

JESUS, THE “SON OF DAVID”

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In 2 Sam 5:4-10 David's conquest of Jerusalem and his making it “the city of David” are described. The great taunt which his enemies, “the Jebusites, the natives of the land,” hurled at him was, “You will not come in here, but the blind and the lame will ward you off” (5:6). David conquered the city (v. 7), after which he declared, “Whoever would smite the Jebusites, let him get up the water shaft to attack the lame and the blind, who are hated by David's soul” (v. 8). The comment is then added: “Therefore it is said, ‘The blind and the lame shall not come into the house’” (v. 8).¹

This ancient series of taunts resounds as an almost unnoticed counterpoint to the “Son-of-David” motif in the Gospel of Matthew.

1. *Analysis of the Data in Matthew*

There are six occasions mentioned in the Gospel of Matthew wherein persons call Jesus “the Son of David.” In each case the episode is associated with conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders of his day, and in each case there is also a reference to blindness. We will look at these six occasions briefly in the sequence in which they appear in Matthew.

Matthew 9:27-34

The first instance of this threefold conjunction of motifs is in 9:27, where two blind men call out to Jesus, “Have mercy on us, Son of David.” If we assume that this title, “Son of David,” was a messianic one—a matter which seems fairly well established now—any encounters with blind or lame persons could, in the light of 2 Sam 5:4-10, have a special significance. They could, in fact, even pose or provide a situation wherein the legitimacy of a person's claim to the title might be placed in question. Thus, when the two

¹Scripture quotations herein are from the RSV.

blind men applied the title “Son of David” to Jesus, those who witnessed the encounter may have understood it as being either a challenge to or an acknowledgment of, Jesus’ right to the title.

Jesus healed the blind men (Matt 9:29-30). This miracle of healing could, in turn, have been viewed by the blind men themselves and by onlookers as evidence that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. Furthermore, the statement that “they [the two blind men] went away and spread his fame through all that district” (v. 31) would indicate that they were speaking of him as the Messiah. Shortly thereafter, in the same locale (“as they were going away,” v. 32), and following a further healing—namely, that of a dumb man whom Jesus made able to speak (vv. 32-33)—the Pharisees derided Jesus’ success, attributing his power to “the prince of demons” (v. 34). In so doing, they were denying that he was the true Messiah.

Matthew 12:22-24

The second instance in Matthew of a confluence of the three motifs is in 12:22-24. In this case, a blind and dumb demoniac was brought to Jesus, and Jesus healed him so that he both spoke and saw (v. 22). At this point the people asked in amazement, “Can this be the Son of David?” (v. 23). But again the Pharisees sought to deny Jesus this title by declaring, “It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons” (v. 24).

Matthew 15:22-31

The third time the title “Son of David” is used of Jesus in the First Gospel is 15:22. In the literary context Jesus had recently engaged in a debate with the Pharisees (15:1-11), and when his disciples pointed out that he had offended the Pharisees (v. 12), Jesus referred to the Pharisees as “blind guides,” indicating that “if a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit” (v. 14). Jesus then went into the region of Tyre and Sidon, where a Canaanite woman asked him to cure her daughter (vv. 21-22). Her words were: “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely possessed by a demon” (v. 22).

Jesus healed the woman’s daughter (v. 28). Then he departed from there, and “passed along the Sea of Galilee” and “went up on the mountain,” where “great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the maimed, the blind, the dumb, and many others”

(vv. 29-30). He healed these, with the result that the crowd "wondered" and "glorified the God of Israel" (vv. 30-31).

In this instance, the confluence of the three motifs is admittedly somewhat loose. Nevertheless, the episode containing the "Son of David" acclamation is juxtaposed with both a controversy scene wherein blindness is attributed to the Pharisees and with a subsequent healing which included the blind and lame (and dumb) among the unfortunates whom Jesus restored to health and normalcy.

Matthew 20:30-21:16

The fourth, fifth, and sixth times that the title "Son of David" is applied to Jesus in Matthew are connected, in that the references to this title (20:30; 21:9,15) occur during the same trip by Jesus. This was a trip in which Jesus traveled from Jericho to the temple in Jerusalem.

After leaving Jericho, Jesus encountered two blind men who called out repeatedly, "Have mercy on us, Son of David!" (20:30-31). Jesus healed them, and they "followed him" (v. 34). Then he continued on his way to Jerusalem, accompanied by shouts from the people, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" (21:9). Jesus entered the city and the temple, and he cleansed the temple (vv. 12-13). Then "the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them" (v. 14). Conflict ensued "when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying out in the temple, 'Hosanna to the Son of David!'" (vv. 15-16). This is the climax of the Son-of-David controversy. In the city of David, Jesus had been acclaimed as the Son of David so widely by the people that even the children picked up the phrase.

Although Jesus had healed the blind and the lame in the temple, Jesus himself soon disavowed "Son of David" as an adequate messianic title (22:41-46). After that, this title is not again applied to Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew.

Assessment

It is now evident that in these passages where Matthew presents people as applying the title "Son of David" to Jesus, this motif clusters with two others: that of the blind/lame (recalling 2 Sam 5:4-10) and that of conflict with the religious authorities. As I have

pointed out elsewhere,² a regular combination of motifs gives them implications which the same motifs may not carry individually. This may very well be the case in regard to the combination of motifs that we are exploring here.

2. *Significance of the Three-motif Constellation*

Accounting for the Data

There are three basic ways to account for the constellation of the three motifs mentioned above:

1. The constellation could be original to Matthew, a distinctive literary expression which he created to convey his theological interpretation of events in the life of Jesus, or to explain who Jesus was.

2. At the other end of the spectrum, the constellation could represent the way things actually happened. The passage from 2 Samuel could have given rise to a popular expectation that anyone claiming to be the Son of David would have to endure confrontation with the lame and the blind in order to prove that claim. Blind and lame persons, then, would accost such claimants and demand to be cured; they might even be urged into doing so by persons who wanted to discredit the claimants. Jesus, so accosted, cured the blind persons; but his enemies tried to discredit the sign.

3. In between the two foregoing explanations is the possibility that the author of the First Gospel found the constellation in the material before him. This, of course, just moves back one step the question of how the pattern developed. In other words, did the pattern originate in that earlier source, or was it taken from still earlier material? Irrespective of this consideration, however, this option of Matthew's finding the constellation in material that he had before him could account for the appearance of the constellation in his Gospel.

Evaluation of the Possibilities

Several considerations must be given attention in any attempt to determine which among the three aforementioned possible explanations is the most likely one through which to account for the three-motif constellation in Matthew. Among such considerations the following would appear to be particularly important.

²Terence Y. Mullins, "Visit Talk in New Testament Letters," *CBQ* 35 (1973): 350-358, esp. 356-357.

In favor of the first hypothesis—i.e., that Matthew produced the constellation of the three motifs—is the fact that he uses the title "Son of David" in his own characterization of the Gospel as the "book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Matt 1:1). This statement is followed by a genealogy which places special emphasis on the status of Abraham and David—even to the extent of adding a comment that "all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen generations" (v. 17). Thus, the title "Son of David" seems clearly to have had a special significance for Matthew.

In addition, there is the fact that the first instances in which persons call Jesus the Son of David in Matthew are unique to that Gospel. And still another point suggesting that the constellation may have originated with the author of the First Gospel is the fact that *every* account of the healing of a blind person in the Gospel of Matthew is set forth in close association with the use of the phrase "Son of David."

On the other hand, against the first hypothesis is the fact that not all of the uses of the title "Son of David" in Matthew are associated with the other two motifs. The contexts of the first two occurrences (1:1, 20) use the phrase without any accompanying reference to those motifs. The first occurrence seems obviously to represent an editorial use unattributable to any other source. The second applies the term to Joseph, not to Jesus.

Another reason for doubting that the author of the First Gospel created the constellation is the fact that this Gospel makes no overt reference to the account in 2 Sam 5. This is significant in view of Matthew's repeated reference to events as being fulfillments of OT Scripture; thus, about the only credible way to account for Matthew's absence of a reference to 2 Sam 5 in the passages where the three motifs appear is to conclude that this Gospel writer did not see such a connection. In other words, the counterpoint was already orchestrated before the author of the First Gospel wrote that Gospel.

Further Relevant Considerations

In our attempt to account for the three-motif constellation in the Gospel of Matthew, a further point to consider is the fact that both Mark and Luke have parallels to the healing incidents in Matthew and that both use the phrase "Son of David." It would, of

course, be difficult to argue that Matthew originated the three-motif constellation if an example of it can be found in one of his sources. As for the other synoptic Gospels, this constellation is not, however, really present in Mark, much less in Luke.

In Matthew 20, as Jesus goes out of Jericho, he is addressed as "Son of David" by two blind men. Since he is on his way to Jerusalem, there is continuity here with his entrance into Jerusalem and his being hailed there as "Son of David," his healing of the blind and the lame, and his conflict with the chief priests and scribes. In this entire section of Matthew the title "Son of David" occurs four times (20:30-31; 21:9,15), there are two encounters with the blind (20:30; 21:14), and there are two instances of conflict with religious authorities (21:12,15). Thus, the three motifs are manifestly present.

In Mark, on the other hand, there is no use of the title "Son of David" in connection with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, and there is no reference to his healing of the blind and the lame. In addition, there is a clear break in Mark's narrative between 11:11 and 11:12, so that the conflicts with religious authorities at 11:15 and 11:27-33 are not indicated as being a part or follow-through of the Bartimaeus incident. In that incident there is indeed a connection between the use of the title "Son of David" and the healing of the blind beggar; but the third motif, that of conflict with religious authorities, is not indicated as being a part of that event or in close conjunction with it.³

3. *Interpretation of the Data*

There are three aspects of the data which require interpretation: (1) the relationship of the three-motif constellation to the use of the title "Son of David" in Matt 1, (2) the general function of this

³It is often assumed that the author of the First Gospel changed the Bartimaeus story which he found in Mark, dropping the name and speaking of two blind men. (See, e.g., Sherman E. Johnson's treatment in *IB* 7:498.) Yet, the case for literary dependence here is weak. The account of the healing of the blind men in Matthew has 79 words, with only 21 identical with words in Mark, and even six of these are trivial: *ti, autō, hina, kai, kai, autō* (Matt 20:32b-34 and Mark 10:51b-52). Only one phrase is significant enough to suggest strongly any literary dependence: *kai stas ho Iēsous* (Matt 20:32 and Mark 10:49). In my view, the author of the First Gospel doubtless had Mark before him, but he seems also to have had another source which he followed here rather than Mark. Indeed, he probably followed that source throughout the section 21:11-19 as well.

constellation in Matthew, and (3) the relation of the strong emphasis on "Son of David" in Matthew to the passage in which Jesus indicates that the Messiah is not the son of David (Matt 22:41-46). The following observations may be made:

1. If I am correct in concluding that the absence of an explicit reference to 2 Sam 5:4-10 and the two uses of "Son of David" in Matt 1 without association with blindness are indications that the author of the First Gospel probably did not see a special importance in references to blindness in conjunction with the "Son-of-David" title, then his reason for taking over this two-motif combination undoubtedly related to the popular use of "Son of David" as a messianic title. He used such incidents as he found them, relating them fairly intact. This would agree with his use of both "Son of David" and "Son of Abraham" in his opening sentence. "Son of David" would assert Jesus' lordship over the Jews, and "Son of Abraham" would assert Jesus' lordship over the non-Jews, the nations to whom Abraham was to be a blessing.

2. The function of the three-motif constellation in Matthew is complicated by the author's taking over a two-motif combination ("Son of David" and blindness/lameness) and uniting it with a third motif (conflict with religious authorities). The two-motif combination may already have had a function which does not appear in its use in Matthew. Nevertheless, when used in conjunction with the motif of conflict with religious authorities, the two-motif combination serves to indicate popular affirmation of Jesus as Messiah in contrast to the rejection of that popular claim by the Jewish religious authorities.

Since Matthew, in my view, probably found the "Son-of-David" and the blindness motifs already combined in at least two sources available to him (Mark being one of them), that combination must have been an early one, possibly preliterate. The joining of this two-motif combination with the third motif, however, appears only in Matthew. The conjunction seems somewhat strained in that at no point do the religious authorities speak specifically to the blindness theme. In the pericope of the blind and dumb demoniac, the authorities dismiss Jesus as an exorcist whose power comes from evil sources (12:22-24). This is the sort of reply given also in indicating Jesus' conflict with the authorities in the healing of a "dumb demoniac" (9:32-34), an incident recorded in immediate conjunction with the first "Son-of-David"/blindness healing (vv. 27-31).

In all of the references wherein the three-motif constellation occurs in Matthew, the opposition to Jesus is on a forensic level. The enthusiasm for Jesus is likewise reasonable and lacking in any sort of fanaticism. Moreover, the constellation does not function in Matthew to set the stage for martyrdom, but to indicate popular support for a religio-political cause and the official resistance given to it.

3. Despite minor differences, all three synoptic Gospels make the same point on the question of the relation of the Messiah to David. The point that then comes as a climax and surprises us is that in reality the Messiah is not properly called "Son of David" because he is David's Lord. This is, of course, one aspect of a general insistence in the NT that Christ is superior to OT figures. The extent, diversity, and vigor of this emphasis make it a distinctive NT motif and one worth documenting here somewhat at length.

In Paul and John there is the superiority of Christ to Moses (2 Cor 3:7-14; John 1:17; 6:33; cf. also Acts 13:38-39 and Heb 3:3). Matthew and Luke record the superiority of Christ to Solomon (Matt 12:42; Luke 11:31), and they also record the superiority of Christ to Jonah (Matt 12:41 and Luke 11:32). John records the superiority of Christ to Abraham (John 8:33-58; cf. also Heb 6:19-7:8). All the synoptic Gospels record the teaching that Christ is superior to David (Matt 22:43-45; Mark 12:37; Luke 20:41-44; cf. also Acts 2:22-36; 13:36-37), and a related theme appears in Matt 12:6.

The synoptic account of Christ's being David's lord finds all three Gospels in accord on the general thrust and the important specific components of the pericope. The specific components are: (1) Jesus is called the Son of David, (2) David in the Psalm (101:1) says that Christ is his lord, and (3) this indicates that the Christ is not merely the Son of David. The general thrust is that Jesus does not accept "Son of David" as adequately describing the Christ.

For interpreting Mark and Luke this does not present any great problem. It does present a problem for interpreting Matthew. Although it is true that in Matthew Jesus never applies the term "Son of David" to himself and that likewise his disciples never apply it to him, nevertheless the author of the First Gospel uses the appellation "Son of David" to describe Jesus (1:1) and emphasizes its popular use. The term is therefore obviously important to him.

All of this would lead us to expect that the account in Matt 22:41-46 would therefore have toned down the general thrust of the story and might even have sought to diminish its importance in the

Holy-Week narrative. But when we compare this episode in Matthew with the same episode in Mark and Luke, however, we find the opposite to be the case. Indeed, in Matthew the issue is placed in a more formal setting than in Mark and Luke, and the steps of literary progression are clearer and better defined. The First Gospel gives a clear and distinct structure to the episode:

Setting—	22:41
The question at issue—	22:42a
The answer—	22:42b
Evaluation of the answer—	22:43-45
Conclusion—	22:46

This is an evaluation form, and it is not unique, of course, to Matthew, for it appears in Mark and Luke as well.⁴ Its function is to highlight theological conflict, especially key moments of theological development, and is essentially a Socratic type of device that moves from a generally accepted position to a more profound understanding.⁵ This episode is, therefore, given special attention and special importance in Matthew.

The effect of the careful development of the "Son-of-David" motif up to this point in Matthew and its dramatic deflating here serves to establish and emphasize the fact that Jesus did not permit anyone to define for him the nature of his claims. It is clear in Matthew that Jesus had a genealogical claim to the title "Son of David"; it is clear that he passed the tests of his spiritual claim to the title; it is clear that he was popularly acclaimed as the "Son of David." In short, it is clear by this point in Matthew that Jesus had the credentials which qualified him to be called the "Son of David." And it is at just this point that he rejected the title as constituting an inadequate description of his claims.

From here on in Matthew, the point of the conflict is no longer between a popular concept and the rabbinic interpretation of its fulfillment. Rather, from this juncture onward the conflict centers on Jesus' own personal claims and his enemies' determination to destroy those claims.

⁴See the excursus at the end of this article for two examples involving material included in all three Synoptics.

⁵It may also be considered as an example of *qal w^ahomer*, a rabbinic interpretational rule attributed to Hillel.

EXCURSUS
TWO EXAMPLES OF THE EVALUATION FORM

1. The Confession at Caesarea Philippi

Element of the Form	Matthew	Mark	Luke
Setting	16:13a	8:27a	9:18a
Question	16:13b	8:27b	9:18b
Answer	16:14	8:28	9:19
Evaluation	16:15-16	8:29	9:20
Conclusion	16:17-20	8:30	9:21-22

2. The Debate over Authority

Setting	21:23-24	11:27-29	20:1-3
Question	21:25a	11:30	20:4
Answer	(21:25b)	(11:31a)	(20:5a)
	(21:26a)	(11:32a)	(20:6a)
Evaluation	(21:25c)	(11:31b)	(20:5b)
	(21:26b)	(11:32b)	(20:6b)
Conclusion	21:27	11:33	20:7-8