

The Healing of Two Blind Men at Jericho (Mt. 20:29-34)

Sr. Maria Suso Rispoli, O.P.

The Gospel of Matthew tells of two healings of two blind men (Mt. 9:27-31; Mt. 20:29-34). The latter of the two stories poses some interesting questions for the exegete. Why are there two blind men instead of one named Bartimaeus, and why does Matthew tell the story twice? Why is this account so different from Mark's? What purpose does this pericope have?

This paper aims to answer these questions and to argue that this pericope functions in a primarily Christological way. Matthew presents Jesus as the Shepherd of Israel, the Son of David, who is healer, king, and judge. In so doing, Matthew invites his readers to identify with the two blind men and approach Jesus as Messiah and Lord so they might be healed of their spiritual blindness, ruled by the true shepherd, and delivered from the judgement on unrepentant Israel.

To begin, I will examine the context of this pericope in terms of the synoptic gospels as a whole, and Matthew in particular, as well as the historical/cultural context. Then, I will analyze the passage verse by verse. Finally, I will present and discuss the three ways this passage presents Jesus as the Davidic Messiah: healer, king, and judge.

I. Context

All three synoptic gospels have the story of the healing of Bartimaeus at Jericho, just before or very near the entry into Jerusalem. Because Matthew depends on Mark but not Luke, and because Luke's version is so similar to Mark's, this paper will discuss the Markan parallel and not the Lukan one.¹ Mark's account is full of details: he recounts the name of the man, the

¹ The question of how to harmonize these accounts and determine the number of blind men healed is an interesting one, but is beyond the scope of this paper. For a summary and discussion of opinions on this question,

name of his father, and detail about his clothing (Mk. 10:46-52). This account reminds the reader of Mark's earlier story of the gradual healing of the blind man at Bethsaida (Mk. 8:22-26). The two stories clearly form an *inclusio* highlighting the three passion predictions and elucidating what it means to follow he whom Peter correctly identifies as the Messiah (Mk. 8:29). Positioned right before the triumphant entry into Jerusalem and right after Jesus' insistence that those who follow him must serve others in imitation of the Son of Man (Mk 10:42-45), the healing of Bartimaeus symbolizes an overall progress in faith and concretizes the call to discipleship.²

Matthew's clearly bases his version on Mark's. In both gospels the passage is positioned between the request of James and John and the entry into Jerusalem. Both accounts include Jericho, a great crowd, crying out to the Son of David for pity, the request to receive sight, and Jesus calling them to heal them. Both accounts end with the healed one(s) following Jesus into Jerusalem. In addition, key details show that Matthew's account is a redaction of the Markan one. For example, the use of *phōneō* (ἐφώνησεν in Mk 10:49 and φωνήσατε in Mt. 20:32)³ instead of the more common *kaleō* for "call"⁴ demonstrates linguistic dependence.

While the two stories are similar, there are notable differences (Fig. 1). The differences in detail are not surprising, since Matthew tends to omit "picturesque details" from Mark's miracle accounts to "underline the mission of Jesus."⁵ In addition, the omission of various details focuses

see Ulrich Luz, "On the Way to Jerusalem (19:1—20:34)," *Matthew 8-20: A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, ed. Helmut Koester, trans. James E. Crouch, *Hermeneia* Vol. 2 (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg, 2001) *Project Muse*, 548.

² *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 2019) #68, 619.

³ Outside of this instance, Matthew only uses *phōneō* four other times: the three cock crows (Mt. 26:34, 74, 75) and when the bystanders think Jesus is calling out for Elijah (Mt. 26:47).

⁴ Matthew uses *kaleō* 24 times, and 10 of those instances refer to summoning or calling people.

⁵ Vicente Balaguer, "The Gospel According to St. Matthew," *Understanding the Gospels* (New York: Scepter, 2005) 74.

the audience's attention on Jesus, who is the only named person in the account, and allows Matthew to contrast the blind men with James and John, the crowd, and the religious leaders.

Figure 1

Comparison of Mt. 20:29-34 and Mk. 10:46-52 (*NRSCVE*)

Notes	Mt. 20:29-34	Mk. 10:46-52
The disciples are specifically mentioned in Mark and not in Matthew.	As they were leaving Jericho, a large crowd followed him.	They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho,
Matthew has two blind men and omits the named Bartimaeus. Matthew has Jesus "passing by." In some manuscripts, the blind men in Matthew address Jesus as "Lord." ⁶	There were two blind men sitting by the roadside. When they heard that Jesus was passing by, they shouted, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!"	Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"
In Matthew, the "crowd" is named, in contrast to "many" in Mark, heightening the dramatic tension between the blind men and those who rebuke them. Despite the difference in translation, both "shouted" and "cried out" come from κράζω.	The crowd sternly ordered them to be quiet; but they shouted even more loudly, "Have mercy on us, Lord, Son of David!"	Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"
Matthew omits Jesus' involvement of the crowd/disciples in summoning the blind man/men. Matthew omits the detail about the garment and Bartimaeus' prompt response.	Jesus stood still and called them, saying, "What do you want me to do for you?"	Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you." ⁵⁰ So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. ⁵¹ Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?"
In Matthew, the blind men address Jesus as "Lord" (κύριε). In Mark, Bartimaeus calls Jesus "my teacher" (ραββουνι), a Greek transliteration of the Aramaic term. In Matthew, the blind men request that their eyes would be opened (ἵνα ἀνοιχθῶσιν ἡμῶν οἱ ὀφθαλμοί) and in Mark that he would see again (ἵνα ἀναβλέψω).	They said to him, "Lord, let our eyes be opened."	The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again."

⁶ Ulrich Luz is of the opinion that only the second κύριε in 20:31 is original. See Luz, "On the Way to Jerusalem," 548.

Matthew adds that Jesus is moved with compassion and touches their eyes. Mark focuses on faith and does not have Jesus touch the blind man.	Moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes.	Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.”
Other than the plural and Matthew’s omission of “on the way,” both accounts end identically.	Immediately they regained their sight and followed him.	Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

While Matthew’s account is different in detail, his account is similar to Mark’s by being part of an inclusio that fits his theological priorities. Instead of bracketing the three passion predictions, as in Mark, the two healings of blind men bracket the missionary discourse (Mt. 10:1-11:1), multiple calls for conversion and repentance (e.g., Mt. 11:20-24; 12:22-45; and 18:6-9), and a host of parables and sayings about the Kingdom. By bracketing the majority of Jesus’ ministry, this inclusio “gives artistic unity to the whole gospel.”⁷ As in Mark, the healing of the blind men at Jericho is an improvement on the earlier account in which they only cry out once, Jesus must elicit their faith by asking, “Do you believe that I am able to do this?” and they only call Jesus “Lord” when prompted (Mt. 9:27-31). Jesus also warns them not to tell anyone, though they disobey the command. In contrast, in our pericope, they cry out twice, demonstrating their faith, they call Jesus “Lord” without prompting, Jesus does not forbid them to publicize the matter, and they follow him as disciples. Thus, there is a sense that this second healing of two blind men completes the first, just as Mark’s account of the healing of Bartimaeus seems to complete the gradual healing of the blind man (Mk. 8:22-26).

As in Mark, the pericope is placed between the request of James and John and the triumphant entry into Jerusalem, but Matthew’s utilization of that placement exceeds what Mark does. First, the heightened preoccupation with the Kingdom is apparent. James and John, through

⁷ “The Gospel According to Matthew: Chapter 20.” *Oxford Bible Commentary* (Oxford University Press, 2020) 20:29-34.

their mother, ask to sit at Christ's right and left in his kingdom (Mt. 20:21). Considering the reference to Jesus as "Son of David," the emphasis on Jesus as the meek king who enters into Jerusalem (Mt. 21:5),⁸ and a potential allusion to the way Bathsheba entreated David to make Solomon king after him (1 Kings 1:15-17, 20-21),⁹ we can say that this section of the gospel elaborates on Matthew's kingship theme. In the third section of the paper, I will discuss this theme at greater length. For now, let us simply note that there is a thematic unity as well as proximity between the request of James and John and the healing of the two blind men.

This implied relationship between pericopes may help to explain why Matthew has two blind men instead of one Bartimaeus. The question of duality – why two blind men? – has vexed commentators since ancient times. Jerome reported multiple opinions in his own day: some thought they represented the Pharisees and the Sadducees, some the people of the Old Testament and the New, and some both Jews in contrast with a Gentile crowd.¹⁰ Augustine says they represent the Jews and the Gentiles, all the people Jesus came to cure and shepherd.¹¹ Some contemporary scholars think Jesus healed two men but only one – Bartimaeus – was known by name.¹² Others think doubling was a common literary trope at the time,¹³ or that Matthew used doubling to "overcome the impression that [the healing was] merely a private affair."¹⁴ It is

⁸ Matthew makes the fulfillment of the following prophecy (Is. 62:11; Zec. 9:9) more explicit than Mark's simple allusion:

"[Y]our king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (Mt. 21:5).

⁹ Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, *Fire of Mercy, Heart of the Word: Meditations on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, vol. 3 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012) 276.

¹⁰ Jerome, "Book Three (Matthew 16.13–22.40)," *Commentary on Matthew (The Fathers of the Church, Volume 117)*, ed. Thomas P. Scheck, (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2008) 229.

¹¹ Augustine, "Sermon 38 on the New Testament," trans. R.G. MacMullen, *New Advent*, from *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, vol. 6, ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1888.), rev. and ed. Kevin Knight, 38.10.

¹² Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2010) 261.

¹³ See the survey of possible explanations in W. R. G. Loader, "Son of David, Blindness, Possession, and Duality in Matthew," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 44, no. 4 (1982), 581.

¹⁴ *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, #123.

W.R.G. Loader's position that doubling the blind men provided two witnesses in a sort of trial against unrepentant Israel.¹⁵ While all of these explanations are plausible, and while I will endorse the latter in a later section, it seems that the best explanation or explanations (since they need not be mutually exclusive) would be the most textually supported. The parallels between the request of James and John and the two blind men (contrasted in Fig. 2) are heightened precisely because there are two blind men and not one. This contrast advances several of Matthew's themes. First, it emphasizes the unexpected nature of the Kingdom of Heaven, which is not merely future but "at hand" (Mt. 10:7). Second, it reinforces the idea that outsiders – those who are unclean, Gentile, or otherwise at the fringe of society¹⁶ – are invited to "come from east and west and...eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 8:11). Third, and most importantly for our purposes, it shows Jesus to be the kind of Messiah who heals but expects his disciples to follow him even to the cross.

Figure 2

Parallels between the Request of James and John and the Healing of the Two Blind Men¹⁷

Parallel	Relationship to Jesus and Society	Form of request	Form of address	Concern	Consequence
Request of James and John (Mt. 20:20-28)	Insiders	Through an intermediary (their mother)	No titles or sign of respect	Future personal exaltation	Jesus declines and exhorts the disciples to follow him by imitating his service
Healing of the Two Blind Men (Mt. 20:29-34)	Outsiders	Direct	"Lord" and "Son of David"	Present restoration of an essential	Jesus does what is asked and those healed follow him without being exhorted

¹⁵ Loader, "Son of David," 581.

¹⁶ Wesley Allen, Jr. notes that Jesus frequently "reverses the low status" persons "would have held in ancient society," e.g., healing the blind, welcoming children, protecting women and speaking positively about eunuchs. Wesley Allen Jr., *Matthew* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2013) 200.

¹⁷ "The Gospel According to Matthew," *Oxford*, 20:29-34.

Before leaving contextual considerations, we do well to consider the location and timing of the healing and the cultural implications of blindness. Jesus heals the men on the road between Jericho and Jerusalem right before the feast of Passover. The road winds its way up an ascent of some 1700 feet. During the days leading up to Passover, there would be many beggars on the road asking for money from the pilgrims going up to Jerusalem, which is probably what the two blind men were doing when Jesus approached.¹⁸

The two blind men were social and perhaps even religious outcasts endangered by their disability. Many blind persons, and ostensibly these two, could not support themselves and thus spent their days begging. It was not always a safe activity. The road from Jericho to Jerusalem was a “favorite haunt of highway robbers even into modern times”¹⁹ and the blind would have been particularly at risk. The danger was well known: among the curses Moses utters against those who violate the covenant is the following: “you shall grope about at noon as blind people grope in darkness, but you shall be unable to find your way; and you shall be continually abused and robbed, without anyone to help” (Deut. 28:29). Further, blindness carried with it a religious stigma. While the Levitical laws only prevent blind animals from being sacrificed (Lv. 22:22) and blind men from serving as priests (Lv. 21:18), some scholars believe that at the time of Jesus, blindness prevented any person, not just a priest, from participating in worship.²⁰ This would explain why the chief priests and scribes become angry at the “amazing things that [Jesus] did,” i.e., curing the blind and lame in the temple (Mt. 21:14-15). Davidson Razafiarivony, who advances this thesis, provides a number of biblical arguments to support his claim. However, even if the blind were not excluded from religious worship per se, they still suffered from the

¹⁸ Mitch and Sri, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 261.

¹⁹ John L. McKenzie, “Jericho,” *Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 425.

²⁰ Davidson Razafiarivony, “Exclusion of the Blind and Lame from the Temple and the Indignation of the Religious Leaders in Matthew 21: 12-15,” *Journal of Biblical Theology* 1, no. 3 (2018), 99-100.

social stigma attached to all physical maladies,²¹ and they still faced unemployment, physical dangers, and potential exploitation.²² In this context, the healing of the two blind men does not only mean the restoration of physical sight. Jesus frees them from the fear of being prey to those who would exploit them. They now have the potential for a normal, self-supporting life. Perhaps they now have the opportunity to enter the Temple and participate in worship. The two men follow Jesus up to Jerusalem for the Feast; perhaps it is the first Passover they ever fully observe.

II. Verse-by-verse analysis

This section focuses on the details of the passage and particularly nuances of the Greek text in order to lay the remainder of the groundwork necessary for the thematic discussion of Matthew's presentation of Jesus in the third section.

20:29 As they were leaving Jericho, a large crowd followed him.

Jericho sits below Jerusalem both in physical and spiritual elevation, since Jericho was a conquered pagan city. Wayne Baxter suggests that the great crowd following Jesus up to Jerusalem may evoke shepherding imagery.²³ His thesis, that Matthew presents Jesus as fulfilling the prophecy of Ezekiel to send a shepherd-king to replace the wicked shepherds,²⁴ will be discussed in the third section. The word “followed” is ἠκολούθησεν, from ἀκολουθέω. This is

²¹ As evidenced, for example, by the disciples' question of Jesus: “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (John 9:2).

²² “Cursed be anyone who misleads a blind person on the road” is one of the twelve curses, ranking alongside curses against murders, sexual deviants, and thieves (Deut. 27:15-16).

²³ Wayne Baxter, “Healing and the ‘Son of David’: Matthew's Warrant,” *Novum Testamentum* 48, no. 1 (2006), *JSTOR*, 40.

²⁴ See Ez. 34, especially “For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out.... I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land” (Ez. 34:11, 13a).

the technical term for discipleship/following²⁵ that Matthew uses, for example, in the call of the first disciples: “Immediately they left their nets and followed [ἠκολούθησαν] him.” (Mt. 4:20).

The implication is that the members of the crowd are his disciples.

20:30 There were two blind men sitting by the roadside. When they heard that Jesus was passing by, they shouted, “Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!”

The blind men boldly shout or cry out for Jesus as he passes by. As mentioned before, this verse only has “Lord” in some manuscripts, and Ulrich Luz is of the opinion that only the “Lord” in v. 31 is original.²⁶ Matthew may be using the combination of “Lord” (κύριε) and “have mercy” (ἐλέησον) to evoke the liturgical significance of the phrase. In that case, these blind men symbolize all those who, before entering into worship, ask mercy from the Lord.

Augustine determined that “passing by” could apply to Jesus’ earthly life in general: “Mark and see how many things of His have passed by. He was born of the Virgin Mary; is He being born always? As an infant was He suckled; is He suckled always?”²⁷ However, it is more likely that “passing by” both serves a practical narrative purpose and alludes to the theophanies to Moses (Ex. 34:6) and Elijah (1 Kings 11).

“Son of David” is highly significant for the meaning of this passage by its association with healing and especially with healing for outsiders. The first time Matthew uses the title is in the opening verse of the Gospel: “An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Mt. 1:1). Who is Jesus, for Matthew? He is the Messiah, the Son of David. Joseph is also called “son of David” in the infancy narrative, but only in order to situate

²⁵ *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, #8, p. 600.

²⁶ Luz, “On the Way to Jerusalem,” 548.

²⁷ Augustine, “Sermon 38,” 9.

Jesus within the Davidic line and reinforce the title as a key to Jesus' identity (Mt. 1:20). The term is also used in the healing of two blind men (Mt. 9:27-9:31) and the healing of the Canaanite woman's daughter. In the latter miracle, the woman shouts, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon" (Mt. 15:22). Since Matthew uses essentially the same formula in Mt. 20:29-34, there must be an intention to compare the two.²⁸ Both miracles are performed for outsiders when others attempt to prevent their access to Jesus. Both miracles also include an active, seeking faith on the part of (a) sufferer(s) who call(s) out for Jesus' help. Interestingly, the story of the Canaanite woman is in the middle of the inclusio created by the two accounts of the healing of blind men. In the center of this pericope is Jesus' comment, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mt. 15:24).²⁹ Thus, the shepherding motif and the Son of David title are closely associated.³⁰

20:31 The crowd sternly ordered them to be quiet; but they shouted even more loudly, "Have mercy on us, Lord, Son of David!"

"Lord" (κύριε) may be equivalent to Mark's "Rabbouni" or teacher, but it is the same word used as the equivalent of "Adonai." Jesus fulfills the promise of God to heal his people: "Then the LORD said to him, "Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?" (Ex. 4:11).³¹ The implication is that Jesus is divine.

²⁸ The Canaanite woman ἔκραζεν λέγουσα ἐλέησόν με κύριε υἱὸς Δαυὶδ (Mt. 15:22), and the two blind men ἔκραξαν λέγοντες ἐλέησον ἡμᾶς κύριε υἱὸς Δαυὶδ (Mt. 20:30). Only the grammatical adjustment for two persons is different.

²⁹ Since it is clear from the context that Jesus also desires to save Gentiles, I will not address the question of why Jesus appears to restrict his ministry to Israel alone in this passage.

³⁰ The title "Son of David" appears several more times in Matthew (Mt. 21:15, 22:42-45). It is associated with his triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the Son of David's superiority over his father David.

³¹ See also Ps. 146:8: "...the Lord opens the eyes of the blind."

The crowd attempts to silence the men, but they only shout louder. Like the Canaanite woman, their faith in Jesus' power to help them and their desire for healing outweigh human respect. Jesus praises the Canaanite woman for her persistence when he says, "Woman, great is your faith" (Mt. 15:28). While he does not praise the blind men, he does call them, heal them, and allow them to follow him, indicating his approval. If Jesus came to heal God's people and save them from the judgement of those who obstinately refuse to see the truth, as I will argue in the last section, then Matthew holds these men up as an example for all Christians. Like these men and the Canaanite woman, Jesus' disciples should not allow others to dissuade them when they call out to Jesus. Augustine says this "calling out" means "to correspond to the grace of Christ by good works.... lest haply we cry aloud with our voices, and in our lives be dumb.... Whoever despises the world, cries out unto Christ.... When he shall begin to do all this.... They who love this world, will oppose him."³²

20:32 Jesus stood still (στὰς) and called them, saying, "What do you want me to do for you?"

The grammatical construction mirrors Jesus' movement by creating a dramatic pause in the story. One can imagine an early Christian reciting this story and pausing on the στὰς of "καὶ στὰς ὁ Ἰησοῦς." The fact that Jesus stops in the middle of his journey up to his Pasch signals the importance he attaches to this request as "an epiphany of the journey's internal meaning" that "signifies the restoration of fullness of life to all mankind as a result of Jesus' willing self-sacrifice."³³

Jesus asks the blind men what they want. Is it not obvious? In the context of the pilgrimage to Passover, perhaps some in the crowd expected them to ask him for money or food,

³² Augustine, "Sermon 38," 12-13.

³³ Leiva-Merikakis, *Fire of Mercy*, 315.

but he elicits their faith. Only those who believe he is more than a mere man could ask him for healing.

33 They said to him, “Lord, let our eyes (ὀφθαλμοὶ) be opened.”

In Mark’s account, Bartimaeus asks, “that my eyes may be opened,” or, “that I may look up (ἵνα ἀναβλέψω)” (Mk. 10:51). In the next sentence, Mark uses the same verb. Bartimaeus looks up. Here in Matthew, however, the construction is different. While Matthew uses ἀναβλέψω in 20:34, in this verse the men ask, “that our eyes may be opened” (ἵνα ἀνοιγῶσιν οἱ ὀφθαλμοὶ ἡμῶν). Why the difference? Perhaps introduction of the word for eye, ὀφθαλμοὶ, allows for contrast with a different word for eye used in 20:34.

34 Moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes (ὀμμάτων). Immediately they regained their sight and followed him.

“Eyes” here comes from the rare root ὀμμα instead of the standard ὀφθαλμός as above. Since the gradual healing of a blind man in Bethsaida (Mk. 8:22-26) is the only other locus in the New Testament for ὀμμα, it is possible that Matthew alludes to that story, which he omits from his gospel.³⁴ Does Matthew imitate Mark’s use of two different words to signal that there is a difference between what the blind men ask for (physical sight) and what they are given (physical sight *and* understanding)? If so, we can say with Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis that Matthew uses the “rarer and more poetic term” to show “the precious newness of their instant vision.”³⁵ For Leiva-Merikakis, “The first thing in the world around them that the healed men see as they come

³⁴ Luz, “On the Way to Jerusalem,” 549. One potential difficulty with making much of this connection is that the order is reversed in Mark, with ὀμμα used in v. 23 for the partial healing and ὀφθαλμός for the full healing in v. 25.

³⁵ Leiva-Merikakis, *Fire of Mercy*, 319.

out of the prison of their blindness is the face of Jesus, the one who has made them this life-transforming gift.”³⁶

As above, the technical term for discipleship/following³⁷ (ἀκολουθέω) is used. The once-blind men are no longer led by the blind religious leaders (the blind leading the blind) but by Jesus, who sees clearly. Jesus does not tell them to keep silent, as he did in the earlier account (Mt. 9:18-34). In fact, given the warm welcome he receives from the crowd in Jerusalem, it is likely the blind men told everyone they could upon entering the city.

III. Jesus as Healer, King, and Judge

Having laid the groundwork, we may now examine in a holistic way how Matthew invites his audience to follow Jesus, the shepherd who is at once healer, king and judge.

Jesus the Healer

While at least one commentator thinks Matthew’s redaction of this pericope serves “simply [to] turn this into another example of Jesus’ compassion,”³⁸ Wayne Baxter makes a convincing argument that Matthew’s portrays Jesus as the Healer-Shepherd who fulfills the prophecies of Ezekiel 34.³⁹ Matthew includes 150 allusions to the Old Testament and cites 50 of them (in contrast to only 23 citations in Mark and Luke),⁴⁰ so it would not be surprising if this passage also functions to show Jesus as the fulfillment of the promises to Israel. In addition, Jesus describes himself as the fulfiller of prophecy when he tells John’s disciples that “the blind

³⁶ Leiva-Merikakis, *Fire of Mercy*, 319.

³⁷ *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, #8, p. 600.

³⁸ Allen, *Matthew*, 200.

³⁹ Baxter, “Healing and the ‘Son of David,’” 36-50.

⁴⁰ Balaguer, “The Gospel According to St. Matthew,” 68.

receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them” (Mt. 11:5). Baxter’s contribution is to link the motifs of healer and shepherd in the Gospel of Matthew and to show that link’s source in Ezekiel 34.

Ezekiel 34 states that God will be/send a shepherd to replace the wicked and negligent shepherds of Israel. In sum, God promises, “I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy” (Ez. 34:16). As for the wicked shepherds, “...thus says the Lord God: I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats” (Ez. 34:17). How will he do this? “I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd” (Ez. 34:23).

Multiple passages in Matthew support the claim that Matthew intends to portray Jesus as this shepherd who is both God and his “servant David” by metonymy.⁴¹ Early in the Gospel, Matthew quotes the prophecy that reads, “But you, Bethlehem.... from you shall come a ruler/ who is to shepherd my people Israel” (Mt. 2:6).⁴² Jesus is both ruler and shepherd, born in David’s city. Immediately after the first healing of two blind men and the healing of a mute man, we see Jesus-as-shepherd tied to Jesus-as-healer: “Jesus went about all the cities and villages...curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Mt. 9:35-36). Further on, during the account of the healing of the Canaanite woman’s daughter, Jesus says, “I

⁴¹ In contrast, some scholars have claimed that when the blind men call out for the “Son of David,” they are alluding to Solomon, who was known as a healer-exorcist. For a layout of this argument, see Mitch and Sri, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 137. Others make convincing rebuttals. As Kim Paffenroth points out, Solomon’s healings are rooted in exorcism, but Matthew redacts Mark’s accounts to focus less on exorcism. Thus, it is unlikely that Solomon is the best explanation for the connection of “Son of David” with healing in Matthew’s gospel. Kim Paffenroth, “Jesus as Anointed and Healing Son of David in the Gospel of Matthew,” *Biblica* 80, no. 4 (1999), *JSTOR*, 552. See also Baxter, “Healing and the ‘Son of David,’” 47.

⁴² As Baxter points out, this prophecy is a conflation of Micah 5:2 and 2 Sam 5:2. See Baxter, “Healing and the ‘Son of David,’” 38.

was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Mt. 15:24). The Parable of the Lost Sheep reinforces the compassion tied to Jesus’ shepherding role (Mt. 18:10-14). These shepherding metaphors suggest that Matthew intended to show Jesus as the fulfillment of the prophecy in Ezekiel 34. Further evidence emerges when Jesus prophesies, “All the nations will be gathered before him [the Son of Man in glory], and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left” (Mt. 25:32-33). The elements of judgement and separation easily connect to God’s promise to “judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats” (Ez. 34:17). While Matthew bases his account on Mark’s, I agree with Baxter that even though Mark has “Son of David” in the Bartimaeus story, he does not develop the theme, so it takes on more meaning in Matthew and is bound up with healing and shepherding in a way it was not in Mark.⁴³

Matthew’s presentation of Jesus as shepherd-healer has numerous implications for his audience. First, Jesus is divine. If he is the one who gathers the flock and judges the sheep and the goats, then he aligns himself with the “I” in the divine proclamations of Ezekiel 34. Moreover, the blind men calling out to Jesus as the Son of David are doing more than simply calling Jesus the Messiah. According to the inner logic of this gospel, they are invoking Jesus as the shepherd who can heal them from their blindness of body, but also from the deeper blindness that has been sitting over their people since the time of the exile.⁴⁴

Individual Christians should also ask for this inner healing. As Augustine put it, “Our whole business then, Brethren, in this life is to heal this eye of the heart whereby God may be

⁴³ Baxter, “Healing and the ‘Son of David,’” 48.

⁴⁴ Leiva-Merikakis points out that they seem more aware of his identity than his followers. *Fire of Mercy*, 310.

seen.”⁴⁵ However, the Son of David is not only a healer, but also the new David who will rule his people rightly.

Jesus the King

Jesus’ kingly role is an important context for this passage. David, who spent his childhood shepherding in the fields, eventually became the “shepherd” of Israel (2 Sam. 5:2). In an analogous way, Jesus is the shepherd who, as “Son of David,” recapitulates David’s reclamation of Jerusalem and restores right rule. A broad look at his recapitulation will allow a deeper understanding of this pericope.

If we examine the account of David’s approach toward Jerusalem after the rebellion of Absalom, we see several parallels to Jesus’ approach toward Jerusalem (Fig. 3).⁴⁶ If we examine these closely, we see that Jesus’ recapitulation corrects the deficiencies in David’s approach. While the strife between the ten and the two remains unresolved in 2 Samuel, Jesus is able to model in his own person the servanthood that will bind the two to the ten (Mt. 25-28). While David does not successfully bring along those he encounters on the way, Jesus incorporates the two blind men into his flock. Finally, Jesus faces even greater threats than David does to his kingship, but he overcomes them in a definitive way and opens up a way for all to enter his kingdom (Mt. 8:11).

⁴⁵ Augustine, “Sermon 38,” 5.

⁴⁶ While Matthew depends on Mark for this ordering, Matthew builds on and develops the theme, making these parallels integral and not accidental to his own gospel.

Figure 3

Parallels between the approaches of David and Jesus toward Jerusalem

	Cross the Jordan	Location	Two against ten	Accompaniment	Goal
David's approach toward Jerusalem after Absalom's rebellion (2 Sam 19:16-43)	David crosses the Jordan and goes to Gilgal (2 Sam. 19:39).	David passes through Gilgal (2 Sam 19:41) "on the east border of Jericho" (Josh. 4:19) on his way up to Jerusalem.	Judah and Benjamin preempt the other ten tribes by escorting David across the Jordan, causing strife (2 Sam. 19:42-44).	A crowd accompanies David, but Shimei, Mephibosheth, and Barzillai do not appear to join the crowd.	David takes Jerusalem only to face another rebellion and more trials (2 Sam. 20).
Jesus' approach toward Jerusalem (Mt. 20:17-34)	Jesus must cross the Jordan to get to Jericho, since he was previously in "the district of Judea across the Jordan" (Mt. 19:1).	Jesus passes through Jericho on his way up to Jerusalem (Mt. 20:29).	James and John try to claim precedence over the other apostles, causing indignation (Mt. 20:20-28).	A crowd accompanies Jesus, and the two healed men join it (Mt. 20:34).	Jesus enters Jerusalem in triumph only to face mockery and abuse as "King of the Jews" (Mt. 27:29-42). However, after his Resurrection the women "approached, embraced his feet, and did him homage" (Mt. 28:9), mirroring the actions of the magi who "prostrated themselves" and "did homage" to the newborn king (Mt. 2:11).

If we return to the healing of the two blind men, we see that Matthew portrays Jesus as the Son of David who is both shepherd-healer and shepherd-ruler. In this context, the blind men may represent Israel in need of the promised Davidic King. Robert Barron states, "For any first-century Jew, Jericho carried the overtone of sin and corruption since it was the city whose walls Joshua and his priest-led army caused to fall at the commencement of Israel's conquest of the promised land." Barron claims that Bartimaeus (and, by implication, the two blind men in Matthew's account) symbolizes the blinded human race in need of leadership "from the city of

sin up to Zion, the city of the king.”⁴⁷ Barron’s insight is corroborated by the fact that the Babylonians captured and blinded the last king of David’s line, Zedekiah, in the plain of Jericho (2 Kings 25: 5-7; Jer. 52:8-11). Since the king is the head of the people, at the time of Jesus corporate Israel still sat blinded, waiting for the restoration of the Davidic kingdom and the day of the Lord, when he would do “amazing things with this people/ shocking and amazing....On that day the deaf shall hear/ the words of a scroll,/ and out of their gloom and darkness/ the eyes of the blind shall see” (Is. 29:14, 18). When Jesus, the new King, approaches Jerusalem, he invites Israel, represented by these two men, into his new vision and restored Kingdom.

Jesus, the Judge

Finally, Matthew portrays Jesus as the Messianic Judge. We already noted God’s promise: “I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats” (Ez. 34:17). Jesus clearly takes up this role, and frequently associates blindness with those he judges. For example, he counsels his disciples to disregard the Pharisees: “Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit” (Mt. 15:14). Later, when addressing the Pharisees, he says, “Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘Whoever swears by the sanctuary is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gold of the sanctuary is bound by the oath’” (Mt. 23:16) In ten verses, he calls them blind six times (Mt. 23:16-26). Jesus does not simply point out their ignorance. These woes directly follow Jesus’ counsel to humble oneself and not be called “father” or “Master” (Mt. 23:1-12). The religious leaders have preferred their own exaltation to the truth. As Ulrich Luz points out when discussing our pericope:

“The readers remember how Jesus has already healed the blind on earlier occasions (9:27-31; 12:22; 15:30-31; cf. 11:5). They also remember what Jesus has said about the crowds that do not see (13:13- 14) and their blind leaders (15:14). Out of their own

⁴⁷ Robert Barron, *2 Samuel* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos, 2015). 76.

biblical-Jewish tradition they are furthermore aware that there is not only physical blindness; there is also a blindness of the heart and of the thoughts.”⁴⁸

Jesus’ judgement of the religious leaders of his day is a foretaste of the fullness of judgement the Son of Man will mete out when he separates the sheep from the goats at the end of the age.

The two blind men not only act as foils for James and John, but for the scribes and Pharisees, or rather for the whole “evil generation” (Mt. 12:39-45; 16:4). W. R. G. Loader suggests that the doubles in Matthew represent witnesses in a trial. Israel is on trial, and the two blind men (and even the doubled demoniacs in Mt. 8:28-34⁴⁹) are the outcasts that testify against her disbelief and unwillingness to change. Loader supports his claim by pointing out that in Matthew, two witnesses testify at Jesus’ trial (Mt. 26:60-61) instead of generalized false witness (Mk. 14:57-58). Matthew also includes Jesus’ teaching about fraternal correction, with a stress on the need for two or three witnesses (Mt. 18:15-16).⁵⁰

Even if Matthew did not intend to present the blind men of Jericho in this manner, surely the *sensus plenior* admits of it. Unlike the crowd that attempts to silence them, these men understand that the Son of David cares for them. Jesus’ act of compassion is itself a judgement against the attitude of the crowd, an attitude that mirrors that of the Pharisees who objected to the cure the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath. At that time, he asked, “Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out?” (Mt. 12:11). Thus, Jesus’ compassionate shepherding is linked to his judgement.

⁴⁸ Luz, “On the Way to Jerusalem,” 549.

⁴⁹ Loader, “Son of David,” 585

⁵⁰ Loader, “Son of David,” 581.

IV. Conclusion

With his multivalent account of Jesus' encounter with the two blind men at Jericho, Matthew invites his audience to imitate these men in calling out to Jesus for healing as he "passes by." He does this by portraying Jesus as the shepherd God promises to send in Ezekiel 34. As the true Shepherd of Israel, Jesus is divine; he heals both physically and spiritually; he provides right rule (in contrast to David, his type); and he judges between the sheep and the goats. The healing that Matthew's audience should ask for, therefore, is a healing of sight. To "see" is to understand who Jesus is and be open to the conversion he requires. Even Jesus own disciples (such as James and John) need the example of these two blind men, who know Jesus' identity. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem; healing leads to discipleship to the Cross.⁵¹ The journey from Jericho to the Temple requires a steep ascent but leads to the Kingdom restored. Jesus leads the way with his flock behind him, willing to stop and answer the insistent cries of the outcasts who call to him.

⁵¹ *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, #123, p. 663.

Bibliography

- Allen Jr., O. Wesley. *Matthew*. (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2013). *JSTOR*. Accessed August 14, 2020. Doi: 10.2307/j.ctt22nmb04.
- Augustine, "Sermon 38 on the New Testament," trans. R.G. MacMullen, *New Advent*, from *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, Vol. 6, ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1888.), rev. and ed. Kevin Knight, 38.10. *New Advent*. Accessed July 28, 2020.
- Balaguer, Vicente. "The Gospel According to St. Matthew." *Understanding the Gospels*. New York: Scepter, 2005. 66-82.
- Barron, Robert. *2 Samuel*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos. 2015.
- Baxter, Wayne. "Healing and the 'Son of David': Matthew's Warrant." *Novum Testamentum* 48, no. 1 (2006). 36-50. *JSTOR*. Accessed June 28, 2020.
- Jerome. "Book Three (Matthew 16.13–22.40)." *Commentary on Matthew (The Fathers of the Church, Volume 117)*. Ed. Thomas P. Scheck. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2008. 189-256. Accessed July 29, 2020. doi:10.2307/j.ctt28531j.10.
- Leiva-Merikakis, Erasmo. *Fire of Mercy, Heart of the Word: Meditations on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*. Vol. 3. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012.
- Loader, W. R. G. "Son of David, Blindness, Possession, and Duality in Matthew." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 44, no. 4 (1982): 570-85. Accessed July 29, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/43718948.
- Luz, Ulrich. "On the Way to Jerusalem (19:1—20:34)." *Matthew 8-20: A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*. Ed. Helmut Koester. Trans. James E. Crouch. Hermeneia Vol. 2. Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg, 2001. *Project Muse*. Accessed July 28, 2020.
- McKenzie, John L. "Jericho." *Dictionary of the Bible*. New York: Touchstone, 1995. 424-25.
- Mitch, Curtis and Edward Sri. *The Gospel of Matthew*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2010.
- Paffenroth, Kim. "Jesus as Anointed and Healing Son of David in the Gospel of Matthew." *Biblica* 80, no. 4 (1999), 547-554. *JSTOR*. Accessed 28 June, 2020.
- Razafiarivony, Davidson. "Exclusion of the Blind and Lame from the Temple and the Indignation of the Religious Leaders in Matthew 21: 12-15." *Journal of Biblical Theology* 1, no. 3 (2018): 93–113. *Ebscohost*. Accessed August 14, 2020.
- "The Gospel According to Matthew: Chapter 20." *Oxford Bible Commentary*. Oxford University Press, 2020.
- The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*. Ed. Raymond E Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 2019.