrick, "Exposition," in *The Interpreter's Bible* Vol. 7 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1951), 461.

⁵⁸ Joseph S. Harvard III, "Homiletical Perspective", in Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson eds, *Feasting on the Gospels, Matthew, Volume 2* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013), 67.

LENT 2 ALTERNATE – JOHN 3:1-17 – JESUS AND NICODEMUS

In John 2:24-25 the narrator tells us that Jesus “knew all people” and “knew what was in everyone” (NRSV). The narrator offers us a few of these bridging passages throughout *John*. This particular bridge will set the scene for Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus (and also Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman, plus later characters). Thus Jesus’ understanding of people of such different walks of life and backgrounds provides the heart of the interactions.

This chapter is an example of the narrative coupled with discourse technique which is used, for example, in Chapters 4, 5 and 6 of John’s Gospel.

Nicodemus is mentioned on three occasions throughout the Gospel. He is a particularly interesting character, even though he doesn’t get a huge mention. He is not mentioned at all in the Synoptics. There is a sense in *John* that the author is not just interested in the person himself, but the role he plays. This is not to suggest that Nicodemus was not a real historical figure. Throughout *John* he appears to be increasingly willing to be associated with Jesus, despite opposition from his fellow leaders. Here he seems more reluctant to be open about this interaction, perhaps his coming by night is to avoid the questioning of his fellow Jewish leaders..

Nicodemus is described as “a man of the Pharisees”, “a leader of the Jews” (v. 1). Later Jesus describes him as “a teacher of Israel” (v. 10), and so he was probably a member of the Sanhedran, the religious governing body..

Some have noted that rabbis studied and debated long into the night. It is quite likely that John is recording a historical reality. However John’s use of the “night” elsewhere (3:2; 9:4 11:10; 13:30) indicates a connection with moral and spiritual darkness.⁵⁹ Is it an expression also of Nicodemus’ state of misunderstanding, or a reflection of his desire to remain hidden?

Nicodemus has been convinced by Jesus’ signs that he was no normal teacher; in fact he is a teacher who has come from God. Did Nicodemus’s understanding of Jesus develop from here? Notice we only have one recorded sign of Jesus so far, yet John uses the plural “signs” (v. 2).

In the passage the dialogue develops into a monologue in which Jesus changes his address from *su* (“you” (singular)) to *humeis* (“you” (plural)) in the Greek at verse 11 onwards, suggesting that Jesus is continuing his teaching with onlookers.

As already indicated, here (as elsewhere in *John*) we have the style of Jesus using statements and phrases which have two meanings. Thus “from above” or “again” for *anōthen* in v. 3 and “lift up” or “exalt” (especially with regards to Jesus being lifted up on a cross as exaltation) in v. 14. This leads into the stylistic trait of John of misunderstanding. This acts as a foil for the message of Jesus.

⁵⁹ D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 186.

Note the mothering imagery in the “born again” sayings. The birth involves an entire renewal of the person. Nicodemus does not discern the action coming from God. Thus no one can truly see God’s reign unless they are born from above.

John rarely uses such “kingdom” or “realm” language (unlike the Synoptics). For a Jew such as Nicodemus, seeing the kingdom of God “was to participate in the kingdom at the end of the age, to experience eternal, resurrection life.”⁶⁰

Here, however, Jesus speaks of generation or regeneration of the person before the end of the world so that they may enter the kingdom or reign of God now.

Notice the connections back to the Prologue (1:12-13) of becoming children of God.

v. 5 Jesus' saying is rephrased: "water and spirit". There are a range of possible meanings:

water = repentance (of John's baptism) + God's Spirit given. Thus repentance is not sufficient in itself, the spiritual birth is also required. Would such a reference to water immediately conjure the connection with John the Baptist's baptism?

water/spirit is tautological repetition - water refers to Spirit as in 7:37-39. Those who argue for this position refer to such texts as Joel 2:28 where the Spirit is “poured out”. Ezek 11:19-20; 36:25-27 speak of the cleansing of the Spirit.

The suggestion has been made of human birth (breaking of waters) and divine birth (however water does not appear to have a strong connection with birth in other ancient writings, and two births do not seem to be emphasised).

Christian baptism practised in the John's community. Bultmann suggested that the words “water and” were a later addition by a redactor interested in the sacraments. There is no textual evidence for these words being absent however.

Carson argues that nowhere else in the account is there any mention of baptism but work of the Spirit (v. 8), the work of the Son (vv. 14-15), the work of God (vv. 16-17) and the place of faith (vv. 15-16).⁶¹

The primary reference is to supernatural life/initiation from God with a secondary level of sacramental reference to baptism.

Entrance to the kingdom is through the unharnessed initiative (v. 8) of the Spirit of God. The kingdom can be entered for John's readers. They are the primary hearers of this message - cf. 7:39; 20:22.

v. 6. The contrast between "flesh" (*sarx*) and "spirit" (*pneuma*) is enunciated. Natural human birth produces people who belong to the earthly human family but not children of God. Both are needed in John's overall presentation of gospel. The Word, Christ, did become "flesh" (*sarx*) in 1:14.

⁶⁰ Carson, *John*, 188.

⁶¹ Carson, *John*, 192.

v. 7 Note again the use of the plural – ‘you’ - representative for the readers.

v. 8 The term *pneuma* can mean both "spirit" and "wind". John, to stress the free action of God, plays on the word. We can still observe the work of the Spirit as we can observe the work of the wind.

vv. 9-12 Nicodemus’s bewilderment provides scope for another dualistic expression central to John's portrayal of Jesus - the contrast between earthly and heavenly existence.

Those not attuned to the heavenly one descended from God will misunderstand analogies (3:4) or interpret sayings on 'flesh' and 'blood' literally (cf. ch. 6).

pisteuo is a key word for John. It can mean either "believe in" or, more dynamically, "have faith in".

vv. 13-15 The climax of the sentence is the phrase "son of man". No one can grasp heavenly reality except granted it from the heavenly Son of Man. The focus is on revelatory discourse.

The focus is on the raising up of the Son of Man but in the earthly domain. The crucifixion is primarily in mind. The Old Testament allusion is Numbers 21:4-9. By God’s providence new life was given.

Four times *hypsoō* (“lift up”) is used for being physically lifted upon on the cross along with Christ’s exaltation (8:28; 12:32, 34).

8:28 (NRSV):

*So Jesus said, "When you have **lifted up** the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me*

12:32-34 (NRSV):

*And I, when I am **lifted up** from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. The crowd answered him, "We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?"*

In all these examples it is the Son of Man who is lifted up. It is interesting that Isa 52:13–53:12 (the Suffering Servant passage) brings together the themes of being lifted up and being glorified.⁶²

Key terms in John’s Gospel occur here – “believe” and “eternal life” Is the latter phrase simply a synonym for 'the kingdom of God' or does it suggest linearity of time? Jesus brings life (1:4). This 'life' comes 'from above', from the Father who grants the Son to bestow it. Also the Spirit of God gives life (3:5-8).

⁶² Carson, John, 201.

v. 16 The most famous of the verses in *John*. There are a few key words which warrant explanation.

monogenēs, means ‘only’ or ‘unique’

“perish” (*apoletai*) – is this a Johannine version of hell?

“eternal life” (*zōēn aiōnion*) - Note the question from v. 15. This is the first occurrence of the phrase in *John*. Literally it means the life of the age to come however in *John* there is also the sense that such life may be experienced in the present.

The mission of the Son is grounded in the love of God. God’s love for the world is an unusual context. Certainly Jews would expect to hear of God’s love for Israel. “God loves the world with the self-less, costly love of redemption.”⁶³

v. 17 How does this verse sit with 9:39 where Jesus says that he came into the world for judgment? Also in 5:27 Jesus says God has given Christ authority to judge. Carson proposes:⁶⁴

Two factors alleviate the difficulty. First, in these two passages the meaning of *krinō/krisis* is neutral. Anyone familiar with Daniel 7:13-14 would not be surprised to learn that the Son of Man has authority to pronounce judgment, and that he came for that purpose. That is rather different from saying he came to pronounce condemnation. Second, and more important, the Son of Man came into an already lost and condemned world. He did not come into a neutral world in order to save some and condemn others; he came into a lost world (for that is the nature of the ‘world’, 1:9) in order to save some. That not all of the world will be saved is made perfectly clear by the next verses (vv. 18-21); but God’s purpose in the mission of Jesus was to bring salvation to it. That is why Jesus is later called ‘the Saviour of the world’ (4:42; cf. 1 Jn. 4:14).

Notice the sending of the Son into the world by God. This will occur elsewhere in *John*.

General Comments

In this passage we see that Jesus has come from God (v. 2). The ascent-descent pattern used by John elsewhere appears in v. 13.

The mention of “speaking” and “bearing witness” in v. 11 underline Jesus’ authority as revealer and emphasises the role of those who bear witness throughout the Gospel. This can be seen earlier in 1:19.

⁶³ Carson, John, 205.

⁶⁴ Carson, *John*, 207.

3:15, 16 provide the mention of the important theme of “eternal life” in John.

Having thus discussed many typical Johannine features of this passage, one thing that does startle the reader used to the Johannine language is the phrase “kingdom of God.” (The only occurrence of this phrase outside this passage is 18:36). Of course it is common in the Synoptics, (or the comparable “Kingdom of Heaven”). This has led some scholars⁶⁵ to suggest that John 3:3, 5, Mark 10:15, Luke 18:17 and Matt 18:3 are different versions of the same traditional saying of Jesus.

Collins describes Nicodemus “as a foil which John uses to present the meaning of authentic faith in Jesus. That faith is a faith which is grounded upon the testimony, the revelation, of Jesus himself ... It is the self-revelation of the Son of Man exalted on the Cross.”⁶⁶

For the Preacher

The above notes highlight the issues of belief, Spirit, baptism, being from above, and God's love for the world. The preacher could explore any of these topics.

What does Jesus' being "lifted up" mean for us and our salvation?

Younger writes:

God has chosen to help us choose eternal life.

God has decided to allow preachers to encourage others to turn to life in an amazing variety of ways. Feel. Dream. Breathe deeply. Work joyfully. Spend an afternoon with a dear friend. Wear tennis shoes. God for ice cream. Read G.K. Chesterton. Read the Gospels. Listen to Adele. Sing along with Frank Sinatra. Ask God to help you feel grace again. Sing loud in worship. Try a new ministry, even though you do not think you have the time.. Pray with gratitude. Pray for peace. Take risks. Give better gifts. Give away more money. Call your mother. Notice small things. Do kind things. Hug someone. Laugh. Listen to the wind of the Spirit.

We choose to build up or tear down, love or ignore, heal or hurt, bless or curse. On Sunday, preachers have the amazing privilege of sharing the invitation to life.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ For example Raymond F. Collins *These Things Have Been Written: Studies on the Fourth Gospel* (Louvain/Grand Rapids: Peeters Press/Eerdmans, 1990).

⁶⁶ Raymond F. Collins, *These Things have Been Written: Studies in the Fourth Gospel* (Louvain/Grand Rapids: Peeters Press/Eerdmans, 1990), 66-67.

⁶⁷ Brett Younger, "Homiletical Perspective," in Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson eds. *Feasting on the Gospels, John, Volume 1* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 73

LENT 3 – JOHN 4:5-42 – JESUS AND THE SAMARITAN WOMAN

This story can be compared and contrasted with the story of Jesus and Nicodemus in the previous chapter.

A traditional interpretation is to view the Samaritan woman as the female member of a people despised by Jews and who leads a disorderly life (4:16-18) to make her trebly a minority person: woman, Samaritan, a polygamist.⁶⁸ The suggestion of polygamy can be questioned as will be the emphasis on her moral status. Nevertheless her overall status as being on the edge of society is probably a fair summary, and certainly her status through Jewish eyes would not have been high.

This woman returning to the village would be taking risks. She would be drawing attention to herself, speaking of her association with a man, speaking of her association with a Jewish man and risking possible marginalisation.

In 4:23 Jesus asserts that anybody (women included) can come to the presence of the Father – there is no exclusion cf. the 'Holy of Holies' in Jerusalem or Mt Gerizim.

There is some historical background to the scene. Mt Gerizim (Deuteronomy 11) was the mountain on which Moses was to pronounce blessings. The temple at Gerizim was built by the Samaritans who gained permission from Alexander the Great to build it there. The temple was destroyed by the Judaeans John Hyrcanus in 128 BCE and the town of Shechem (Nablus) was destroyed in 109 BCE. This did not encourage good relationships between the Jews and the Samaritans. Relationships did not improve between these racially and religiously differing groups.

v. 6 "Jesus was wearied" note the humanity of Jesus here. Notice the contrasts with Jesus' discussion with Nicodemus. Here it is in the middle of the day (not night) and not in Jerusalem, not with a Jewish male but with a Samaritan woman.

v. 7 The scene at the well is reminiscent of Abraham's servant meeting Rebekah (Gen 24:10-27) and Jacob meeting Rachel (Gen. 29:1-12). It has been observed that the time of her coming to the well was unusual. Usually this task was undertaken in the morning and evening. Was she a marginalised woman, perhaps ostracised for her relationships with men? Coming alone to the well would make her more vulnerable.

Jesus initiates the conversation with the woman, crossing social, religious and ethnic boundaries.

v. 9 John explains the background to the woman's astonishment. The issue of purity is raised in the woman's question.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Gerard S. Sloyan *John* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988).

⁶⁹ Barnabas Lindars, *John*, 180-1.

v. 10 The implied reader (who "knows") is privy to the deeper meaning of this verse. Here is a well used dramatic effect in disclosure narratives (cf. Joseph in Egypt with his brothers)

"The gift of God" - could be:

- a. Jesus himself
- b. the revelation Jesus brings
- c. the life Jesus brings
- d. the gift of the Spirit
- e. all of the above

"Living water" - This would refer to fresh or running water. e.g. used in the mikveh (Jewish ritual bath). The phrase has Old Testament echoes: Zech 14:8 - the eschatological fountain, Jer 2:13 - God's living water, Ezek 47:1-12 - fresh river flowing from out of Jerusalem. Life-giving water was referred to in 3:5 indicating birth from above and in 7:38-39 where it is identified with the Spirit.

v. 14 Here is the term "eternal life" often used in *John*. It climaxes the statement in v.14. How do we understand this saying?

- a. metaphysically
- b. experientially/psychologically or
- c. progressively (keep on having thirst quenched?)

v. 16 What of the abruptness of the question in v.16?

Carson⁷⁰ says: "it is designed to help the woman come to terms with the nature of the gift he is offering".

2 Kings 17: 24 – 34 gives a story of 5 nations coming to settle in Samaria and yet who did not know how to worship "their local god". Later they were taught to worship Yahweh.

Thus some see an allegory happening here. Most commentators reject the allegory as it not John's style and that the 5 nations came to live at once in Samaria, not one after the other like the woman's husbands. Also, most readers would not detect the analogy if it did exist.

Note that the passage does not say that the woman has been divorced five times. It was normal for a man to divorce a woman, not the other way around. It is possible that her previous husbands have died.

Certainly her present circumstances suggest that she is in a sexual liaison with a man. Notice however how Jesus does not dwell on her morality, indeed he complements her truthfulness. Jesus continues to offer the living water. And so the woman's behaviour in her relationships is not a key focus of the entire passage.

v. 20 A question which broaches a key division between Jew and Samaritans.

⁷⁰ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1991), 221.

- v. 23** What is one to make of this verse?
- Had not such worship occurred in the past? - e.g. The Psalms express genuine worship.
 - Brown notes that Jesus is not contrasting external worship with internal worship (p.180; similarly Lindars, *John*, 189) (Even the most “spiritual” of Christian groups seem to have buildings.)
 - The 'Spirit' here, for John, most likely means God's Spirit, not the human spirit.
 - Probably best understood in terms of John's earthly/heavenly dualism similar to John 3
 - Are 'truth' and 'Spirit' synonymous? cf. 14:17.
- v. 25** Understated but dramatic presentation of Jesus as "the Messiah".
- v. 26** The Samaritans were expecting a Messiah-like figure called the Taheb. Jesus replies with an I AM saying commonly used in *John*. Literally “Jesus says to her: “I am, who is speaking to you”. Notice that it is a woman who is the first to hear Jesus utter the words “I AM” which is reminiscent of the divine name give to Moses on the mountain in Exodus.
- v. 27** The disciples return and are "astonished" to find Jesus speaking to a woman.
- v. 34** These words are significant for *John*. Given the significance of food and drink throughout the Gospel, these words provide the key for true food. Thus Jesus can cry out in triumph on the cross “It is finished” or “it is completed”.
- v. 39** Note that many believed because of the testimony of the woman. The role of a good disciple in *John* is one who testifies to Jesus.
- v. 40** Jesus “abides” with the Samaritans. This is a typical word used in *John* with deeper meaning. It reflects the importance of Jesus’ presence in Samaria.
- v. 41** The important response for John. Again note the place of the “word” in this.
- v. 42** Note Richard J. Cassidy's view⁷¹ that this confession of faith is presented deliberately to counter similar claims on the part of Roman emperors.⁷²

Some have seen this passage in the form of a betrothal scene. Bro Larsen, while acknowledging the betrothal features, sees it in the form of a recognition scene. This form was used in ancient fiction, in the Hebrew Bible, in Homeric Epics and Greco-Roman tragedies, comedies and romances.

Typically such scenes contain a meeting (often with a hospitality motif) followed by a scene of “cognitive resistance” where the person is not recognised. Often irony plays a part here.

⁷¹ R. Cassidy, *John's Gospel in New Perspective: Christology and the Realities of Roman Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992).

⁷² See also Craig R. Koester "'The Savior of the World" (John 4:42)' *Journ.Bib.Lit* 109 (1990), 665-680.

Next comes the display of some token of recognition, e.g the display of birth marks or scars or some other sign. This is followed by the moment of recognition and then the reaction. Thus:

John 4:4-42 as Recognition Scene⁷³

The Observed and Observer	Jesus and the Samaritan Woman
The meeting	Meeting at the well, the place where strangers can meet (4-7a)
The move of cognitive resistance (occasionally with a motif of foretelling)	Dialogue about. Postponing recognition and hospitality (7b-15). Motif of foretelling (20-25) and double entendres
Displaying the token of recognition	Jesus reveals his extraordinary knowledge (16-18). There is mutual recognition. Jesus reveals his Messianic identity (26)
The moment of recognition	Partial recognition: Jesus is a prophet (19). Jesus is the Messiah (29)
Reaction	The woman's testimony to the Samaritans (27-30; cf 39, 42)

Thus through this form of the story Jesus' identity is recognised and emphasised by following this motif of recognition scene. There is also a recognition by the Samaritans where Jesus is recognised as saviour of the world (39-42).

Lee states:⁷⁴

In this reading, the woman moves from a literal and material level of understanding to a metaphorical and symbolic one. By the end of the narrative, a new Christological vision of humanity is attained. The story is told in such a way that the reader participates in the narrative and shares the revelation as it unfolds. In the end, he or she is challenged by its spirituality and by the self-discovery it evokes. The reader enters the text as an outsider, an eavesdropper, and by identifying with the central character comes face-to face with Jesus, the Savior of the world. The struggle to move through misunderstanding to understanding becomes the reader's own faith story.

Comparisons and contrasts are often made between this encounter with the Samaritan woman and with Nicodemus. All share something, that whoever they are,

⁷³ Kasper Bro Larsen, "John 4:4-42 as Recognition Scene: Challenging Current Consensus", SBL Conference, Boston, 2008.

⁷⁴ Lee, *Flesh and Glory*, 75.

they need eternal life which Jesus actually offers them.⁷⁵ Through listening to Jesus, people are invited into the divine birth and waters and food of life.

Verse 42 is an apt conclusion to this story: “and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.”

For the Preacher

Jesus is becoming “known” more. The woman firstly notes that Jesus is a Jew. Then, interestingly, the woman refers to Jesus as “Lord”. Although for the woman this could simply be a polite form of address, for John and his later readers this says something more about who Jesus really is. She will acknowledge him as a prophet. Jesus is also in this passage gradually being revealed as Messiah and then Saviour which connects with 3:16. In this passage we begin to see the universality of his mission, to Jew and to Samaritan, to male and to female. Boundaries are now being crossed. O’Day and Hylan write:

The message of this text is still relevant for the church. Jesus crosses the boundaries society creates and asks his disciples to participate in this work. The Samaritan woman’s story challenges our distinctions between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ and summons churches to re-examine the boundaries they set around women’s witness and work.⁷⁶

Who are the insiders and outsiders in our society or even in our churches?

How is Jesus revealed to us today? How can we learn from Jesus’ “everyday” approach with his encounter with this woman and turns the conversation to deeper spiritual issues? How outgoing is our gospel message?

Issues of worship are also raised. What does it mean for us for true worship to be in Spirit and in truth?

LENT 4 – JOHN 9:1-41 – THOSE WHO CAN SEE

This story has parallels with the healing of the lame man in 5:1-47. Both are set in Jerusalem and in both Jesus is in conflict with the authorities. What will follow in the next chapter is Jesus claiming to be the Good Shepherd of the sheep (unlike the present [religious] leaders).

All the Gospels include a story about the healing of a blind person, however John devotes a whole chapter to it. In *John* we see the inclusion of the theological theme of sinfulness as a possible cause of blindness. This is rejected by Jesus.

⁷⁵ Van der Watt, *An Introduction to the Johannine Gospel and Letters*, 14.

⁷⁶ O’Day and Hylan, *John* 57.

The whole story takes on a deeper meaning beyond the miraculous. As O'Day writes: "The situation of need is one of both physical healing and theological insight."⁷⁷

The blind man's understanding of Christ grows from "a prophet" (9:17), to the one sent from God (9:33) and then to the "Son of Man" (9:35-38). While Jesus is described as a "prophet" (cf. also the woman of Samaria (4:19), there could be a reference to the prophet like Moses (Deut 18:15). This is supported by the comparison between Jesus and Moses in v. 28.

Morris⁷⁸ notes that there is no miracle story of the blind being given sight in the Old Testament by human hands. There are no records in the New Testament of Jesus' followers performing this miracle (except perhaps Ananias with Paul's temporary blindness in Acts 9:17-18). In the Old Testament it is connected with God (Exod 4:11; Ps 146:8) and a messianic activity (Isa 29:18; 35:5; 42:7). So Jesus' sign points to his divine and messianic identity.

The parents are cautious in their interaction with the Pharisees for fear of expulsion from the synagogue (v. 22. See also 12:42 and 16:2) at the hands of "the Jews" even though they are identified in the story as Jews themselves. This is a bit of a theme in *John* where brave followers who aren't afraid to be open about their following are subtly noted (e.g. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea with the burial of Jesus in ch. 19).

The healed person turns his questioners' questions around on themselves (26-27) and confronts them with their contradictions (vv. 30-33). "Ironically the man has functioned more like a teacher than the religious authorities have."⁷⁹ He can truly see, but they can't.

Scholars see the dialogue with the authorities as reflecting the relationship between early believers and the synagogues of which they had been part in the post-resurrection church communities.

To some extent this story justifies Jesus' claims against his opponents in chapter 8.

For the Preacher

Smith writes:

Jesus' coming reveals who people are. All are really in darkness and need the giver of sight and light. Those who own up to their need accept Jesus as Revealer and the giver of light and sight. Those who insist they see, already, when in fact they do not, are locked into the estrangement from God that is sin. In Johannine

⁷⁷ Gail R. O'Day, *John* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 98.

⁷⁸ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* Revd edn. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 422.

⁷⁹ O'Day, *John*, 101.

[= “of John”] theology it is finally through the revelation of God in Jesus that sin is defined.⁸⁰

He continues:

The son, who has been given sight, boldly confesses, not doctrine about Jesus, but what Jesus himself has done for him. Presumably the life of the Johannine community, a community of Jesus’ disciples and their heirs, was based upon such a brave and incautious confession.⁸¹

What things might we miss out on seeing? How have we and the church been blind leaders?

This passage is immediately followed by Jesus’ claim in ch. 10 that he is the Good Shepherd, unlike the false leaders. In ch. 9 these leaders are described as blind guides. There is something about qualities of leadership in this passage which preachers can explore.

Soards et al write of the themes of chapter 9:⁸²

Sin (“But Jesus refuses to play the blame-game [of who was responsible for the man’s blindness] and speaks instead of the will of God in relation to ministry to those who suffer”),

Transformation (while the man grows in his understanding of who Jesus is, “conversion is not an end in itself.”),

Sabbath (Jesus is lord of the Sabbath),

Fear (of religious opponents against an open confession of our allegiance to Jesus),

Expulsion (who is really in and who is really out?), and

Revelation (“Christ’s self-disclosure brings the man to profound faith, confession, and worship.”)

LENT 5 – JOHN 11:1-45 – THE RAISING OF LAZARUS

This is the seventh and climactic miraculous sign which is recorded in the “Book of Signs” in the first half of *John*.⁸³ There is a contrast with the first sign in 2:1-11 where there was wedding festivity, now we encounter the funeral and mourning over Lazarus. There is a peak in terms of the resurrection power of Jesus, a sign which is centred on Jesus’ I AM saying about the resurrection and the life (v. 25).

⁸⁰ D. Moody Smith, *John* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 200.

⁸¹ Smith, *John*, 201.

⁸² Marion Soards, Thomas Dozeman, Kendall McCabe, *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year A, Lent/Easter* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 70

⁸³ Unlike the Synoptics, John does not use the word “miracle” (*dunamis*) rather “sign” (*semeion*) to refer to Jesus’ miraculous deeds. “The Book of Signs” is a name which is given to John 2-12 where Jesus undertakes various particular signs which say something about who Jesus is, especially in relation to his Father.

The story contains both 'flashbacks' (11:8) and 'flashforwards' (11:53). In terms of its overall context in *John* it is immediately prior to Jesus' final hour. The significance of this story is highlighted by the proximity to Jesus' own death and resurrection.

Towards the beginning of the story Jesus makes a firm statement about walking in the light (vv. 9-10). As Lee says:⁸⁴

The relevance of these words is not immediately clear, yet Jesus is speaking primarily of his mission to the world in the context of those who threaten his life. He has a limited time to do the 'works' of the Father and is unafraid of those who menace him. Similarly, for disciples, their only confidence lies in knowing that the light of Christ illumines them.

The plot moves from sadness to triumph - death to life, this is in face of encircling darkness surrounding Jesus.

Stibbe posits the following simple structure:⁸⁵

a beginning (v.1-16) - Jesus hears the news but delays.
a middle (vv.17-37) - Jesus reaches Bethany and encounters Martha and
Mary
an ending (vv.38-44) - Jesus raises Lazarus.

As we shall see, some argue for a further development into ch. 12 where Jesus is at the house of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, and where he is anointed for his own death.

In the beginning section Jesus refers to Lazarus sleeping (v. 11), a common term used for death amongst the early Christians (plus other ancient writers). Death is not a thing to be feared.

v. 12 "he will get better" is literally "he will be saved".

vv. 14, 15a are jarring:

Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵ For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe..."

These words highlight the John's importance placed on believing. Thomas' curious words appear to point to 12:24-26.

v. 17 "four days" – there was a Jewish belief attested around 220 CE, but probably understood in earlier times, that the soul stays near the grave for 3 days, hoping to be able to return to the body. However on the fourth day it sees decomposition setting in and leaves it finally. Thus by the fourth day all hope was gone.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Lee, *Flesh and Glory*, 171.

⁸⁵ M.W.G.Stibbe, "A Tomb with a View: John 11.1-44 in Narrative-Critical Perspective" *NTStud* 40 (1994), 38-54. Some of the following is based on Ray Barraclough's Lecture notes, St Francis' Theological College, Milton, Brisbane.

⁸⁶ Morris, *John*, 485.

v. 18 near Jerusalem, as well as the narrative effect we also have a reminder of the impending death of Jesus.

v. 26 two commentators have:

- 1) "... from the point of view of life in God there is no death"⁸⁷
- 2) "The only death that is worth regarding cannot affect those who believe in Christ"⁸⁸

v. 27 Martha believes that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God (cf. 20:31 and 1:34 and 1:49). Also she expresses faith in a deliverer, "the one who is to come into the world". Thus note how strong Martha's confession is and how it is a significant part of the entire episode.

v. 33 Jesus is (*enebrimēsato*) "deeply moved" – a word which can mean the snorting of horses. Perhaps it conveys also the meaning of anger. Is this anger against death? "The words will also probably mean that to work this miracle cost Jesus something (cf. Mark 5:30)"⁸⁹ This verb is also used in v. 38.

v. 35 – why does Jesus weep? Is he sad about unbelief? Is he frustrated with the presence of death as part of human existence? Is he mourning the loss of Lazarus and sharing in the grief of those around him? Is it his expression of being deeply moved as in v. 33?

The story is framed by anointing for death – i.e. indication of who Mary is, outlining of road to death by disciples and yet Jesus still calls it walking in the light.

Lee notes 7 scenes which form a structure of inverted parallelism:⁹⁰

Illness and death of Lazarus (11:1-16)

 Jesus' dialogue with Martha (11:17-27) – Jesus' resurrection and life

 Jesus' dialogue with Mary and Judean mourners (11:28-37)

 Raising of Lazarus (11:38-44)

 Conversion of many Judeans and plot to kill Jesus (11:45-57)

 Jesus' anointing by Mary (12:1-8) – symbolic pointing to Jesus death and resurrection

Plot to kill Lazarus (12:9-11)

The first and last scenes share themes of: Lazarus, 'Lord', Jesus' love for Lazarus, the 'glory of God', 'the Jews', stone, death.

While the structure is not tight, it has the benefit of tying together chapter 11 and the beginning of chapter 12, something which the text itself indicates:

John 11:2 (NRSV):

Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill.

⁸⁷ Lindars, *John*, 395.

⁸⁸ Barrett, *John*, 300.

⁸⁹ Morris, *John*, 495.

⁹⁰ Lee, *Flesh and Glory*, 199.

"The drama does not end until the Bethany family gathers together in joyous union around Jesus, counteracting the separation, confusion, and pain of the opening episode."⁹¹

Jesus is the 'now' of the eschatological hope of resurrection.

Martha, like the Samaritan woman, grows in understanding and faith. She, too, (cf. 4:28) fetches someone else and is a bridge to Jesus. She progresses from "a propositional to a personal understanding of resurrection. It is a reality in the person of Jesus and in her own experience". "(Martha is told) of the present realization of what she expects on the last day".⁹² Martha is depicted as a type of 'faith response' and Mary depicted more down to earth.

Based on the inverted parallel structure proposed by Lee above, both Mary (in the anointing) and Martha express their faith in different ways: "Each faith confession represents symbolic words and actions that are crucial to the Gospel's understanding of eternal life."⁹³

Notice the intimacy expressed for the whole family of Bethany in 11:5:

Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus,

Here the Greek for "loved" is in the imperfect tense indicating an ongoing state.⁹⁴ Notice also the love expressed at the extravagant anointing about to follow

Lazarus has a passive role. He is the only character thus far "described in a positive, indeed intimate relationship with Jesus" - note 11:3, 5, 11, 36. Here Jesus explicitly refers to Lazarus as "our friend". Jesus' relationship with Martha, Mary and Lazarus must have been close.

Stibbe regards two themes as crucial to the account:

love: 11:3, 5, 36

glory: 11:4, 40.

Other themes present are:

sending (vv. 3,4 2)

remaining (v. 6)

light (vv. 9, 10)

seeing (vv. 9, 31, 33, 34, 40)

the world (vv. 9,27)

salvation (v. 12)

hearing (vv. 41,42)

faith (vv. 15,25,26,40,42)

⁹¹ Lee, *Flesh and Glory*, 199.

⁹² Brown *John I*, 434.

⁹³ Lee, *Flesh and Glory*, 200.

⁹⁴ Lee, *Flesh and Glory*, 101.

life (vv. 25,26)
knowledge (vv. 22,24,42).

Jesus' I AM saying is the deepest so far in *John* and serves as an appropriate conclusion to the signs.

John 11:25 (NRSV):

...I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die ...

As we shall see, when we look later at the resurrection account in *John* there are echoes back from that scene to this story. For example, Lazarus emerges from the tomb with a cloth (*soudarion*) around his face. In 20:7 - the *soudarion* of Jesus is mentioned among the grave clothes.

General Comments

This story is unique to *John*. Why this would be is often seen as a puzzle. *John* portrays this as part of the movement towards the crucifixion. If this was so, why weren't the synoptic writers also familiar with this story, or, if they were, why didn't they include it in their accounts?

The Synoptics do give specific examples of Jesus raising from the dead i.e. the daughter of Jairus (Matt 9:18ff; Mark 5:22ff; and Luke 8:4ff). Also Luke records the raising of the widow of Nain (Luke 7:11ff). Interestingly the Synoptics do not record any of the miracles recorded by John in Jerusalem.

I AM

Verse 25 has one of John's famous "I am" (*egō eimi*) sayings "I am the resurrection and the life" and forms a central focus of the entire story. This confession of Jesus is more than Jesus giving resurrection and life, but that it is his nature. In Jesus' claim to be resurrection and life Jesus is claiming to be both the one who embodies the power to raise from the dead and the one who is the source of the positive verdict of life.

Glory

Dodd considers that 11:4 governs the whole narrative.⁹⁵

John 11:4 (NRSV):

⁹⁵ C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 365-6).

rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."

Glory is the revealing of who Jesus is, not just the amazing sign itself.

Morris writes:⁹⁶

"It is likely that we should understand the glorification of the Son in two ways in the Johannine manner. Jesus was seen to be at one with the Father, and many came to believe on him (v. 45). But the true glory is in the cross, and this incident led right on to Calvary (v. 50)."

The Story Unfolds

The inclusion of the plot to kill Jesus provides the bridge into chapter 12 and on into the remainder of the Gospel. Lee notes the irony, however, that while the ruling authorities plan to kill Jesus (The word "Sanhedrin" is not used in *John*) it can only happen when the Father determines the coming of the hour.

For the Preacher

Some themes from the passage which the preacher could explore might be:

Jesus' care for humanity.

Jesus' desire to work against death

The preacher can explore the story as a pointer to Jesus' own death and resurrection. As we lead from Lent into Easter we are reminded that God is stronger than death and will provide life for those who believe. We are reminded of the move that can be made within the believer as consider our own response to the life and then the death of Jesus and then his resurrection.

Jesus is the life. We are invited into life.

Glory is another theme which can be developed from the story.

There is also the list of themes suggested in the notes above:

sending (vv. 3,4 2)

remaining (v. 6)

light (vv. 9, 10)

seeing (vv. 9, 31, 33, 34, 40)

the world (vv. 9,27)

salvation (v. 12)

hearing (vv. 41,42)

faith (vv. 15,25,26,40,42)

knowledge (vv. 22,24,42).

⁹⁶ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* Revd. Edn. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 479.

EASTER DAY ALTERNATIVE GOSPEL READING 1 – JOHN 20:1-18 – JOHN'S RESURRECTION ACCOUNT

Background on Belief in the Resurrection of the Dead

There is little in the Old Testament that would describe a belief in resurrection.

Note the following:

Psalm 49:14-15 (NRSV)

Like sheep they are appointed for Sheol; Death shall be their shepherd; straight to the grave they descend, and their form shall waste away; Sheol shall be their home.¹⁵ But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me.

Psalm 6:5 (NRSV):

For in death there is no remembrance of you; in Sheol who can give you praise?

Qumran – *The Thanksgiving Hymn* 1QH 3:21-23; 6:13.

2 Maccabees 7:21-23;

She encouraged each of them in the language of their ancestors. Filled with a noble spirit, she reinforced her woman's reasoning with a man's courage, and said to them,²² "I do not know how you came into being in my womb. It was not I who gave you life and breath, nor I who set in order the elements within each of you."²³ Therefore the Creator of the world, who shaped the beginning of humankind and devised the origin of all things, will in his mercy give life and breath back to you again, since you now forget yourselves for the sake of his laws."

Daniel 12:2 (NRSV):

Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.

General Comments about the Passage

In John's Gospel the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension are brought together. As Kysar says, the enthronement of the crucifixion occurs with the resurrection accounts. The glorification of the cross is also the glory of the risen Lord.

The time sequence of when, for example, the Holy Spirit comes upon the disciples, when Jesus ascends to the Father does not seem important to John. It is quite the opposite with the accounts in *Luke* and *Acts*.

Comparison with the Synoptics

John's account of the Resurrection is the longest in the Gospels. Each Gospel records different events around the Resurrection appearances, particularly with regard to the women at the tomb. Brown provides the following summary table of

comparison of all the Gospel accounts. From this it can be seen that the account in John is quite different to the Synoptics.⁹⁷ Marsh⁹⁸ says John is concerned, “even more than the other evangelists, to tell us not just what took place, but what was going on in what took place”.

Jesus ensures that he is seen by the disciples and can even be touched and indeed is very much alive. He also prepares them for the new situation, when he will not be physically with them, but it is the time of the Holy Spirit (or “Paraclete” as Jesus often refers to the Spirit in *John*), when disciples will believe without seeing. It is now the time of mission that was begun in Jesus.

The resurrection is not predicted as clearly in *John* as it is in the Synoptics. Verses 10:17-18 allude to it but there is no specific resurrection language.

For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."

It almost seems as though Jesus returns to divine glory via the crucifixion. Bultmann commented that nothing is added to the revelation of the glory by the resurrection of Jesus, because what Jesus accomplished he accomplished through his death. Does the resurrection accomplish anything besides what has been done through Jesus' deeds, words, and death?

⁹⁷ Brown, *John II*, 974.

⁹⁸ John Marsh, *Saint John* (Harmondsworth/Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1968), 18.

The Variant Gospel Narratives of the Visit of the Women to the Tomb

	Mark 16: 1 – 8	Matt 28	Luke 24	John 20
Time	Very early First day of week Sun risen	First day of week Growing light	First day of week At first dawn	Early First day of week Still dark
Women	Mary Magdalene Mary, mother of James Salome	Mary Magdalene Other Mary	Mary Magdalene Mary, mother of James Joanna Others	Mary Magdalene (note “we” in v2)
Purpose	Brought aromatic oils Came to anoint	Came to see tomb	Had aromatic oils from Friday Took aromatic oils along	
Visual Phenomena	Stone already rolled back Youth sitting inside on right	Earthquake Angel descended and rolled back the stone He sat on stone (outside)	Stone already rolled back Two men standing (inside)	Stone already moved away (Later) two angels sitting inside
Conversation	Youth said: Not to fear Jesus not here He is raised Tell disciples that he is going to Galilee There you will see him	Angel said: Not to fear Jesus not here He is raised Tell disciples that he is going to Galilee There you will see him	Men asked: Why seek living among dead? Jesus not here He is raised As he told you while still in Galilee	(Later) angels asked: Why do you weep? (Later) Mary answered: they took my Lord away (Later Jesus gives Mary a message for disciples)
Reaction	Women fled trembling, astonished Told no one	Women went away quickly with fear, great joy to tell disciples	Women left Told Eleven and rest	Mary ran to Peter and to the Beloved Disciple Told them that body had been taken

Smith argues: “The resurrection allows Jesus’ ministry and message to be seen for what they were, and are. Jesus’ resurrection means for John, as for other early Christians and the New Testament writers generally, that God authenticates Jesus as his Son.”⁹⁹

⁹⁹ D. Moody Smith, *The Theology of the Gospel of John* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 123.

2:19–21 points to the resurrection. As indicated earlier, the power to take up life again (10: 17-18) is claimed as Jesus' authority and mission.

The appearance of the resurrected Jesus leads Thomas to the momentous confession "my Lord and my God". This appears to be the ultimate confession of the Gospel.

Chapter 21 especially emphasises the significance of the resurrection for the church.

The Discovery of the Empty Tomb (20:1-10)

In this passage Mary Magdalene is the first to discover the empty tomb. We then see Peter and this mysterious Beloved Disciple come to the tomb. Peter and the Beloved Disciple usually appear together in *John* (e.g. 13:23-26; 21:20-25) and it is notable that they are portrayed here together at this significant event.

Generally the Beloved Disciple appears to be what good disciples are meant to be. He is the good model. Here he sees and believes even though yet he hasn't seen the risen Lord (see below). We are not sure what he believes, however this apparently isn't relevant for John's narration of the story.

- v. 1 John states that it is still dark. (Mark 16:2 states that the sun had come up.) Mary finds the tomb empty. Is this symbolic that the light of the world is not there?
- v. 2 Mary chooses to tell Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple that the body is not there. Although Mary has been the only one mentioned she says "we" do not know where they placed Jesus' body. Does this reflect other traditions apparent in the Synoptics which note several women at the tomb (note Brown's table above)?
- vv. 3-4 The "Beloved Disciple" reaches the tomb first (note this is another situation where the Beloved Disciple ends up looking better than Peter. Moloney suggests that this indicates a greater eagerness and the beginnings of belief that God has entered the story."¹⁰⁰
- v. 5 The Beloved Disciple sees the grave clothes (*ta othonia*) from outside. Peter will go in and see them, but more.
- vv. 6-7 Why the mention of the one not entering (v. 5) and Peter entering, and the reference to the separate cloth (*soudarion* – "head cloth")?
- v. 8 Is this the catalyst for his belief? Schneiders¹⁰¹ sees a link with Exod 34:33–35, the veil of Moses. The word (*soudarion*) is also specifically used to describe Lazarus' grave clothes (11:44).

This, among other reasons, is why Stibbe equates the Beloved Disciple with Lazarus. Byrne¹⁰², without drawing that conclusion, still believes that the connection

¹⁰⁰ Moloney, *John*, 522.

¹⁰¹ Sandra Schneiders "The Face Veil: A Johannine Sign (Jn 20.1-10)" *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 13 (1983), 94-97.

with the Lazarus story is pertinent. He argues that Lazarus' grave clothes had to be removed by others, however, for the Beloved Disciple the fact that the *soudarion* was lying separately was a sign for him that Jesus himself had removed it and thus he believed. He notes that both disciples saw the other grave clothes from without the tomb, but that it wasn't until one entered the tomb that the *soudarion* laid separately could be seen. It is given some emphasis in the narrative by means of the repetitions.

Lee¹⁰³ notes several parallels in the accounts of Lazarus' and Jesus' raising:

the arrival at the tomb (11:38; 20:1)

the grief and faith of the women present

the cavelike tomb with its heavy stone, which has first to be removed (11:38-39, 41; 20:1)

the reference to the headcloth (*soudarion*, 11:44; 20:7) as noted above

the need to be freed from the grave-clothes (11:44; 20:6-7)

- v. 9** Watson¹⁰⁴ argues that this comment is more appropriate if the disciples were bewildered, rather than that one 'believed'. Smith writes:¹⁰⁵ "the simplest explanation suffices: the Beloved Disciple's belief is grounded in his seeing, even if he does not yet know the scriptural prophecy."

Mary Magdalene's Encounter with Jesus (20:11-18)

There are some questions in the narrative:

How/when did Mary Magdalene get back to the tomb?

Why did the two disciples depart without talking to her?

Is it that the story of the disciples' coming to the tomb has been inserted into the earlier narrative of Mary's finding the empty tomb?

Who is seen at the tomb? Mark records a "young man" (the same word used of the boy who ran away naked in the garden). Matthew records an angel who has rolled the stone away. Luke records two men in dazzling clothes and John has two angels in white although the word for "angel" can mean simply "messenger".

- v. 12** The two angels at either end of the stone slab where Jesus' body had been laid recalls the two cherubim covering the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant (Exod 37:7-9).

v. 13 Mary speaks as a disciple - 'my Lord'.

v. 15 Jesus addresses Mary (*gunai* - "woman") as he has his mother (2:4; 19:26) and the Samaritan woman (4:21).

¹⁰² Brendan Byrne, "The Faith of the Beloved Disciple and the Community in John 20" in Stanley E. Porter & Craig A. Evans *The Johannine Writings* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 31-45.

¹⁰³ Dorothy Lee, *Flesh and Glory: Symbolism, Gender and Theology in the Gospel of John* (New York: Crossroad, 2002), 219.

¹⁰⁴ Nigel Watson, "John's Witness to the Resurrection" in Hugh McGinlay (ed.) *The Years of John* (Melbourne: Joint Board of Christian Education, 1985), 81.

¹⁰⁵ Smith, John, 375.

Kysar points out that the two questions asked of Mary by Jesus are basic questions of life: "Why are you weeping? and "Whom/What are you seeking?" (in terms of the human quest for meaning and fulfilment.)

- v. 16 Interpretation for non-Hebrew readers. The naming of Mary alludes to 10:1–18 where the Good Shepherd knows the sheep and calls them by name. The Good Shepherd brings life by laying down his life.
- v. 17 The tense of the imperative in the Greek (i.e. present - *haptou* - "hold") denotes an action already happening. In other words, the meaning is probably more: "Stop holding on to me".
Her response of holding Jesus was natural (Jesus will later invite Thomas to touch him). Yet she cannot prevent him going to the Father so that the Spirit may be given.

She must go to Jesus' brothers and sisters (*adelphoi*). This term is used for the first time in relation to the disciples. Jesus' relationship with the community has changed as they are children of the Father (cf. 1: 12). This term will appear again in 21:23.

The distinction between "my Father" and "your Father" and between "my God" and "your God" has sometimes been interpreted to mean that Jesus intends to emphasize how different his relationship is compared with that of the disciples. But that is to miss the intention of the Evangelist. He really intends to say that the God of Jesus is now also the God of the disciples ... the distinction in relationship to God between Jesus and the disciples has been abolished and not continued, as will be repeated in verses 21f in another form.¹⁰⁶

Jesus' ascension and resurrection are now being brought together in John.

- v. 18 Mary's testimony to the disciples is extremely simple and yet profound: "I have seen the Lord" bringing in the theme of seeing. The perfect tense of the Greek adds the nuance that what was seen in the past still has an effect now.

It is significant that it was a woman in John's account who is the first to see the risen Lord and goes and announces to the disciples. By such declaration she has been called the "apostle to the apostles".

Some Further Notes on John 20:19-31

Notice that in the above encounter Mary hears, and sees, and holds the risen Jesus, even though at first she doesn't recognise him. As Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene, the disciples behind closed doors, and later also to Thomas, he is still able to show them the signs of the flesh. They hear him, see him, hold him and are offered to feel him.

¹⁰⁶ Haenchen, *John II*, 210.

The disciples are behind closed doors for fear of the Jews (20:19). This is not the valued characteristic of a good Johannine disciple (contra the examples of John the Baptist (1:19, 20), the man born blind (ch. 9), Jesus (18:20) plus others. Perhaps also Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea after Christ's death "came out" in their association with Jesus.

When the disciples see the risen Christ they are filled with joy and Christ greets them with a blessing of peace (in fulfilment of Jesus' word to them of 16:16–33). This blessing is repeated.

Peace also holds a new meaning in the light of 14:27 where Jesus promises this gift. His words are more than a greeting but also a bestowal on the disciples of the gift.

The Giving of the Spirit in John 20:20-23.¹⁰⁷

As regards 20:22 (*enephusēsen* - "breathed"):

- a. Instead of a verbal promise (as in ch.16) here is dynamic transmission.
- b. Probable parallel to Gen 2:7 (and possibly Ezek 37:9 - breath on the dry bones.)
- c. Already John's narrative has prepared for it at 1:33; 3:5; 4:24 and 7:39.
1:33 – baptism of Holy Spirit. *John* is the only gospel which connects Jesus' Spirit baptism directly with the descent of the Spirit upon him as a dove. Note also John's mention of the Spirit "abiding" on Jesus (1:32). Note also 3:5 – water and spirit and 4:24 – God is spirit and worship in spirit.

As regards 20:23:

- a. Variant of the saying in Matt 16:19 - in 18:18 authority given to the disciples (18:1)
- b. Here given to ten disciples - Judas is gone and Thomas is not present (20:24).

Interpretations:

1. sacramental/priestly power of absolution or baptism (e.g. Constantine)
2. authority to adjudicate on membership of the community
3. gift of discernment - aspect of being led into all truth
4. present forgiveness announced and honoured on the 'last day'
5. declaration of forgiveness - through penance/gospel proclamation
declaration of judgment - discipline/excommunication

(On the "Procession" of the Spirit note Brown's brief comment¹⁰⁸)

The passive form of the verbs "they stand forgiven" or "not forgiven" is a form commonly implying that it is God who does the acting, i.e. forgiving or not forgiving.

¹⁰⁷ Based on Ray Barraclough's Lecture Notes.

¹⁰⁸ Brown, *John II*, 716-717.

Smith sees this being primarily for “inner-community discipline, a problem and need that appears acute in 1 John”¹⁰⁹.

Lindars proposes:¹¹⁰

The disciples preach repentance and the forgiveness of sins in preparation for the rule of God. To those who respond forgiveness is assured, and ratified by God himself ... But to those who refuse, there is the divine warrant for asserting that their sins remain unforgiven ... But we can hardly suppose that John does not think *also* of preaching within the life of the Church, so that the notion of an internal ecclesiastical discipline is not altogether excluded (cf. 1 Jn 1.5-2.6).

Carson says:¹¹¹

The Christian witnesses proclaim and declare, and, empowered by the Spirit, live by the message of their own proclamation; it is God who *effectively* forgives or retains the sin. ... through the gift of the Spirit the authority that Jesus exercises in, say, John 9, is repeated in their lives. Jesus there gave both sight and faith to the one who knew he was blind; to those who claimed to see, he declared, ‘Your guilt remains’ (9:41). Thus the retention of their sin was both description and condemnation. And the Paraclete who is given as a gift to Jesus’ followers (v.22) continues the same two-edged work through them...

Moloney proposes: “The Paraclete’s ongoing – yet divisive – revelation will lay bare sin, righteousness, and judgment (cf. 16:7-11).”¹¹²

Is the authority given to individuals? Is it the duty of the church to convey forgiveness and warn those who spurn God that they forsake God’s mercy?

Morris also notes that whoever sins are forgiven is plural i.e. Jesus is not speaking of individuals but classes. “Of course, what applies to classes has its application to individual cases. That cannot be denied and should not be overlooked. But it is not the subject of this gift of Christ.”¹¹³

Brown¹¹⁴ notes how the disciples are sent as the Son was sent, now they continue the “discriminatory judgment between good and evil.” “The disciples both by deed

¹⁰⁹ Smith, *John*, 380.

¹¹⁰ B. Lindars, *The Gospel of John* (London: Oliphants, 1977), 613.

¹¹¹ Carson, *John*, 656.

¹¹² F. Moloney, *The Gospel of John* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998), 533.

¹¹³ L Morris, *The Gospel According to John* Revd. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 750.

¹¹⁴ Brown, *John II*, 1042.

and word cause men [*sic*] to judge themselves; some come to the light and receive forgiveness; some turn away are hardened in their sins.”

Brown continues:

... we doubt that there is sufficient evidence to confine the power of forgiving and holding of sin, granted in John xx 23, to a specific exercise of power in the Christian community, whether that be admission to Baptism or forgiveness in Penance. These are but partial manifestations of a much larger power, namely, the power to isolate, repel, and negate evil and sin, a power given to Jesus in his mission by the Father and given in turn by Jesus through the Spirit to those whom he commissions. It is an effective, not merely a declaratory, power against sins, a power that touches new and old followers of Christ, a power that challenges those who refuse to believe. John does not tell us how or by whom this power was exercised in the community for whom he wrote, but the very fact that he mentions it shows that it was exercised.¹¹⁵

Hägerland notes echoes of the Balaam/Balak cycle in Numbers 22-24, particularly in the Greek version of the Old Testament (LXX), where Balaam was unable to curse those whom God has blessed. He compares this episode also with the prophecy of Caiaphas. He suggests that the LXX translation of the Balaam episode indicates that Balaam's word was “an unwitting confession that only those who are already blessed or cursed by God can be blessed or cursed by Balaam.”¹¹⁶ He concludes:

If the phenomenon of Jesus' disciples forgiving and retaining sins by virtue of the Spirit parallels that of Balaam blessing and cursing in the spirit of God, then the perfects of John 20:23 do not imply a divine blanket ratification of any forgiveness and retaining of sins proclaimed 'at will' by the disciples. Rather, they express the notion that by the prophetic Spirit given to them, the disciples will be able to forgive the sins of those, and only those, whose sins have been forgiven by God or Jesus.... It is reasonable to view 20:21-23 as Jesus' commissioning of the disciples to put into practice the ministry of the prophetic Spirit, a ministry that includes a prophetic ability to identify and proclaim sinfulness and forgiveness.¹¹⁷

The bestowal of the Spirit is now in fulfilment of 14:16-17,26; 15:26; 16:7-15. The recalling of Gen 2:7 and Ezekiel 37:9 perhaps indicates the beginning of a new creation and awakening of the dead.

The verb to breathe doesn't carry an object so it more literally reads “And with that he breathed, and said ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’”.¹¹⁸ This raises the question whether this is the point at which the disciples receive the Spirit or is it a sign of what is to come, if one wishes to harmonise this with Acts 2. It seems that most scholars would see this action in a symbolic way.

¹¹⁵ Brown, *John II*, 1044.

¹¹⁶ Tobias Hägerland, “The Power of Prophecy: A Septuagintal Echo in John 20:19-23,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 71 (2009): 99.

¹¹⁷ Tobias Hägerland, “The Power of Prophecy,” 100, 102.

¹¹⁸ D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester: Apollos, 1991), 652.

It must be acknowledged that the effect of this breathing appears to make little immediate difference. The disciples still meet behind locked doors. The picture portrayed in the next chapter indicates life as normal for the disciples and nothing like the scenes depicted in Acts 2.

Carson then proposes that “Jesus’ ‘exhalation’ and command *Receive the Holy Spirit* are best understood as a kind of acted parable pointing forward to the full enduement still to come (though in the past for John’s readers).”¹¹⁹

Jesus speaks of “as the Father has sent me”. “Has sent” is in the perfect tense in the Greek suggesting that Jesus’ “sentness” is still in operation today. Carson concludes from this: “Thus Christ’s disciples do not take over Jesus’ mission; his mission continues and is effective in their ministry (14:12-14).”¹²⁰

Forty times in *John* Jesus is described as sent by the Father. Now Jesus sends the disciples. Again the concept of the model of the Father/Son relationship is expressed with the Son and the disciples. The disciples are enabled for mission.

Later on Jesus invites Thomas to touch his flesh. Thomas sees and believes and confesses. Confession as I have already noted, is important in John. It is opposed to denial and connected with a proper response of believing.

With his confession “my Lord and my God” we finish the Gospel (assuming ch. 21 was probably added at a later stage of the development of the Gospel). In fact it is arguably the highest claim of faith made by a character other than Jesus in the whole Gospel. With the claim “my God” we have now returned to the Prologue to the very beginning (1:1).

I have stressed the number of “seeings” recorded in these resurrection accounts. This event also connects back with the Prologue. “We have seen his glory” (1:14).

Jesus’ words to Thomas: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believed” suggests that Christ can still be believed through the Paraclete. Now the significance of the flesh is expanded beyond what can be seen and touched.

If John 20 originally finished the Gospel, it certainly is an appropriate place to finish, with Thomas’ confession and the statement of belief

Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." John 20:29 (NRSV)

The statement of belief blesses those of us who cannot see and yet seek to believe and so may receive this gift of life through their word.

¹¹⁹ Carson, *John*, 655.

¹²⁰ Carson, *John*, 649.

Moloney¹²¹ proposes that Mary Magdalene's experience shows similarities with Thomas' in terms of their journey towards belief. Both move from disbelief in the Resurrection to an intermediate stage where there is a desire to impose conditions and maintain some control.

Jesus demonstrates to them that this is insufficient. Mary must allow him to ascend to the Father to commence a new relationship between God and believers (v. 17). Mary is the announcer of this. Jesus invites Thomas to cease doubting and believe. This eventuates in Thomas' great confession (20: 28).

Byrne¹²² notes that they receive the Holy Spirit and begin to be the proclaiming community. Thus Mary, Thomas and the disciples move from unbelieving, seeing and believing to be able to proclaim.

The Beloved Disciple sees a sign and believes without seeing the risen Lord. So too, argues Byrne, are the later community called to believe not having seen the risen Jesus, but have encountered the "sign" of his rising.

The Beloved Disciple is given as the example. However it is for these later believers who receive the blessing of Christ: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." (20:29 NRSV).

Belief without sight is demanded from those who read John's Gospel. And so the Evangelist explains his purpose in writing the Gospel: "that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name" (20:31)

Whether it is "believe" or "continue to believe", either way John desires for people to believe, and through this believing find life in the name of Jesus.

For the Preacher

The passage portrays a moving to belief for the different characters involved. What can we learn from the Beloved Disciple's example? What about Thomas' later confession "My Lord and my God" (20:28)?

Belief without sight is demanded from those who read John's Gospel. And so the Evangelist explains his purpose in writing the Gospel: "that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name" (20:31) In the light of the Resurrection what can we say in our preaching about believing?

Crowetipton writes:¹²³

¹²¹ Francis Moloney, "John 20: A Journey Completed" *Australian Catholic Record* 59 (1982), 417-32.

¹²² B. Byrne, *The Beloved Disciple*, 42.

We may know about the resurrection but struggle to believe it when we see it. Our tendency is to place it in the past, as one of those hard to fathom yet somehow essential parts of the faith. At the same time, when we see resurrection in our own lives, it is as if we are Mary in the garden staring Jesus in the face but not recognizing him. Perhaps the best sermon will challenge the congregation to see both the resurrected Christ, but also the effect of resurrection in our own lives. Through the corrective lens of resurrection faith, we can see why it is true that when Jesus tells us to leave behind the things that hold us captive, to love our neighbor (whoever that is), to pray for our enemies, to turn the other cheek, all so that we can follow him, our own lives are resurrected. Resurrection corrects our vision of ourselves, our community, and our connection to God.

Other possible themes to explore are:

The connection of the Resurrection and receiving the Spirit.

Multiple witnesses to the Resurrection and the impact on the followers.

The connection of Jesus' resurrection and the Lazarus account with Jesus' "I am the resurrection and the life" saying.

What does the statement "God authenticates Jesus as his Son" (see above in the notes) mean for us today?

EASTER DAY ALTERNATIVE – MATT 28:1-10

Barton describes well the differences in Matthew and Mark's resurrection accounts:

Where Mark has the women wondering who would roll the stone from the tomb, Matthew obliges with an earthquake [*seismos* – used elsewhere in *Matthew*] and a strong and dazzlingly bright angel; where Mark has the (three) women fleeing in terror from the mysterious 'young man' and saying nothing to anyone, Matthew has the (two) women departing 'with fear *and great joy*' and going in obedience to tell the disciples; where Mark shows no concern that the empty tomb might be explained away as a case of body-snatching, Matthew provides guards at the tomb and, subsequently, a cover-up plot by a perfidious Jewish leadership; most striking of all, where Mark has no appearances of the risen Christ, Matthew has two, the first to the women as they leave the tomb, the second to the eleven disciples on a mountain in Galilee.¹²⁴

Matthew clears away the ambiguity and uncertainty at the end of *Mark*. Even the guard is aware that the body is missing. The women are also rejoicing as they leave the tomb. Jesus seems to repeat the commission given by the angels (28:7,10). The

¹²³ Vaughan Crowetipton, "Homiletical Perspective," in *Feasting on the Gospels*, John, Volume 2 eds. Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 313.

¹²⁴ Barton, *Gospel according to Matthew*, 132.

disciples meet the risen Lord in Galilee and Jesus sends them on their mission to spread the gospel throughout the world.¹²⁵

The actual account of the resurrection itself is not recorded in the Gospels (unlike *The Gospel of Peter*). The resurrected Jesus does not appear to any of the Jewish or Roman authorities as far as we know, neither apparently does he appear to non-disciples.

The women at the Tomb on the Sunday, when they see the risen Christ, grab him and worship him. This is the appropriate Matthean response in submission and paying homage to a king (cf. the magi at Jesus' birth). Apparently the risen Jesus has a body which can be held on to.

The guards report to the Jewish authorities who then discuss what to do. As Witherington says: "The irony of the story is meant to be heavy, because those who are so busy worrying about Jesus' followers perpetrating a fraud about Jesus are about to perpetrate one themselves."¹²⁶

The whole story of the resurrection is told in *Matthew* in only 10 verses however it has been shaped from the beginning of *Matthew*, which is why we should do some work to see its context against the rest of *Matthew* without blurring it with Luke's account. Graves and May write: "The author of Matthew was seeking to articulate for his original listeners a new approach to ethics, community, mission, and relationship with God. For Matthew this new worldview found both its foundation stone and capstone in the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth."¹²⁷

It may suggest that Matthew's community or the author himself may have been experiencing doubters of the resurrection. They could accept the empty tomb, but thought that his body had been removed.

As the religious authorities were responsible for instigating the investigation they are portrayed as being paranoid and resorting to bribes. The presence of the guard stories also reiterate the theme of the clash of empires which was introduced at Jesus' birth.

In *Matthew* the women go to the tomb to "see". The metaphor for "seeing" is so common it can be overlooked. In *Matthew* having eyes, or seeing is used to indicate understanding and insight (9:2; 13:16-17 cf. 5:8). "Seeing" is used frequently in this resurrection account (28:1, 6, 7, 10). As the righteous of chapter 25 (vv. 34-40) "see" the hungry, thirsty, stranger, sick, naked, and prisoner, so all disciples are called to see and understand as exemplified by the women here.

¹²⁵ Perkins, Introduction, 176.

¹²⁶ Ben Witherington III, *Matthew* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2006), 530.

¹²⁷ Graves and May, *Preaching Matthew*, 114.

The mission of the women is to bear witness to the resurrection but also to indicate Jesus' desire to meet with the failed disciples in Galilee, i.e. they are also agents of reconciliation.¹²⁸

Again the presence of earthquakes is significant in *Matthew* being apocalyptic features to highlight the enduring and earth shattering importance of the event. (See, for example the stilling of the storm in 8:23-27, where only Matthew uses the word *seismos*, [normally means "earthquake"] for storm. See also the mention of an earthquake after the death of Jesus [27:51], only recorded in Matthew.) The presence of the angel also adds to the colour of the scene.

The women are given the first commission before the later commission further on in the chapter. They have been told that Jesus has been crucified using a Greek form of speech (perfect tense) to indicate that Jesus is still the crucified one. This is part of his identity even in the present. Resurrection does not mean the erasure of the past, but rather the transformation of the past for living in the present.¹²⁹

Their reaction to the risen Jesus is the attitude of worship, something which occurs elsewhere in Matthew (the magi - 2:11 - and the disciples meeting Jesus on mountain in Galilee - 28:17). The second commissioning given to the women emphasises the amazing story of the resurrected Lord.

For the Preacher

As quoted above:

The author of Matthew was seeking to articulate for his original listeners a new approach to ethics, community, mission, and relationship with God. For Matthew this new worldview found both its foundation stone and capstone in the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.¹³⁰

How could we spell this concept out further?

What can we "see" in the Resurrection?

How can we be "agents of reconciliation"? (See above.)

Only Matthew records that the women were the first to see, touch and worship the risen Lord. Remember worship is an important theme in Matthew.

Given the apocalyptic language surrounding Matthew's resurrection account, it seems as though we are meant to see the Resurrection as of earth shattering importance. How does this apply today?

The preacher may choose to connect the Resurrection with the ongoing work of the disciples in the light of the Resurrection as they are told to meet the Resurrected Lord in Galilee where Jesus' mission began. How do we as disciples respond to the Resurrection in our sharing in that mission?

¹²⁸ Graves and May, *Preaching Matthew*, 120.

¹²⁹ Graves and May, *Preaching Matthew*, 119.

¹³⁰ Graves and May, *Preaching Matthew*, 114.