

Donald J. Verseput

The Faith of the Reader and the Narrative of Matthew 13.53–16.20

JSNT 46 (1992) 3-24

ABSTRACT

An examination of the narrative of Mt. 13.53–16.20 reveals a sustained effort on the part of the Evangelist to impart a certain cognitive understanding to the reader which might function as an antidote to the malady of 'little faith'. Relentlessly exploiting the shortcoming of the disciples to heighten the force of his message, Matthew endeavors to impress upon his readership the inexhaustible greatness of the eschatological power present in Jesus Christ.

Page 3

The conviction that the Synoptic Gospels were written as continuous narratives rather than as collections of individual textual units appears in the light of recent studies to be emerging as a common consensus of New Testament scholarship. If, however, we accept this 'new' perspective on the Gospels as valid, and it certainly seems that we must,¹ then a necessary corollary immediately presents itself: briefly stated, the narrative framework in which the individual pericope is located inevitably influences its meaning. No element of the narrative can be isolated from the whole without distorting the Evangelist's intention. When applied to the study of an Evangelist's theological concepts, this principle dictates that the plot, or sequential arrangement of individual incidents, be taken into account, for only then can the researcher detect the full contours of the thought which guided the writer's hand. Indeed, the interpreter who adopts an atomistic approach to the investigation of any textual component by focusing upon the Evangelist's minute manipulation of his sources exclusively at the pericope level, while at the same time failing to consider the

Page 3, fn 1 — One needs merely to cite the results of U. Luz's discriminating enquiry into the structure of Matthew's Gospel: 'Es ist nicht eine liturgischen oder katechetischen Zwecken dienende Sammlung von Einzeltexten. Sein Sitz im Leben ist das Studium, die Lektüre, und zwar von Anfang bis zum Schluß' (*Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* [EKKNT, 1; 2 vols.; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1985-90], I, p. 24).

movement of the Gospel as a whole, is doomed to the fate of all who draw premature

4

conclusions on the basis of partial evidence. The consequences of this 'new' perspective are, of course, far-reaching and in some cases perhaps not yet fully evident even to its most enthusiastic advocates. It will be necessary, at the very least, to re-examine many hitherto accepted results of Synoptic studies in a search for answers which are more sensitive to the narrative movement of the Gospel texts.

One such point calling for careful re-examination is the generally accepted conclusion of G. Barth that the intellectual element which is contained in the πίστις-concept of Paul and John and also the editor of Mark is excluded from the πίστις-concept of Matthew and transferred to συνίεναι.¹

Page 4, fn 1— G. Barth, 'Matthew's Understanding of the Law', in G. Bornkamm, G. Barth and H.-J. Held, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* (trans. P. Scott; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), pp. 113-14. This conclusion naturally applies to the faith of the disciple, rather than to kerygmatic faith, which Barth elsewhere acknowledges to be present, for example in Mt. 18.6 and 27.42, but which belongs for him to an essentially different category from the use of the πιστευ-wordgroup in the miracle stories ('Glaube und Zweifel in den synoptischen Evangelien', *ZfK* 72 [1971], p. 291). The results of Barth's analysis are reflected for example in U. Luz, 'The Disciples according to Matthew', in G. Stanton (ed.), *The Interpretation of Matthew* (London: SPCK, 1983), p. 104; J. Zumstein, *La condition du croyant dans*

Barth arrived at this conclusion not by a thorough examination of Matthew's narrative rhetoric but simply by observing that 'Matthew has omitted or interpreted differently all the passages in Mark's Gospel which speak of the lack of understanding on the part of the disciples.'² Indeed, he observes that in Matthew 13 the disciples are distinguished from the obdurate multitude precisely on the basis of their 'understanding'. Thus, after examining the concept of 'little faith' in Mt. 14.31-33 and 16.5-12, Barth concludes that for Matthew the disciples 'have understanding but they lack faith'.³ Since the

5

knowledge of the ἐξουσία of Jesus has been transferred to συνιέναι, πίστις is limited by Matthew primarily to the idea of trust. The disciples understand who Jesus is; they must, however, learn to trust his authority. In this way Matthew allegedly writes the situation of the post-Easter church into the experiences of the disciples during the earthly ministry of Jesus.

There is, of course, nothing superficially improbable about Barth's conclusion, other than the rather perfunctory methodology typical of many redaction-critical studies which frequently failed to appreciate the narrative dimension of the Gospel text. Yet for reasons of methodology alone, it is incumbent upon the modern researcher to re-examine the evidence in order to determine whether or not Barth has in fact overlooked important inferences embedded in the plot of the First Gospel. Does Matthew indeed employ the πίστις concept solely with reference to *trust* in the ἐξουσία of Jesus, as Barth supposes, or is the relationship between the knowledge of and trust in Jesus' authority in actuality more complex? The search for an answer to this question leads inevitably to the section of Matthew extending from the Parable Discourse (ch. 13) to Peter's confession in 16.13-20. Here the disciples have already been clearly distinguished from the obdurate crowds on the basis of their 'understanding', and yet they prove themselves repeatedly unable to exercise the necessary faith in Jesus' authority. In this section of the Matthaean narrative one might naturally expect the relationship between 'understanding' and 'faith' to be most readily discernible.

l'évangile selon Matthieu (OBO, 16; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977), pp. 233-38. H. Klein ('Das Glaubensverständnis im Matthäusevangelium', in F. Hahn and H. Klein [eds.], *Glaube im Neuen Testament* [Festschrift H. Binder, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1982], pp. 28-42) does not interact with Barth on this point, but does repeatedly refer to faith in Matthew as 'Vertrauen' and 'Gewißheit, daß Jesus helfen kann und will' (e.g. p. 39), so that the no-etic element is not neglected.

Page 4, fn 2— Barth, 'Law', p. 106.

Page 4, fn 3— Barth, 'Law', p. 113.

In the course of this investigation I will endeavor to demonstrate that the controlling purpose behind the narrative plot is the author's attempt to impart a certain cognitive understanding to the reader¹ which might function as an antidote to the malady of 'little faith'. Hence, 'understanding' does, in fact, provide an essential component of the 'faith' of the believer: an 'understanding', that is, of the inexhaustible greatness of the eschatological power present in Jesus Christ.

6

I

Several recent studies of the First Gospel have pointed out the difficulties associated with the search for a formal literary structure within the Matthaean narrative—so long as 'structure' is perceived to imply self-contained blocks of material.¹ Clearly the Evangelist presents us less with a neatly constructed pattern of closed literary units than with a continuous, dynamic plot. We must, therefore, keep in mind throughout our study of Mt. 13.53–16.20 that we are dealing with an open segment of a wider whole and hence with a text which is neither rounded off at the beginning and end, nor capable of being reduced to a single closed thematic dimension.

The discovery of an important key to the narrative flow in this portion of the Gospel can fairly be attributed to X. Léon-Dufour.² Simply stated, the Matthaean composition

Page 5, fn 1— It has become customary for literary critics to make a careful distinction between the implied reader and the real reader, as well as between the implied author and the real author (see, e.g., D. Rhoads and D. Michie, *Mark's Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982], pp. 137-40; J.D. Kingsbury, 'The Figure of Jesus in Matthew's Story: A Literary Critical Probe', *JSNT* 21 [1984], pp. 3-36). This differentiation is certainly valid, but in order to avoid pedantry I have chosen the simplified terminology of 'author' and 'reader', while keeping in mind that I am indeed speaking of figures posited by the text.

Page 6, fn 1— R.H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on his Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), pp. 10-11; G. Stanton, 'The Origin and Purpose of Matthew's Gospel: Matthaean Scholarship from 1945-1980*', in H. Temporini and W. Haase (eds.), *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1983), II.25.3, p. 1905; Luz, *Matthäus*, I, pp. 18-27; J. Gnlika, *Das Matthäusevangelium* (HTKNT, 1; 2 vols.; Freiburg: Herder, 1986, 1988), I, p. 523; R.T. France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1989), p. 153.

Page 6, fn 2— X. Léon-Dufour, 'Vers l'annonce de l'église: Etude de structure (Mt 14, 1-16, 20)', in *Etudes d'évangile* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1965), pp. 231-54. Other structural proposals for this segment have, of course, been made, but they typically leave the impression of artificiality. Note, for example, J. Murphy-O'Connor's suggestion that 13.53-16.4 centers around the crowds' reaction to Jesus ('The Structure of Matthew XIV-XVII', *RB* 82 [1975], pp. 360-84), D.W. Gooding's forced symmetry ('Structure littéraire de Matthieu, XIII, 53 à XVIII, 35', *RB* 85 [1978], pp. 227-52) and A.G. van Aarde's improbable focus upon the figure of Peter ('Matthew's Portrayal of the Disciples and the Structure of Matthew 13, 53-17,27', *Neot* 16 [1982], pp. 21-34).

appears to be deliberately marked by three 'withdrawals' of Jesus before the Jewish opposition (ἀναχωρεῖν in Mt. 14.13, 15.21 and καταλιπὼν αὐτοὺς ἀπῆλθεν in 16.4), followed in each case by his continued ministry among the disciples and the crowds. These withdrawals are peculiar to Matthew and do not correspond to any actual permanent geographical movement in the narrative, but seem to be predominantly literary in

7

character, purposefully punctuating a studied oscillation between the hostile reaction to Jesus and his ongoing authoritative ministry. So conceived, the narrative movement of 13.53–16.20 may be graphically portrayed as follows:

Matthew 13.53–16.20

Jesus is Rejected at Nazareth	13.53-58
Herod's Opinion Regarding Jesus	14.1-12
Withdrawal	
Feeding the Five Thousand	14.13-21
Walking on the Water	14.22-33
Healings at Gennesaret	14.34-36
Dispute with the Pharisees and Scribes	15.1-20
Withdrawal	
The Canaanite Woman	15.21-28
Feeding the Four Thousand	15.29-39
The Pharisees and Sadducees Seek a Sign	16.1-4
Departure	
The Leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees	16.5-12
Peter's Confession and Jesus' Promise	16.13-20

It remains to enquire why Matthew might have chosen to formulate his narrative in such an unusual manner.¹ The careful reader will quickly observe that the Evangelist's rather contrived arrangement represents, in fact, a deliberate continuation of the preceding narrative movement. One would, therefore, do well to recall three

Page 7, fn 1— The sequence of pericopes admittedly runs to a large extent parallel to Mark; and yet, given the consistency of the pattern Matthew imposes upon his material, one would be poorly advised to underestimate the First Evangelist's creative accomplishment in composing these chapters. In any case, it would not be wise to suppose that Matthew intended his readers to decode the meaning of his own text by a word-for-word comparison with Mark.

distinctive features of the Matthean plot up to this point.

(1) The First Gospel is a primarily christological document. Characteristic of Matthew's entire work is a well-defined interest in Jesus' authority, which the Evangelist clearly grounds in Jesus' intimate relationship with God, most succinctly expressed in the

8

terminology of divine sonship.¹ Upon hearing the Sermon on the Mount, the crowds 'were amazed at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one having authority and not as their scribes' (7.28-29). To Jesus had been given, not only the authority to heal (8.8-10), but also 'the authority on earth to forgive sins' (9.6-8); indeed 'all things', the power and prerogative to accomplish the divinely assigned messianic mission, had been handed over to him by the Father (11.27). This authority Jesus delivers to the disciples, sending them out to share in his ministry (10.1). The Jewish leaders challenge him, however, on precisely this point, demanding to know, 'By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?' (21.23-27). By way of reply, Jesus tells three carefully connected parables (21.28-32, 33-46; 22.1-14), making the source of his authority unmistakably clear in the Parable of the Wicked Tenants: he is the unique, divine Son acting on behalf of his heavenly Father. It comes thus as no surprise that Matthew has placed Jesus' filial relationship to the Father squarely in the center of the crucifixion scene (27.40, 43); in crucifying the Son, Israel decisively rejects 'God's supreme agent in the history of salvation'.² And yet, in the closing scene of the Gospel, Jesus triumphantly declares to his disciples on the Galilaean mountaintop, 'All authority on heaven and on earth has been given to me...' (28.18), providing the climax of the entire book. Jesus is for Matthew the Son of God, who derives his authority directly from the Father and carries out the divinely ordered plan of salvation.

Page 8, fn 1— The importance of the divine sonship in Matthew's Gospel has been successfully demonstrated by J. Kingsbury (*Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975], pp. 40-83), although the details of his argument have been legitimately subject to some scepticism. On the relationship between the divine sonship and the messiahship of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel see: D.J. Versepunt, 'The Role and Meaning of the "Son of God" Title in Matthew's Gospel', *NTS* 33 (1987), pp. 532-56.

Page 8, fn 2— J.D. Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2nd edn, 1988), p. 126. Kingsbury is correct to note, 'Matthew makes it exceedingly plain that, whether directly or indirectly, the issue of authority underlies all the controversies Jesus has with the religious leaders and that it is therefore pivotal to his entire conflict with them' (p. 125).

(2) Similarly, Matthew shows himself to be more keenly aware of the rejection of the earthly Jesus than his fellow Synoptists. Already in ch. 2, he prefigures Israel's response to the Davidic messiah in the

9

story of Herod's despotic attempt to murder the child king. Although God rescues his son from danger, Jesus grows up— as a result of the opposition— in Nazareth, removed from Judaea, the center of the nation and home of Israel's royalty. This prelude sets the tone for the subsequent narrative. Indeed, even the cross-section of Jesus' itinerant ministry portrayed in 4.23–9.35 culminates in the Pharisees' dour response, 'He casts out demons by the ruler of demons' (9.34), a conspicuous signal of the opposition which is to come.¹ Then, in chs. 11–12, the Evangelist begins to deal directly with the causes and consequences of Israel's obduracy, attributing Israel's recalcitrance to the sovereign plan of God. After parabolically describing the petulance of 'this generation' (11.16–19), Jesus soundly rebukes it for its failure to repent (11.20–24) and, immediately thereafter, praises the Father 'that having hid these things [that is, the significance of the deeds of John and Jesus for the presence of salvation] from the wise and intelligent, you revealed them to babes' (11.25). When the Pharisees prove their belligerent hostility towards Jesus' merciful yoke (12.1–14), he 'withdraws' (ἀναχωρεῖν: 12.15), ministering to the crowds while concealing his identity before the opposition according to the plan of the Father and the blueprint spoken through the prophet Isaiah (12.18–21). Thereupon, Matthew produces a concrete example of the reality and the results of Israel's rejection in 12.22–45: when the Jewish leadership refuses to acknowledge the source of Jesus' mighty power by rudely demanding a sign in the face of his stern warning, Jesus upbraids them as 'an evil and adulterous generation', solemnly announcing that the last state of 'this generation' will be worse than the first. Thus, with this last grim pronouncement still fresh on his mind, the reader arrives at Mt. 13.53–16.20. Israel's fateful repudiation of its messiah is already a foregone conclusion. The narrator needs only to remind the reader periodically of this fact to drive the plot forward to the final conflict in Jerusalem.

Page 9, fn 1— U. Luz ('Die Wundergeschichten von Mt 8-9', in G. Hawthorne and O. Betz [eds.], *Tradition and Interpretation in the New Testament* [Festschrift E.E. Ellis; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], pp. 152–53) is certainly correct to note the climactic function of the Pharisees' reaction, but errs when he concludes that the function of chs. 8–9 is 'diese Spaltung in Israel zu bewirken', for by this point the essential separation of the disciples from the unbelieving masses is already a given fact.

Yet it would be a mistake to suppose that Matthew is interested in Israel's repudiation of the messiah solely for its dramatic value in propelling the narrative forward to its conclusion; he also views Jesus' rejection as a paradigm for the fate of the Church which exists as a beleaguered minority in an alien world.¹ This is poignantly illustrated not only in 8.18–34, where the disciples, in obeying Jesus' command to depart to the other side of the lake, accompany their rejected Lord on his restless wandering,² it is likewise evident in the subsequent Missionary Discourse (ch. 10) which focuses on the realities of ministry in a context of persecution, explicitly reminding the reader, 'A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above his lord' (10.24). The Jesus of Matthew's Gospel is an ill-treated and harassed figure with which a minority group could doubtless readily identify.

(3) A third peculiarly Matthaean trait of interest to this study is the unmistakable tendency to place the disciples over against Israel as the recipients of divine revelation. Jesus not only calls the disciples at the outset of his public ministry (4.18–22; cf. Mk 1.16–20), he immediately addresses his first, programmatic discourse primarily to them rather than to the crowds (5.1–2). And to them, rather than to the 'wise and intelligent', the heavenly Father has revealed the salvific significance of the events taking place through the ministries of John and Jesus (11.25). Furthermore, Jesus declares, to the disciples 'it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven', whereas to the crowds 'it has not been given' (13.11), for the disciples are those who already 'have' (13.12), that is, who 'understand the word of the kingdom' (13.19, 23),³ so that to them 'more will be given' (13.12). As a result of the disciples' 'understanding', Jesus instructs them privately on the 'things hidden from the foundation of the world' (i.e. in 13.10–23, 36–52; cf. 13.35), while at the same time he cloaks his teaching to the multitudes in parables. The disciples, who by revelation perceive the import of his mission, are thus the special object of Jesus' teaching from the very inception of his ministry,

Page 10, fn 1— G.N. Stanton ('The Gospel of Matthew and Judaism', *BJRL* 66 [1984], p. 277) has rightly pointed out that 'the evangelist and his readers were very much at odds, not only with contemporary Judaism but also with the *Gentile* world'.

Page 10, fn 2— Cf. C. Burger, 'Jesu Taten nach Matthäus 8 und 9 \ ZTK 70 (1973), p. 285.

Page 10, fn 3— συνιέναι in 13.13,14,15,19,23 clearly has a more fundamentally religious sense than the concept of 'understanding' in 13.51, 15.10, 16, 16.11, 12, 17.13, where it is a matter of a purely intellectual process.

standing out in bold relief against the backdrop of Israel's rejection. Interestingly enough, however, the disciples are largely static figures in the narrative of Matthew's Gospel. That is, they evidence no linear development over time from a condition of fundamental incomprehension or unbelief, through uncertainty, to full faith or full understanding. Some interpreters have indeed been tempted by the enticing parallel between 8.27 and 14.33 to suppose that the disciples actually progress in their grasp of Jesus' identity,¹ but this surely reads too much into the astonished reaction of 8.27 and is otherwise without support in the narrative. Not even the dramatic Petrine confession of 16.13 represents a new level of understanding, having been already anticipated in 14.33—itsself a confirmation rather than an expression of new insight.² The disciples thus do not advance before the eyes of the reader from one stage of understanding to another nor does the narrator set out to chronicle a gradual emergence of a community of faith from the amorphous mass of unbelief. The center of attention rests, instead, totally upon the figure of Jesus, while the disciples function throughout the narrative merely as useful props—the recipients of Jesus' instruction and witnesses of his mighty power—by means of which the narrator unfolds for the reader the significance of his protagonist's ministry.³

With these brief comments in mind, we return, then, to the portion of the Gospel which has been chosen for

further investigation, Mt. 13.53–16.20. Here we must, unfortunately, part company with X. Léon-Dufour¹ as well as with U. Luz,² both of whom perceive the story line of this segment to move forward toward Peter's confession and the announcement of the Church in 16.13–20 by depicting the contrasting responses to the ministry of Jesus: the rejection on the part of the one and the faith of the other. Luz claims, for example, that 'the disciples draw closer to Jesus in recognition and confession', while the malice of the opponents 'becomes more evident.'³ Yet this misses the point completely, for, aside from the 'opposition' pericopes (13.53–58; 14.1–2; 15.1–20; 16.1–4) where the rejection of Jesus' divine sending is indeed emphasized, the primary focus in the narrative lies less upon the response to Jesus than upon his mighty deeds. The disciples, the supplicants and the crowds are, in reality, merely the supportive cast whose chief role is to highlight the confidence in Jesus' mighty power which Matthew wishes to elicit from the reader. Far from manifesting progress in their 'recognition and confession' of Jesus, the disciples are consistently represented as never quite mastering the necessary lesson of faith in Jesus' great authority. Indeed, their 'little faith' forms the dark backdrop against which the miraculous power present in Jesus is the more radiantly displayed, so that the reader is called upon to distance himself from their deplorable behavior, recognizing their failure—along with his own—to be completely unfounded in the light of Jesus' ἐξουσία.⁴ In short, the movement of the plot in this section of the Gospel lies not in diverging responses to Jesus' ministry, but in the disclosure to the reader of the magnitude of

Jesus' authority, the knowledge of which should preserve him from the infectious influence of unbelief.

II

The next step will now be to trace briefly the major plot developments in Mt. 13.53–16.20, paying particular attention to the central focus upon Jesus' powerful deeds in the context of both 'unbelief' and 'little faith'.

Page 11, fn 1— E.g. J.C. Anderson, 'Double and Triple Stories, the Implied Reader, and Redundancy in Matthew', *Semeia* 31 (1985), pp. 73–74; D.B. Howell, *Matthew's Inclusive Story: A Study in the Narrative Rhetoric of the First Gospel* (JSNTSup, 42; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), p. 142.

Page 11, fn 2— That ὁ Χριστός in 16.16 rounds out the confession without representing any deliberately intended advancement over the θεοῦ υἱός of 14.33 is supported by (a) the addition of ὁ υἱός τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ζῶντος in 16.16; (b) the absence of any new messianic motifs between 14.33 and 16.16 that would occasion new insight; and (c) the fact that the Davidic sonship of Jesus has already been openly weighed and rejected by the opposition in ch. 12. Nor do the words of 17.23 'and they were deeply grieved indicate a major advance over Peter's reaction in 16.22, but express, rather, 'ablehnende Betroffenheit' (Gnilka, *Matthäusevangelium*, II, p. 113, against, e.g., D. Patte, *The Gospel according to Matthew: A Structural Commentary on Matthew's Faith* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987], p. 230).

Page 11, fn 3— The same cannot be said, however, of Mark's Gospel, for Mark's disciples move from an acceptance of Jesus' divine authorization (note Mk 1.16–20 immediately following 1.14–15) through a bewilderment about his identity (4.41) to a realization of his messiahship (8.27–30). Indeed, the entire segment, Mk 4.35–8.26, appears to be constructed around the question τίς ἄρα οὗτός ἐστιν ἔστιν; (4.41) which receives its answer in Peter's confession (cf. D. Lührmann, *Das Markusevangelium* [HNT, 3; Tübingen: Mohr, 1987], p. 93).

Page 12, fn 1— Léon-Dufour, 'L'annonce', p. 252.

Page 12, fn 2— Luz, *Matthäus*, II, pp. 381–82.

Page 12, fn 3— Luz, *Matthäus*, II, pp. 381–82.

Page 12, fn 4— To fully grasp what Matthew is up to in this section of the Gospel, the modern student must be prepared to surrender the once fashionable conviction that the disciples in Matthew are 'transparent' for the Matthaean community (as, e.g., in Luz, 'Disciples', pp. 98–128). Recent literary criticism has emphasized that, although there can be little doubt that the implied reader is encouraged by Matthew to identify readily with the disciples, he is nonetheless occasionally required to evaluate their shortcomings, learning from their mistakes (cf., e.g., Howell, *Story*, pp. 229–36).

Matthew 13.53–14.12

Following the Parable Discourse of ch. 13, Matthew resumes his narrative with the story of Jesus' visit to his hometown of Nazareth, an incident serving to typify 'unbelief and its consequences. There is no apparent desire on Matthew's part to cast this small village into a representative role for all Israel. On the contrary, the point of the pericope remains bound up with Nazareth's unique relationship to Jesus through which the village becomes an illustration of culpable blindness to the divine source of Jesus' power and wisdom.

Matthew constructs the reaction of the townspeople in a manner which leaves no doubt as to the nature of the problem. The narrator makes it clear that the villagers readily acknowledge the unusual character of Jesus' activity; indeed, it astonishes them. Their unbelief thus does not lie in their failure to perceive the extraordinariness of Jesus' wisdom and power, but rather in their refusal to recognize the true *origin* of these endowments arising from his filial relationship to the heavenly Father. The villagers' astonished questions are concentrically structured: the *πόθεν* clauses stand at the beginning and the end, framing the rhetorical references to Jesus' familial background in vv. 55-56a. Because the townspeople focused exclusively upon Jesus' earthly identity—particularly upon his earthly 'sonship' (v. 55a)¹—refusing to take into account his intimate relationship to the Father, they were thus unable to comprehend the origin of his wisdom and power. Consequently, they 'stumbled at him' (v. 57a). This failure to recognize the divine source of Jesus' activity Matthew characterizes as

14

ἀπιστία (v. 58), noting that Jesus 'did not do many miracles there because of their unbelief.' Thus, the denial of the divine agency in Jesus' ministry results for Matthew in the withdrawal of the exercise of God's power,¹ a message that sets the tone for the ensuing plot development.

The following pericope, citing Herod's opinion regarding Jesus (14.1-12), is at the level of the Matthaean story intimately connected with the Nazareth episode not only through the transitional phrase (*ἐν ἐκείνῳ τῷ καιρῷ*), but also through the thematic association evident in Her-

Page 13, fn 1— Mark is not nearly so precise on this point as Matthew, contrasting Jesus' supernatural endowment (Mk 6.2) more generally with his humble background (v. 3).

Page 14, fn 1— Matthew's οὐκ ἐποίησεν (13.58), as opposed to Mark's οὐκ ἐδύνατο ποιῆσαι (Mk 6.5), is fully consistent with the 'withdrawal' motif of the First Gospel.

od's attempt to explain Jesus' δυνάμεις.² As the people in Jesus' hometown had done, Herod seeks an answer for Jesus' superhuman powers, drawing the conclusion, 'This is John the Baptist; he is risen from the dead, and that is why these powers (αἱ δυνάμεις) are at work in him' (v. 2). But this estimation not only reflects a refusal to recognize the true source of Jesus' activity, it acquires an ominously threatening tone in the light of the subsequent verses, 14.3-12. Indeed, the Matthaean narrator leaves no doubt as to the tetrarch's willingness to victimize God's messengers.³ In this way Matthew adds a menacing note to the unbelief already pictured, preparing the way for the announcement of the passion in 16.21.

Matthew 14.13-33

In the face of Herod's sinister deed, Jesus 'withdraws' by boat privately to a solitary place, removing himself from the opposition in a manner characteristic of the First Gospel. Nevertheless, in his retreat from the opposition Jesus continues to pursue a ministry of mercy. In the next three pericopes Matthew concentrates the attention of the reader upon δυνάμεις of Jesus in an endeavor to dispel all uncertainty about the greatness of Jesus' power.

The first scene, Mt. 14.13-21, opens with Jesus' compassionate healing ministry among the crowds, setting the stage for the feeding narrative which follows. Whatever allusion might otherwise be

15

suspected in the nature of the feeding miracle, the emphasis of the story lies primarily on the inexhaustible fullness of Jesus' ἐξουσία, indicated in the narrator's climactic words on the superabundance of the miraculous provision: '...they picked up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve full baskets; and there were about five thousand men who ate, aside from the women and children' (vv. 20c-21).¹ Nonetheless, it is the dialogue between Jesus and his disciples in vv. 16-18 which reveals the particular significance of the story for the reader. As evening approaches, the disciples come to Jesus and bid him to dismiss the crowds to go into the surrounding villages and buy food for themselves. To this Jesus replies with the challenge, 'you give them some-

Page 14, fn 2— Mark joins the story of Herod's misjudgment and John's execution (6.14-29) to the mission of the Twelve (6.6b-13) rather than the Nazareth pericope (6.1-6a).

Page 14, fn 2— Gnlika, *Matthäusevangelium*, II, p. 2: 'Die mt Bearbeitung läßt klar die gegnerische Rolle des Königs hervortreten'.

Page 15, fn 1— B. Gerhardsson (*The Mighty Acts of Jesus according to Matthew* [Scripta Minora 1978-1979, 5; Lund: Gleerup, 1979], p. 56) nicely captures the point of the episode in his characterization of it as an 'exousia miracle'. Cf. Gnlika, *Matthäusevangelium*, II, p. 9.

thing to eat' (v. 16). The disciples, however, prove themselves incapable of the task, focusing upon their limited means and failing to reckon with the magnitude of Jesus' awesome power (οὐκ ἔχομεν ὧδε εἰ μὴ πέντε ἄρτους καὶ δύο ἰχθύας)—an obvious expression of their 'little faith' (cf. 16.8).² Jesus' powerful deed in feeding the multitude is thus carried out in the face of the disciples' dullness, delivering an unmistakable message to the reader: insufficient faith such as that displayed by the disciples on this occasion is utterly unwarranted since the overwhelming greatness of God's mighty power present in Jesus wonderfully exceeds all human imaginings.

The following pericope, the story of Jesus walking on the water (14.22-33), is so closely connected with the feeding narrative that the two accounts can fairly be described as a single, two-part episode. The central motif is here, once again, the greatness of Jesus' ἐξουσία which leaves no room for hesitation or doubt. Not only does Jesus himself walk upon the water (cf. Mk. 6.45-52), but according to Matthew's version of the story, Peter cries out, 'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water' (v. 28) and likewise begins to tread upon the waves. But when he falters, Jesus reaches out and takes hold of him, saying, 'O you of little faith, why did you

16

doubt?' This question, spoken at the highpoint of the narrative, dramatically challenges the reader to conclude that, in view of Jesus' amazing power, Peter's ὀλιγοπιστία was indeed unfounded.¹ To corroborate this point, the narrator not only depicts Jesus' mastery over the storm (v. 32), he also closes the scene with the authenticating declaration by the witnesses to the event, 'You are truly God's Son!' (v. 33). The reader is thus forcefully reminded of the truth which Herod and the villagers of Nazareth failed to perceive, but which emphatically confirms the utter incongruity of 'little faith': Jesus is none other than the unique representative of the Father!

The final pericope, the story of Jesus in Gennesaret (14.34-36), continues to exalt the fullness of Jesus' unprecedented power. The men of Gennesaret, recognizing

Page 15, fn 2— E.g. Gnlika, *Matthäusevangelium*, II, p. 8; Luz, *Matthäus*, II, p. 401. Whereas in Mk 6.37 the disciples show themselves blind to the *eventuality* of a miraculous provision, in Mt. 14.17 they refer more specifically to the *impossible dimensions* of the dilemma (similarly Mt. 15.33; cf. Mk 8.4).

Page 16, fn 1— Matthew's addition of Peter's escapade upon the waves in 14.28-31 has thus changed the emphasis in comparison to Mk 6.45-52 from a failure to perceive Jesus' *identity* (v. 50; θαρσείτε, ἐγὼ εἰμι· μὴ φοβείσθε) to a failure to grasp and rely upon his *power*. The reader is given no cause to separate the volitional element of trust from the cognitive perception of Jesus' power in this episode.

Jesus, send word to the whole district, and bring to him 'all' (πάντας) who are ill, desiring 'only' (μόνον) to touch the edge of his cloak. With this latter remark, the Evangelist lays stress upon the implicit acknowledgment of the extent of Jesus' great power and authority (cf. 9.21-22). And Jesus indeed proves himself once again to be sufficient, for 'as many as touched were healed' (v. 36). Although rejected by many, Jesus did indeed possess an incomprehensible power which rendered the behavior of the folk of Gennesaret, in contrast to that of the disciples, the only appropriate response.

Matthew 15.1-20

The next narrative unit, containing the sharp dispute between Jesus and a delegation of scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem over the matter of eating food with unwashed hands, is rather abruptly introduced by a Matthean τότε without geographical movement and with no readily apparent thematic connection to the preceding pericope. The structure of the controversy story, however, leaves little doubt as to the significance of the episode for the narrative flow of the Gospel. The question posed by the delegation from Jerusalem assumes the form of a hostile accusation (v. 2) to which Jesus responds in kind

17

(v. 3), charging his accusers with 'transgressing the commandment of God because of your tradition'. This countercharge is backed up in vv. 4-6 with evidence from the Jewish 'Korban' practices, deliberately represented as being irreconcilably opposed to the word of God (ὁ γὰρ θεὸς εἶπεν... ὑμεῖς δὲ λέγετε). Jesus' indictment then reaches its climax in the denunciation of his antagonists as ὑποκριταί, which is collaborated by the Isaian quotation of vv. 8-9 proclaiming that the heart of 'this people' is far from God. But unlike Mark, Matthew does not move from there to the broader issue of the Jewish food laws.¹ Instead, he remains for the rest of the pericope at the level of the immediate controversy, launching a sustained effort to convict the Pharisees of vainly worshipping God. When the Pharisees take offense at his words in v. 11, Jesus warns his disciples that his opponents are 'blind guides' who will not escape judgment (vv. 13-14). Even his explanation offered to the disciples in vv. 16-20 amounts to a pointed contradiction of the Pharisees' teaching: the essence of genuine purity arises from the

Page 17, fn 1— The point of the Markan version of the story (Mk 7.1-23) appears to lie primarily in the removal of social barriers occasioned by ritual defilement as a preparation for the following episode of the Syro-Phoenician woman (so, e.g., R.A. Guelich, *Mark 1-2:26* [WBC, 34a; Dallas: Word Books, 1989], pp. 380-81; R. Pesch, *Das Markusevangelium* [HTKNT, 2; 2 vols.; Freiburg: Herder, 4th edn, 1984], I, p. 384).

heart, 'but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man' (v. 20, cf. v. 2). Thus, the significance of the story lies primarily in the incriminating evidence it provides for the Pharisees' failure to honor God: rejecting the word of the divine Son, they preferred the precepts of men. In this manner, Matthew deliberately molds the incident into a relentless prosecution of Jesus' adversaries, tearing the mask off their opposition to his authority and exposing for the reader their fundamental estrangement from God. Those who refused to acknowledge the ἐξουσία of God's son possessed hearts far removed from the true worship of the Father.

Matthew 15.21-39

In reaction to the confrontation, Jesus again 'withdraws' from the opposition, and the narrative focuses once more upon the δυνάμεις which God has committed into the hand of his son. This time, however, the reader is initially confronted with the positive example of a

18

Canaanite woman, who in contrast to the disciples penetrates the secret of Jesus' inexhaustible power (15.21-28). Having departed into the district of Tyre and Sidon, Jesus there encounters the woman whose daughter was cruelly demon-possessed. When she begins crying after them, the disciples blindly urge him to 'send her away', much as they had done in the first feeding narrative (15.23; cf. 14.15). The woman, however, demonstrates her grasp of the richness of the eschatological blessings in Jesus' ministry by noting in response to Jesus' dissuasive remark that 'the dogs, too, feed upon the crumbs which fall from their masters' table' (v. 27). As with the Gentile centurion in 8.5-13, the 'faith' of this woman lies in her insight into the extent of Jesus' ἐξουσία (cf. esp. 8.8-9), for she correctly discerns that even the ψιχία were sufficient to meet the needs of the Gentiles.¹ Jesus consequently accedes to her request, responding with the words, 'O woman, your faith is great; be it done for you as you wish' (v. 28). With that the daughter is healed—signaling to the reader that the woman's faith was well placed. Jesus' ἐξουσία was indeed boundless and thus available to all those who grasped this reality, laying claim to his power.

Page 18, fn 1— In Mark's account (Mk 7.24-30) the *heilsgeschichtlich* dimension of Gentile salvation is clearly represented: the bread shall be given first to the children (Jews), but even the dogs (Gentiles) may feed from the children's (Jews') crumbs. For Matthew, however, the issue is Jesus' mission mandate and the crumbs are not those of the children, but of the 'master'—that is, the leftover scraps of Jesus' abundant ministry. The woman's demonstration of great faith thus does not lie solely in her tenacity, which would empty v. 27 of all meaning beyond that of a renewed appeal, but in her grasp of the magnitude of the blessings in Jesus.

The following pericope, the Feeding of the Four Thousand (15.29-39), functions as an appropriate sequel to the woman's story, for it climactically illustrates the richness of the divinely granted eschatological blessing mediated through the ministry of Jesus. The summary of vv. 29-31 specifically depicts Jesus' thaumaturgical activity in the unmistakable colors of Isaian salvation, impressing upon the reader yet more forcefully the blessed reality of the 'God of Israel' having visited his people through the activity of his son.² On the heels of this pregnant introduction, the feeding story emphasizes again the immeasurable fullness of Jesus' ἐξουσία superimposed upon the

19

backdrop of the disciples' continued dullness.¹ Jesus announces that he does not want to send the crowds away in their weakened state, but the disciples still show no awareness of the awesome power available through him, focusing as before upon the impossible dimensions of the task (πόθεν ἡμῖν ἐν ἐρημῷ ἄρτοι τοσοῦτοι ὥστε χορτάσασθαι... ὄχλον τοσοῦτον).² Yet Jesus once again proves himself masterfully able to meet the need. Using words directly reminiscent of the first feeding story, the narrator concludes, '...they picked up what was left over of the broken pieces, seven full baskets; and there were about four thousand men who ate, besides women and children' (vv. v.37-38). The deliberate parallels between this episode and the first feeding account render the disciples' continued lack of insight into the mighty power of Jesus all the more incomprehensible for the reader (cf. οὐπω in 16.9), impressing upon him the utter foolishness of their 'little faith'.

Matthew 16.1-12

The next two pericopes, the Request for a Sign (16.1-4) and the Leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees (16.5-12) are deftly woven by Matthew into a single unit in which the lesson of the entire narrative segment is driven home. In the first of the two episodes, the Pharisees and Sadducees come to Jesus and demand a sign from heaven to validate the divine origin of his ministry, for, like Herod and the villagers of Nazareth, they refuse to accept his superhuman endowment as arising from his

Page 18, fn 2— Matthew's extravagantly depicted scene stands in place of Marie's healing of a deaf mute (Mk 7.31-37).

Page 19, fn 1— Whereas in Mk. 8.4 the disciples again fail to reckon with the eventuality of a miracle altogether (cf. Mk 6.37), in Mt. 15.33 the emphasis rests, as it did in 14.17, more precisely upon the magnitude of the task (ἄρτοι τοσοῦτοι... ὄχλον τοσοῦτον).

Page 19, fn 2— Whereas in Mk. 8.4 the disciples again fail to reckon with the eventuality of a miracle altogether (cf. Mk 6.37), in Mt. 15.33 the emphasis rests, as it did in 14.17, more precisely upon the magnitude of the task (ἄρτοι τοσοῦτοι... ὄχλον τοσοῦτον).

unique relationship to the Father. Jesus, however, denies their request and, leaving them, departs. This briefest of the 'opposition' pericopes in the narrative segment not only reminds the reader of the hostile context of Jesus' ministry, it functions also as an important prelude to what follows.

On their trip across the lake, the disciples forget to take bread. In that setting Jesus suddenly declares: 'Watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees' (v. 6). A vital clue to the

20

significance of the incident for Matthew lies in the obvious link which the Evangelist has forged with the immediately preceding episode by means of the common expression οἱ Φαρισαῖοι καὶ Σαδδουκαῖοι (vv. 1,6,11,12).¹ At the level of the Matthaean story, Jesus thus warns his disciples against the failure of his adversaries to accept the divine origin of his authority as exemplified by their concerted demand for a sign—that is, against their ἀπιστία (cf. 13.53-58). The disciples, however, fail to perceive the point of Jesus' words and begin to discuss among themselves their need of bread (v. 7). But what do these two narrative strands—Jesus' warning and the disciples' concern for bread—have to do with one another? Are we to understand these two motifs as being substantially unrelated, united only by the curious coincidence of a misunderstanding? The answer is most plainly revealed in Matthew's use of ὀλιγόπιστοι (v. 8), a term which not only characterizes the disciples' behavior at the moment, but which likewise summarizes the strange denseness that has plagued them throughout the last two chapters (note esp. 14.31). As Jesus' adversaries have failed to grasp the heavenly source of his authority, so the disciples fail to comprehend its extent. Both ἀπιστία and ὀλιγοπιστία share a common denominator: the incomplete recognition of the authority granted to Jesus. Thus, at the very moment that Jesus warns his disciples against the ἀπιστία of the Pharisees and Sadducees, their ὀλιγοπιστία ironically demonstrates the pertinence of his words.

In response to the disciples' unperceptive behavior, Jesus points backwards to the abundance of his miraculous provision in the feeding narratives as proof that their 'little faith'—here explicitly described as a failure to 'comprehend' (οὕτω νοεῖτε)²—was indeed groundless

Page 20, fn 1— Mk 8.15 reads: ὁρᾶτε, βλέπετε ἀπὸ τῆς ζύμης τῶν Φαρισαίων καὶ τῆς ζύμης Ἑρώδου, presumably a reference to the intransigent opposition as witnessed already in the collusion of Mk 3.6 and continued in 6.14-29, 7.1-23 and 8.11-13.

Page 20, fn 2— G. Barth ('Law', p. 114) is guilty of forcing the text when he relates οὕτω νοεῖτε (v. 9a) specifically to Jesus' enigmatic saying rather more generally than to his ἐξουσία, for οὕτω νοεῖτε not only

(vv. 9-10). In view of what had taken place before their eyes, he demands incredulously (v. 11a), 'How is it that you do not understand

21

that I did not speak to you concerning bread?' Here, once again, the δυνάμεις of Jesus serve to expose for the reader the absolute absurdity of the disciples' continued failure to reckon with the greatness of Jesus' authority. Nor do the hapless disciples, even now, achieve final insight into his incredible power, for although they 'understand' Jesus' enigmatic warning in v. 12, they promptly repeat their failure of ὀλιγοπιστία in 17.14-20 and, as late as 28.17, they still hesitate (ἐδίστασαν, cf. 14.31), only to be told, 'All authority has been given unto me...' (28.18). Matthew's purpose has thus not been to inform the reader of the disciples' progress towards greater faith— indeed, none is evident— but to use their blockishness as a foil to educate the reader in the mighty power of Jesus: in the light of the ἐξουσία present in God's son, 'little faith' such as theirs lacks all reasonable foundation.

Matthew 16.13-20

Following his warning against unbelief in 16.5-12, Matthew moves directly to the story of Peter's confession and the promise to the church in Caesarea Philippi (16.13-20), bypassing Mark's account of the healing of the blind man (Mk 8.22-26). Here the christological and ecclesiastical implications of the entire Matthaean story line since the beginning of Jesus' public ministry are drawn together. But, as we have already seen, there is no indication that Peter's confession of Jesus as 'the Christ, the Son of the living God' (v. 16) expresses any new insight into the mission of Jesus; on the contrary, Matthew has distinguished himself from Mark on precisely this point. Whereas, in Mark's Gospel, the incomprehension of the disciples regarding the mystery of Jesus' identity is at long last overcome at Caesarea Philippi, in Matthew's account the disciples receive no essentially new understanding, having stood firmly within the sphere of revelation from the outset. Yet despite Matthew's fundamentally different perspective on the role of the disciples, he has not chosen to erase their imperfections, preferring instead to redefine the object of their ignorance: the dullness of Matthew's disciples no longer relates to Jesus' *identity* but, as we have seen, to the greatness of his mighty *power*. Matthew's preference for the language of

stands closely parallel to οὐδὲ μνημονεύετε τοὺς πέντε ἄρτους (v. 9b), but such an interpretation would greatly weaken the climactic nature of the question in v. 11a (πῶς οὐ νοεῖτε ὅτι οὐ περὶ ἄρτων εἶπον ὑμῖν;), which expresses incredulity at the very possibility of misunderstanding Jesus' words.

'little faith' over Mark's 'hardened heart' (Mk 6.52; 8.17) does not, therefore, indicate a shift away from the noetic element in the πίστις concept, but signals, rather, a basic reorientation of the narrative purpose. Under

22

Matthew's creative hand, the story of 13.53–16.20 has become for the reader a forceful lesson on the overwhelming power available through the Church's faith in the authority of Jesus Christ.

III

It should be sufficiently evident by now that the alleged difference between Matthew and Mark—where Mark's πίστις concept involves the recognition of Jesus as bearer of God's eschatological power, while for Matthew faith means only trust—does not adequately capture Matthew's creative contribution to the story of Jesus. In the first place, Matthew clearly exhibits a familiarity with the language of kerygmatic faith, not unlike that witnessed by Mark's Gospel.¹ It is certainly not without significance that the First Evangelist characterizes the failure to acknowledge God's active, eschatological presence in the person and ministry of Jesus as ἀπιστία (13.58; cf. 27.42). This includes not only the refusal of the villagers at Nazareth to recognize Jesus' filial relationship to the heavenly Father (cf. 13.55), but also the parallel reactions of Herod Antipas (14.1) and of the Jewish leadership (15.1-20; 16.1-4), all of which are finally epitomized in the confusion of 'men' regarding the identity of the Son of Man (16.13-14). On the other hand, Matthew succinctly summarizes the attitude of those who actually do belong to Jesus—that is, to whom the secret of his mission has been revealed—as πιστεύειν εἰς him (18.6). Furthermore, it is readily apparent that kerygmatic faith extends for Matthew beyond mere intellectual assent, for the disciples' believing comprehension of 'the word of the kingdom' cannot be uncoupled from 'bearing fruit' (13.19, 23) and those to whom the significance of Jesus' ministry has been revealed are also those who 'do the will of my Father who is in heaven' (12.49-50). Thus Matthew reflects an indisputable awareness of the New Testament πίστις terminology to describe that which distinguishes those who, recognizing the significance of Jesus' ministry, commit themselves to it from those

Page 22, fn 1— Note particularly two recent studies on Mark's theme of faith: T. Söding, *Glaube bei Markus: Glaube an das Evangelium, Gebetsglaube und Wunderglaube im Kontext der Markinischen Basileiathologie und Christologie* (SBB, 12; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2nd edn, 1987); and CD. Marshall, *Faith as a Theme in Mark's Narrative* (SNTSMS, 64; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

23

who do not. At this point, the only essential difference between Matthew and Mark is less of a conceptual nature than a consequence of the dissimilar roles which the Evangelists have assigned to the disciples in their respective Gospels: whereas Mark's disciples respond to Jesus' call and thereby express the conversion and faith he demands (1.16-20, cf. 1.14-15) long before they actually achieve insight into his messiahship (8.27),¹ an analogous separation of faith and confession cannot be found in Matthew.

A closer examination of the narrative of Mt. 13.53–16.20 has revealed, however, that Matthew is more than just a little concerned with the ongoing commitment of faith in the life of the believer. The Evangelist is acutely aware that a believing acceptance of the activity of God in Jesus does not itself guarantee the virtue of 'great faith'. Indeed, in this segment of the narrative, the disciples repeatedly fail to live up to the expectations of the reader, proving themselves frustratingly incapable of overcoming the scourge of ὀλιγοπιστία. But, as we have seen, Matthew is less interested in chronicling the disciples' development in faith than in exploiting their shortcoming as a foil to impress upon the reader the greatness of Jesus' awesome power. It is the faith of the reader which ultimately consumes the Evangelist's attention as he relentlessly manipulates his narrative to expose 'little faith' for what it is: the unjustified incapacity of the disciple to grasp and rely upon Jesus' inexhaustible power. The same impatience with which the reader of Mark's Gospel responds to the disciples' inability to apprehend Jesus' identity is utilized by Matthew to communicate the lesson of Jesus' boundless authority which is sufficient to meet every need. The dynamic between author and reader in this portion of the Gospel thus reveals an important aspect of the author's perspective on what is often called 'petitionary faith'. In a nutshell, Matthew is of the conviction that 'little faith' is not solely a matter of a lack of trust, but can in fact be overcome in the life of the reader by a *cognitive awareness* of Jesus' limitless authority. And to this end he has carefully composed the narrative of 13.53–16.20, creatively readjusting the motif of the disciples' incomprehension to impress the reader with the truth of Jesus' power.

Page 23, fn 1— Marshall, *Faith*, p. 136.