

Jesus as Role Model in the Gospel of Matthew: Does the Matthean Jesus Practise What He Preaches?

David C. Sim

Abstract: Many scholars have argued that Jesus is presented as the definitive Christian role model in the Gospel of Matthew. In this text, especially in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus preaches a high standard of ethical conduct, and the remainder of the Gospel demonstrates how Jesus lives by these ideals. On this view, the Matthean Jesus practices what he preaches. But this thesis can be questioned. Jesus' attacks on the scribes and Pharisees, especially in Chapter 23, seem to conflict with his teachings in the Sermon, and Jesus' future activity as the final judge is also at odds with his earlier moral standards. Consequently, Jesus does not always practice what he preaches in Matthew, and this study aims to explain why this is the case.

1. Introduction

From the very beginning the Christian tradition has viewed Jesus as the perfect role model, whose life and teaching are to be emulated by his followers. In the first Christian generation Paul looked upon Jesus as the definitive exemplar for himself and his congregations. He advised the Corinthians to imitate him as he imitates Christ (1 Cor. 11:1),¹ and this view is fleshed out with concrete examples in the epistle to the Romans (Rom. 15:1-7).² In the early second century the first epistle of Peter continued this tradition. According to 1 Pet. 2:21-23, Jesus provided an example that should be followed; he committed no sin or acts of guile, did not revile those

¹ Cf. the variation in Ignatius of Antioch, *Philad.* 7:2; 'Be imitators of Jesus Christ, as he was of his Father'.

² See the discussion of this and other pertinent texts in M. B. Thompson, *Clothed With Christ: The Example and Teaching of Jesus in Romans 12.1-15.13* (JSNTSup 59; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991).

who reviled him and did not threaten when he suffered. Many other New Testament texts refer similarly to Jesus as the perfect Christian model who is to be imitated (e.g. John 13:15, 34; 15:12; Heb. 12:2; 13:12-13; 1 John 2:6), and further references are found throughout the writings of the Church Fathers and in a host of later Christian texts. The concept of the *imitatio Christi* has had a widespread and lasting influence on the Christian Church over the centuries, and many saints and other holy figures, from ancient times to the modern day, have lived their lives guided by the example set by Jesus. These Christians have been inspired by the ethical teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel and by the life of Jesus as presented in all four canonical Gospels.

In this study I wish to examine the theme of Jesus as the perfect Christian role model in a single early Christian text, the Gospel of Matthew. This Gospel in particular lends itself to such an analysis because it contains the influential Sermon on the Mount in which the Matthean Jesus spells out candidly a distinctive set of moral and ethical principles that are to govern the lives and actions of his followers. Because Matthew writes a Gospel and therefore narrates the life and teachings of Jesus, the reader is also given an opportunity to determine how well the actions of Jesus throughout the Gospel compare with the high moral standards he espouses in the Sermon. And this in turn raises a number of questions. Is the Matthean Jesus a perfect role model who is worthy of emulation by the evangelist's Christian readers? Does Matthew's Jesus observe fully in his life and without any exceptions the moral code he preaches in the Sermon? To put the matter another way, does he consistently practise what he preaches? Most readers of the Gospel would doubtless answer these questions in the affirmative, and many Matthean specialists would agree with that view. This is understandable. A close reading of Matthew's story reveals that there are many precise correspondences between the moral teachings of Jesus and his actions. Jesus does indeed appear to practise what he preaches, and in so doing provides an example to be admired and emulated.

Yet, the situation is not quite as straightforward as this. While it is unquestionably true that there is a large measure of consistency between Jesus' moral demands and his own actions, there are also a number of instances in the Gospel where there seem to be serious lapses on the part of the Matthean Jesus. In these cases Jesus appears to ignore his own ethical standards and act in ways contrary to them. The following discussion will focus on two of these exceptions. The first concerns Jesus' attitude towards the scribes and Pharisees which occurs within the story that Matthew narrates. Jesus' scathing critique of these people, albeit in response to their mistreatment of him, stands in significant tension with the ethical principles he teaches in the Sermon on the Mount. The second and more significant instance does not relate to the words and actions of Jesus at the time of his historical mission, but to his role at the eschaton after he returns in glory to preside over the final judgement. Matthew's portrait of this eschatological Jesus as a figure of brutality and vengeance with no forgiveness or compassion stands in complete contrast to the moral code proclaimed by the same Jesus at the time of his earthly appearance.

These two aspects of Matthew's portrayal of Jesus are largely constructed by the evangelist himself. The reasons why he creates such an anti-Pharisaic Jesus and such a vindictive and unloving eschatological Jesus are linked to the historical and social circumstances of Matthew's home community. That community was undergoing various crises, and the evangelist responds to these events by depicting Jesus in these particular ways. But in assisting his intended readers to cope with their dire circumstances, Matthew pays a very steep christological price. His Jesus demands very high ethical principles that he does not himself keep. He fails to practise what he preaches at the time of his mission, and he seems to ignore completely his own moral injunctions in his role at the eschaton. The Matthean Jesus is therefore a conflicted and contradictory figure, who does not measure up to his own standards and who does not present a perfect exemplar for his followers.

2. Jesus as Role Model

As noted above, there is a general consensus among scholars that the Matthean Jesus provides a perfect role model for his followers. He preaches a demanding ethic and promotes certain patterns of behaviour, which he consistently observes throughout the Gospel narrative. In a recent study, D. C. Allison claims, '...in Matthew Jesus is the "canon" of Christian morality. The Messiah goes infallibly right'.³ F. J. Matera makes the same point; '...the Matthean Jesus exemplifies the righteousness proclaimed in the Sermon on the Mount, thereby proclaiming an example of ethical behavior that is pleasing to God'.⁴ There is much to be said for this general proposition. The Gospel is replete with examples of Jesus establishing an ethical position or behavioural norm, and then acting in total concordance with those principles.

Jesus blesses meekness among his followers (5:5) and he too is characterised by this quality.⁵ In 11:29 he pronounces 'I am meek and lowly of heart', while in 21:5 Matthew the narrator cites Zech. 9:9, 'Your king is coming to you meek and mounted on an ass', as Jesus prepares to enter Jerusalem. Related to this is the concept of servanthood.⁶ Jesus teaches that leadership is tied up with servanthood (23:11; 24:45-51; 25:14-30) and he proclaims that he came not to be served but to serve, and does so by giving his life for the many (26:28). Jesus directs his followers to renounce worldly goods (6:19-21, 24-25) and he lives an itinerant existence free of comfort

³ D. C. Allison, 'Structure, Biographical Impulse, and the *Imitatio Christi*', in D. C. Allison, *Studies in Matthew: Interpretation Past and Present* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005) 135-55 (152).

⁴ F. J. Matera, *New Testament Ethics: The Legacies of Jesus and Paul* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996) 53.

⁵ Allison, 'Structure, Biographical Impulse', 149-50; Matera, *Ethics*, 53; D. R. Bauer, *The Structure of Matthew's Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (JSNTSup 15; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1988) 61; and J. K. Riches, *Conflicting Mythologies: Identity Formation in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew* (SNTW; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000) 284.

⁶ Bauer, *Structure*, 61.

(8:20).⁷ He also warns them that they must be prepared to take up their cross (16:24), and of course towards the end of the narrative the innocent Jesus is crucified (27:35-50).⁸ There is a further correlation in terms of Jesus' teaching on prayer.⁹ He advises that prayer must be performed in private (6:6), and Jesus prays by himself on a mountain (14:23) and alone on three occasions in the Garden of Gethsemane (26:36-44). In the Lord's Prayer Jesus suggests the use of the words 'Your will be done' (6:10), and he himself employs that very expression in his second prayer in Gethsemane (26:42).

The notion of forgiveness also looms large in the ethical demands of the Matthean Jesus. In the Lord's Prayer Jesus teaches that his followers must forgive their debtors just as they are forgiven by God (6:12), and this is reiterated in the two verses that come after the conclusion of the prayer (6:14-15). The notion of forgiveness is also prominent in Chapter 18. In vv. 21-22 Jesus tells Peter that he should be prepared to forgive not just on seven occasions but as many as seventy times seven, a concept that probably entails limitless forgiveness.¹⁰ This tradition provides the setting for a parable about the necessity of forgiveness and mercy in 18:23-35, the moral of which is that we should forgive our debtors just as God has forgiven our much greater debt to him. In accordance with this emphasis on forgiveness, the Matthean Jesus has the authority to forgive the sins of others (9:2-8) and he dies on the cross for the forgiveness of sins (26:28).

Jesus likewise emphasises the quality of mercy (5:7) and Matthew spells out in detail how the mission of Jesus exhibits this concept.¹¹ Jesus

⁷ Allison, 'Structure, Biographical Impulse', 150; and Riches, *Conflicting Mythologies*, 284.

⁸ Allison, 'Structure, Biographical Impulse', 150-51.

⁹ Allison, 'Structure, Biographical Impulse', 150; and Riches, *Conflicting Mythologies*, 284.

¹⁰ So T. W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1949) 212.

¹¹ Allison, 'Structure, Biographical Impulse', 150; Matera, *Ethics*, 52; Riches, *Conflicting Mythologies*, 284; and Bauer, *Structure*, 61-62.

shows mercy by eating with tax collectors and sinners (9:9-13), but it is in his healings and exorcisms that his compassion is most clearly illustrated. In the healing of the two blind men in 9:27-31, the afflicted men approach Jesus and ask him to have mercy on them. Jesus responds with compassion by healing them. A second healing of two blind men in 20:29-34 follows the same pattern. In response to their double plea for Jesus to show them mercy, Jesus takes pity on them and opens their eyes. The Canaanite woman also appeals to Jesus' mercy to heal her possessed daughter, and Jesus accedes to her request (15:21-28). In a similar episode a father asks Jesus to have mercy on his possessed son, and Jesus exorcises the unclean spirit (17:14-21). The same theme appears in the healings that Jesus performs on the Sabbath in 12:1-14. When he is criticised by the Pharisees, Jesus cites in his defence Hos. 6:6; 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice' (cf. 9:13). Jesus' constant demonstration of mercy in Matthew's Gospel¹² is informed by the statement in 23:23 that mercy is one of the fundamental aspects of the Law.

This introduces another important connection between the teaching of Jesus and his actions in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus proclaims that the Mosaic Law must be fulfilled to the letter (5:17-19) and he instructs the healed leper in 8:4 to abide by the demands of the Torah.¹³ The greatest of the commandments are love of God and love of neighbour (22:34-40; cf. 19:18-19), and Jesus fulfils both in his mission. The love of God is demonstrated by obedience to the will of the Father (6:10; 7:21; 12:50), and Jesus accedes to his Father's will by submitting to crucifixion (26:42). His love of neighbour appears in his miracles of mercy and compassion and by his atoning death (20:28; 26:28).

The Matthean Jesus places great store in peacemaking (5:9), reconciliation and non-retaliation. Disciples are not simply to refrain from

¹² We can add to the texts already cited the compassion of Jesus in the two miraculous feeding stories (14:14; 15:32), which involves a similar theme. See Matera, *Ethics*, 52; and Bauer, *Structure*, 62.

¹³ Allison, 'Structure, Biographical Impulse', 150; and Matera, *Ethics*, 52 .

killing, but are to resist the temptation to become angry, to insult others and to call their brother a fool (5:21-22). They are also to reconcile themselves with their accusers (5:23-26) and not resist those who are evil. When struck on one cheek, they are to offer the other; when sued for one garment, they are to offer another garment as well; and when forced to go one mile, they are freely to go a second mile (5:39-42). Jesus demands that his followers must love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them as they strive for perfection (vv. 43-48).

Once again we find instances where Jesus himself practices what he preaches. In Mark 3:5 Jesus looks upon the Pharisees with anger, but Matthew omits this detail in his parallel text (Matt. 12:13). It is, however, in the passion narrative where these qualities are most easily identified.¹⁴ As he is arrested, Jesus does not resist. When one of his disciples retaliates by cutting off the ear of the high priest's slave, Jesus denounces this violent act by stating that all who take the sword will perish by the sword (26:51-52). During his trial before the High Priest and the council, Jesus remains controlled and largely silent. He offers no resistance when he is spat upon and beaten (26:57-68), and he continues to adopt his silent and non-retaliatory posture before Pilate (27:11-26). Jesus is then handed to his executioners who mock him, spit on him, beat him and humiliate him (27:27-31). Again Jesus maintains a dignified silence and offers no resistance to these brutal Roman soldiers. As he hangs on the cross, he is subjected to a range of derisory comments by passersby, the chief priests, scribes and elders, and even by those who were crucified with him (27:39-44). Once more Jesus makes no attempt to respond, and his final sound is a loud cry to God as he dies (27:50). Despite being subjected to a host of injustices, indignities and brutal punishments, Jesus offers no resistance to his enemies. He does not get angry, but remains meek, passive and silent as he fulfils the will of the Father.

¹⁴ Allison, *Structure*, 150; and Riches, *Conflicting Mythologies*, 284.

The above analysis reveals that in a host of ways the Matthean Jesus is true to his principles and practices what he preaches. He exemplifies in his life his stringent moral code and so serves as a definitive role model for the evangelist's Christian readers. But these texts tell only part of the story, and it is to the other parts that we may now turn. We shall begin with the attitude of the Matthean Jesus to the scribes and Pharisees.

3. The Matthean Jesus and the Scribes and Pharisees

In Matt. 5:22 Jesus pronounces that whoever says '(you) fool' (mwre/) will be condemned to the fires of Gehenna. Yet the Matthean Jesus uses that very term in 23:17 when he addresses the scribes and Pharisees as 'fools and blind men' (mwroi\ kai\ tufloi/). It is disappointing but not perhaps surprising that most commentators fail to mention the real tension between this text and 5:22. When scholars do acknowledge it, they tend to argue that the contradiction is more apparent than real. In 5:22 Jesus prohibits the use of the word 'fool' when addressing a fellow Christian (i.e. brother), but not when addressing an outsider or an enemy. His description of his Pharisaic and scribal opponents as 'fools' does not therefore contradict his earlier dictum.¹⁵ But this neat explanation, while theoretically resolving one contradiction, simply introduces another. If we accept that the evangelist drew a distinction between abusive language to insiders and outsiders, then how can this be reconciled with the teaching in 5:43-47, in which Jesus urges his followers to love their enemies and to pray for those who persecute

¹⁵ So R. Mohrlang, *Matthew and Paul: A Comparison of Ethical Perspectives* (SNTSMS 48; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) 181 n. 45; R. H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2nd edn 1994) 463; and U. Luz, *Matthew 21-28* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005) 120 n. 63. W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (ICC; 3 vols; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988, 1991, 1997), III, 291, note this explanation without committing themselves to it. An alternative understanding is proffered by A. H. M'Neile, *The Gospel according to St. Matthew* (London: Macmillan, 1915) 334, who suggests that what is at issue is not the word itself but the spirit in which it is uttered. While this interpretation excuses Jesus' use of the term in 23:17, it seems to introduce an element in 5:22 that is not readily apparent.

them?¹⁶ In this tradition the Matthean Jesus specifically states that his disciples must treat outsiders as they treat each other. It is not enough to love only each other and to salute only each other; they must do so to those beyond their immediate circle. The suggestion that it is acceptable to use abusive language to outsiders but not within the Christian community seems to contravene this principle. This point can and should be broadened.

Matthew 23:17 is merely the tip of the iceberg in terms of the Matthean Jesus' treatment of the scribes and the Pharisees. In the context of Matthew's narrative these groups, either singly or together, are the real villains of the piece. They are offended by the teaching of Jesus (15:12), they think evil of him (9:4), they charge him with blasphemy (9:3), they attack him with breaking the Torah (12:2; cf. 15:1-2) and for eating with sinners (9:11), they test him (19:3; 22:15-16, 34-35), and they plot to kill him (12:14). One might think that the terrible treatment of Jesus by the scribes and Pharisees presented the evangelist with a golden opportunity to demonstrate the correct response to such behaviour. Given the teachings of Jesus with respect to this issue, we would expect that he would remain meek, merciful and a peacemaker (5:5, 7, 9), that he would not judge these opponents (7:2-5), that he would not get angry or use insulting language against them (5:21-22), that he would seek reconciliation with them (5:23-26), that he would not resist them but turn the other cheek (5:38-42), that he would love these enemies and pray for them (5:43-47), that he would show them mercy (9:13; 12:7; 23:23) and that he would forgive them without limit (6:12, 14-15, 18:22-35). But our expectations are not fulfilled.

The Matthean Jesus responds to his maltreatment in a manner that parallels rather than contrasts with the actions of the scribes and Pharisees. He denounces them with insulting and vituperative epithets. They are hypocrites (6:2, 5, 16; 15:7; 22:18; 23:13, 15, 23, 25, 27-29), blind guides (15:14; 23:16, 19, 24, 26), fools (23:17), children of Gehenna (23:15) and a

¹⁶ See R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007) 201 n. 85.

brood of vipers (12:34; 23:33; cf. 3:7). In terms of their behaviour Jesus criticises them for failing to practice what they preach (23:3; 27-29), for placing intolerable burdens on others (23:4), for soliciting admiration (23:5-7), for placing their own tradition before the will of God (15:2-3; 23:15-26), for lacking the appropriate level of righteousness (5:20) and for either agreeing to or committing acts of murder (23:29-36; cf. 22:6). They abuse their leadership roles by leading the people astray (15:14), by preventing them from entering the kingdom of heaven (23:13) and by making converts twice as much a child Gehenna than they are (23:15). Both the scribes (9:4) and the Pharisees (12:34; 22:18) are described as evil (pnhro/j/pohhri/a), which in the context of Matthew's dualistic schema marks them as followers of Satan, the evil one (o(pnhro/j; cf. 5:37; 6:13; 13:19, 38).¹⁷

The harsh polemic of the Matthean Jesus against these opponents is distributed throughout the Gospel, but it reaches its climax in the discourse of Chapter 23. Here Jesus mounts a bitter and unrelenting attack on his enemies using no less than seven times the condemnatory opening formula, 'woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites' (23:13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29), or the alternative, 'woe to you, blind guides' (23:16). We find in this vitriolic speech no mercy, forgiveness, reconciliation or love of enemy, but plenty of anger, negative judgements, retaliation, and insulting and abusive language. In his dealings with these opponents, the Matthean Jesus appears not to practise himself what he preaches to his followers. As a result his charges of hypocrisy against the scribes and Pharisees contain more than a touch of irony.

When dealing with this prominent Matthean theme and with Chapter 23 in particular, scholars tend to focus on the reason(s) for the evangelist's harsh condemnation of these opponents. In this respect it is well accepted that the conflict between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees in the Gospel reflects a very real and bitter conflict between the evangelist's Christian

¹⁷ See D. C. Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology in the Gospel of Matthew* (SNTSMS 88; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 76-77.

Jewish community and a resurgent Pharisaism (or Formative Judaism) in the turbulent decades following the Jewish revolt in 66-70 CE.¹⁸ Matthew's small Christian group was seemingly persecuted by its more powerful opponents,¹⁹ and the evangelist responds in a conventional way by contemporary standards by presenting Jesus vilifying the scribes and Pharisees in the harshest of terms.²⁰ His response serves to delegitimize the claims of the opposition party and to confirm his own community's allegiance to Jesus. While this issue is doubtless of major importance and deserves to be highlighted, the preoccupation with it has led scholars to overlook the problem this theme has caused for Matthew's portrayal of Jesus as the ideal role model.

Not all scholars, however, have ignored this point, though they have responded to it in different ways. D. C. Allison has suggested that Matthew (and the Matthean Jesus) permitted exceptions to the teaching on anger. As a prophet Jesus has every right to display prophetic indignation and speak harsh truths against his opponents who are leading others to eternal damnation (23:15-16). His obligation to love and save everyone overrides in some circumstances the command not to get angry.²¹ This is, however, a thorny path to tread. The possibility of exceptions simply dilutes the high ethical standards that the Matthean Jesus sets. Moreover, if Jesus as a prophet is exempt from absolute consistency, does this apply to prophets in the Christian tradition? In Matt. 23:34 Jesus sends prophets, wise men and

¹⁸ See the major studies; J. A. Overman, *Matthew's Gospel and Formative Judaism: The Social World of the Matthean Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990); A. J. Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); and B. Repschinski, *The Controversy Stories in the Gospel of Matthew: Their Redaction, Form and Relevance for the Relationship between the Matthean Community and Formative Judaism* (FRLANT 189; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000).

¹⁹ For detailed analysis of this theme, see Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 192-98.

²⁰ In relation to Matthew 23, see Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, III, 258-62; Luz, *Matthew 21-28*, 168-77; and A. J. Saldarini, 'Delegitimation of Leaders in Matthew 23', *CBO* 54 (1992) 659-80.

²¹ D. C. Allison, 'Deconstructing Matthew', in Allison, *Studies in Matthew*, 237-49 (247-48).

scribes who will eventually be persecuted. Are these prophets permitted to get angry or to consider themselves excused from the other moral precepts taught by Jesus? Even Allison concedes that even if this explanation satisfied the evangelist, it will probably not satisfy the modern reader.²² One such modern reader, U. Luz, states his distaste for this Matthean theme forcefully and honestly, and gives it a personal slant as well; 'For me there is a fundamental contradiction between Jesus' command to love one's enemies and what happens in the woes against the scribes and Pharisees. It is a contradiction that cannot be explained away'.²³ Although Luz here is referring to a contradiction between the historical Jesus and the Matthean Jesus, the same tension or contradiction appears in the Gospel narrative. In other words, the Matthean Jesus, while often practising what he preaches and providing an excellent example to be emulated, is guilty of a serious lapse in the application of his own high ethical principles in his interactions with the scribes and Pharisees.

4. The Eschatological Jesus

We may now turn from Matthew's portrayal of Jesus at the time of his historical mission and examine his presentation of the future activity of Jesus. It was a normative Christian doctrine that the risen Christ would return from heaven and that this event would initiate the universal and final judgement. While most other early Christian texts do not emphasise these end-time events and are rather vague about their precise details, Matthew both focuses intensely upon them and provides a colourful description of them. His eschatological material is in fact the most developed in the New Testament with the possible exception of the book of Revelation.²⁴ When we

²² Allison, 'Deconstructing Matthew', 248.

²³ Luz, *Matthew 21-28*, 138 (cf. too 175).

²⁴ See the major studies of this theme; Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, passim; and D. Marguerat, *Le Jugement dans l'Évangile de Matthieu* (La Monde de la Bible; Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2nd edn 1995).

examine the evangelist's depiction of Jesus in his future manifestation, we find that it is difficult to square Jesus' eschatological actions with his ethical precepts at the time of his historical mission.

Let us consider first Matthew's description of the manner in which Jesus returns. The clearest depiction of this event is found in Matt. 24:29-31, which is a redacted version of Mark 13:26-27. The evangelist follows Mark in describing Jesus (as the Son of Man) coming on the clouds with power and glory who will send out angels to gather the elect. This powerful and glorious Jesus marks a significant change from the earlier Jesus of Matthew's narrative who is meek and humble (cf. 11:29, 21:5). But over and above this, the evangelist introduces into the Marcan material an overtly military theme.²⁵ The appearance of Jesus will be preceded by the sign of the Son of Man, and he will discharge the angels with a loud trumpet call. The sign of the Son of Man is best identified as his military standard, since in Jewish eschatological thought the standard and the trumpet are often linked (cf. Isa. 18:3; Jer. 6:1; 51:27) and both motifs feature prominently in the military battle depicted in the Qumran war Scroll (1QM 2:15-4:17). The angels who accompany the returning Jesus are identified as *his* angels, and it is clear from the reference in 26:53 to legions of angels that Matthew conceived of the heavenly host in military terms. In short, the evangelist envisages Jesus to return at his *parousia* at the head of a mighty, heavenly army (cf. Rev. 19:11-26). The motif of peacemaking, so evident in 5:9 in the teaching of Jesus, has now given way to the theme of justifiable and even necessary eschatological warfare.

²⁵ See the discussion in Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 104-08, and literature cited there. Later studies to accept this interpretation include Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, III, 359-64; J. Draper, 'The Development of "the Sign of the Son of Man" in the Jesus Tradition', *NTS* 39 (1993) 1-21; W. Carter, 'Are There Imperial Texts in the Class? Intertextual Eagles and Matthean Eschatology as "Lights Out" Time for Imperial Rome (Matthew 24:27-31)', *JBL* 122 (2003) 467-87; D. L. Turner, *Matthew* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008) 582-83. For a critical response to this view, see France, *Matthew*, 926 n. 103.

Matthew's eschatological scenario does not focus on the details of the eschatological war, since his main interest is in the process of judgement that follows. In accordance with the glory of his return, Jesus the Son of Man will sit upon his throne of glory (19:28; 25:31), judging all humanity (25:32-46) and dispensing eschatological rewards and punishments. The evangelist spells out the fate of the righteous and their rewards in a number of pericopes.²⁶ They will be transformed into angels (22:30; cf. 13:43), and be given eternal life (19:16; 19:29; 25:46). The righteous will also participate in the messianic banquet (8:11-12), a very common Jewish eschatological theme, and will live in peace and harmony in the presence of God (5:8; 18:10).

It is, however, the opposite notion, the fate of the wicked, that is of more concern to Matthew, and his views are the harshest that we find in the New Testament.²⁷ The evangelist can at times speak of their fate in very general non-descript terms. They will meet with condemnation (12:41-42), destruction (7:13) and eternal punishment (25:46), but he also provides specific details. For example, he notes that the wicked will be sent to a place of complete darkness. In three redactional sections the evangelist states that they will be consigned to the outer darkness (8:12; 22:13 and 25:30), which results from their removal from the presence and the light of God. The main theme, however, is that the wicked will burn for eternity, and many of the evangelist's references to this topic are the result of his editorial activity.

Matthew's Jesus identifies the place of fiery punishment as Gehenna (cf. 4 Ezra 7:36; Sib. Or. 4:186; Ap. Of Ab. 15:6). When referring to this terrible place, he most often simply refers to Gehenna (5:29, 30; 10:28; 23:15, 33) or its Greek equivalent Hades (11:23; 16:18), though at times he uses the more descriptive 'Gehenna of fire' (5:22; 18:9). On other occasions he speaks of the wicked being cast into the eternal fire (3:7-12; 7:18:8; 25:41; 7:19) or the furnace of fire (13:42, 50) with no mention of Gehenna,

²⁶ Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 140-45.

²⁷ Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 129-40.

but the meaning is the same. When we tally all the Matthean texts that refer to the theme that after the final judgement the wicked will be punished by burning forever the evidence is impressive. It is even more so once we consider that most of these references on the lips of Jesus are redactional. While this was a very common theme in Jewish eschatological circles,²⁸ it is not so prominent in the Christian texts of the New Testament,²⁹ though it is found in the book of Revelation (Rev. 19:20; 20:10, 14-15).

Another common theme in Jewish eschatological circles was that the wicked, in addition to being burned eternally, would also be tortured by angelic tormenters (cf. Sir 39:28-31; 2 En. 10; T.Ab. 12:1-2; T. Levi 3:2;). Matthew too seems to reflect this theme. In the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matt. 18:23-35, a servant who was forgiven a large debt by his master failed to show similar mercy to those who owed him money. When his master learned of this, he delivered the servant to the torturers, and the parable ends with the message that God will do likewise at the judgement. These metaphorical torturers can be identified with actual angelic tormenters of the wicked.³⁰ The same motif probably underlies the strange parable of the wicked servant in Matt 24:45-51 where the offender is sent to a place of punishment and then dissected.³¹ The evangelist highlights the terrible nature of this eschatological punishment by mentioning the reaction of the wicked to their plight. He says on no less than six occasions, five of which are redactional, that the wicked will weep in misery and gnash their teeth in rage as they realise the terrible nature of their eternal fate (8:12; 13:42, 13:50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30).

²⁸ Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 47-48.

²⁹ Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 130-34.

³⁰ See D. C. Sim, 'Angels of Eschatological Punishment in the Jewish and Christian Apocalyptic Traditions, and in the Gospel of Matthew', *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 55 (1999) 693-718.

³¹ D. C. Sim, 'The Dissection of the Wicked Servant in Matthew 24:51', *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 58 (2002) 172-84.

In the evangelist's end-time scenario, those who face these terrible punishments include a variety of rather disparate groups. Needless to say, the scribes and Pharisees feature prominently (Matt 3:7-12; 12:31-37, 41-42; 23:15, 33), but Christians who fail to obey the Torah are also earmarked for rejection by Jesus the judge and they too will be placed in the fires of Gehenna (7:15-23; 13:36-43, 47-50; cf. 22:1-14). In addition, there are warnings to those within the evangelist's community that those who sin or who behave inappropriately will also share this fate (5:22, 27-30; 18:8-9, 21-35; 24:45-51; 25:1-13, 14-30).

Once again there is no secret as to why Matthew embraced and emphasised this terrible eschatological picture. Ancient Jewish and Christian apocalyptic groups who focused on the brutal and horrendous punishment of the wicked did so in response to a situation of great crisis, usually but not necessarily persecution, which led to an intense sense of alienation from the wider world. The belief that the wicked would be punished by horrible and torturous means served to console the oppressed group that their enemies will face punishment and to restore their confidence in the justice of God. The constant threat of judgement to those within the community was a necessary tool to maintain group solidarity in the face of hostile external forces and to enforce social control.³² The situation of Matthew and his community was no different. In addition to being persecuted by the proponents of Formative Judaism, this small Christian Jewish group also experienced conflict with Law-free (Gentile) Christianity and from the broader Gentile population as well. Matthew responded to these events by highlighting the severe punishments to be visited on these opponents, and by threatening a similar fate to wayward or dissident community members.³³

But knowing why Matthew felt the need to depict the eschatological Jesus in such a vengeful and violent manner does not alleviate the christological problem that this depiction causes. The future Jesus exhibits

³² See the detailed discussion in Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 54-69.

³³ Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 181-242.

almost none of the characteristics that were proclaimed as necessary by the past Jesus. Meekness and humility are exchanged for power and glory, and peace-making gives way to war. Retaliation replaces turning the other cheek, while extreme violence, sheer brutality and even torture take over from non-violence and pacifism. The love of enemies and prayers for persecutors have no place in the eschaton where the emphasis now falls on vengeance of the basest kind. The related concepts of mercy and limitless forgiveness are also overturned. The punishment of the wicked is eternal (cf. 3:12; 18:8, 34; 25:41), which means that there is no possibility of their future forgiveness by God (or Jesus) and no possibility of a divine act of mercy to alleviate their suffering.

The contradiction that exists between the teaching of Jesus in the past and his eschatological activity is much more serious than the tension identified above in relation to Matthew's presentation of Jesus' ministry. The earthly Jesus did often practise what he preached, even if he did lapse to some extent in his dealings with and treatment of the scribes and Pharisees. But the eschatological Jesus appears to ignore completely the ethical commands that he expects of his followers, and he fails to follow his earthly example in terms of meekness, pacifism, non-retaliation, love, mercy, forgiveness and compassion. He is a figure characterised by vengeance and brutality, who has no hesitation consigning the wicked to the eternal flames and to the hands of angelic torturers. There is no love, forgiveness or compassion for this Jesus, and yet he is the same figure who preached the Sermon on the Mount in his earlier appearance on earth. It is here in particular that we see most clearly the contradiction in the Matthean Jesus.

Some Matthean scholars have been aware of the difficulties posed by the Gospel's violent eschatology. In a study of the violent endings of certain eschatological parables, B. E. Reid explores whether Matthew enjoins violence among Christians.³⁴ Her answer is that the Gospel does not promote

³⁴ B. E. Reid, 'Violent Endings in Matthew's Parables and Christian Nonviolence', *CBO* 66 (2004) 237-55.

such a proposition because the violence is attributed to God after the judgement, and Christians are to emulate the teachings and example of Jesus.³⁵ Reid accepts that the Gospel raises a *theological* problem in terms of the nature of God and the limits to his forgiveness and mercy,³⁶ but she fails to perceive the *christological* issue that this material presents. While it is true that in some texts it is God who appears to mete out eschatological punishments (18:23-35; 22:11-14), in the vast majority of cases it is Jesus the eschatological judge who does so (7:15-23; 10:32-33; 13:41-2, 50; 16:27-28; 24:45-51; 25:1-13; 25:14-30; 25:31-46). The questions raised about God's lack of mercy and his emphasis on brutal punitive measures in the eschaton apply just as much to Jesus, perhaps even more so in the light of the latter's specific teachings on this matter.

This is partially noted by W. Carter in his study of violence and identities in Matthew's Gospel.³⁷ Carter perceives Matthew as a Christian text countering human violence, especially Roman imperial violence, but in the end failing to live up to its own high standards. He writes, 'In redeeming and resisting the violence of the imperial status quo, the gospel also affirms that some violence, namely the violence of God...and of God's agent Jesus, is legitimate and necessary...Matthew's gospel finally, but ironically, capitulates to and imitates the imperial violence from which it seeks to save'.³⁸ While Carter correctly identifies that the returning Jesus in Matthew is a figure of violence and merciless cruelty, he does not fully explore the contradiction between the earlier teachings of Jesus and his actions at the eschaton.

In a more recent and very thoughtful discussion of Matthew's eschatological violence, D. J. Neville discusses both the theological problem of a loving and compassionate God who sponsors violence at the eschaton

³⁵ Reid, 'Violent Endings', 252-53.

³⁶ Reid, 'Violent Endings', 253-54.

³⁷ W. Carter, 'Constructions of Violence and Identities in Matthew's Gospel', in S. Matthews and E. L. Gibson (eds), *Violence in the New Testament* (London: T & T Clark International, 2005) 81-108.

³⁸ Carter, 'Constructions of Violence', 102.

and its attendant christological problem of a Jesus who promotes non-retaliation and of love of enemy and yet acts with brutality and vengeance at the end of the age.³⁹ He writes, '...what Matthew anticipated on the part of the eschatological judge, the returning Son of humanity, is incongruent with what the self-same Son of humanity taught about violence'.⁴⁰ Neville proposes a number of solutions to the difficulty inherent in this troublesome Matthean theme. First, priority should rest with the message of the historical and incarnated Jesus whose clear message was one of peace and anti-violence. Secondly, the eschatological violence in Matthew, which is not found in the other Gospels and is clearly a Matthean emphasis, can be explained on the basis of the socio-historical circumstances of the evangelist and his community. If we put these two elements together, '...one can hold tightly to Matthew's record of Jesus' mission and message, while sitting loosely to his vision of eschatological vengeance'.⁴¹ Whether or not one concurs with Neville's solution, there is little doubt that he has correctly identified the christological tension that exists in Matthew's portrayal of the work of Jesus in the past and in the future.

5. Conclusions

This study has examined the Gospel of Matthew's portrayal of Jesus and was directly concerned with whether the Matthean Jesus can be appealed to as a perfect moral role model worthy of emulation by Christians. Many scholars of course have argued that Matthew's Jesus does fulfil such a function, and they have cited many instances where there is a direct and consistent correlation between the ethical teachings of Jesus and his actions in the Gospel narrative. The Matthean Jesus practices what he preaches and so provides an exemplar of the ideal way to fulfil the will of God. While it must be

³⁹ D. J. Neville, 'Toward a Teleology of Peace: Contesting Matthew's Violent Eschatology', *JSNT* 30 (2007) 131-61.

⁴⁰ Neville, 'Teleology of Peace', 153.

⁴¹ Neville, 'Teleology of Peace', 157.

acknowledged that this reading of the Gospel holds true much of the time, it does overstate its case. Even within the flow of the story-line the evangelist narrates, there are considerable tensions or contradictions. In the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere Jesus preaches an ethic of meekness, love of enemy, non-retaliation, peacemaking, non-violence, non-anger, mercy, compassion and limitless forgiveness. Although the Matthean Jesus very often complies with these demands, there are occasions where he does not. The most obvious example concerns his dealings with the scribes and Pharisees, where he retaliates verbally and angrily to their attacks on him and displays little in the way of compassion, forgiveness and non-retaliation. Even more serious is Matthew's portrayal of the very same Jesus at the time of eschaton. Here we discover a Jesus who simply abandons his own ethical principles by meting out vengeful and brutal punishments for all eternity. This Jesus in particular fails to show any mercy, forgiveness or turning the other cheek as he seeks violent retribution against his enemies by casting them to the fires of Gehenna with accompanying angelic tormenters. There is, needless to say, a considerable distance between the practice of this future Jesus and his earlier preaching.

We can of course account for these aspects of Matthew's presentation of Jesus. Both of them were constructed by the evangelist himself in response to the situations of crisis his small Christian community was experiencing. But by the introduction of the anti-Pharisaic Jesus and the vengeful and vindictive eschatological Jesus, Matthew pays a very heavy christological price. His Jesus ultimately betrays his own principles. His Jesus fails to practice what he preaches, and is no better than his Pharisaic opponents in this respect (cf. 23:3). And finally and sadly, his Jesus fails to provide the perfect role model for his readers and for Christians today.

Author: David C. Sim is Associate Professor in the School of Theology and a member of the Centre for Early Christian Studies at Australian Catholic University.

Email: David.Sim@acu.edu.au
