

LEADERSHIP: MORE SACRIFICE THAN GLORY

A SOCIO-RHETORICAL READING OF MATTHEW 12

By:

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ABSTRACT

Power and authority are difficult topics because researchers tend to play out the implications of each in extremes. Jesus does some fascinating things in Matthew 12, where words, actions, law, family, miracles, historic prophecy, current prophecy, power, and authority all intersect in a confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees. This paper analyzes the narrational texture/pattern, argumentative texture, opening-middle-closing texture/pattern, social texture, and inter-texture of this chapter using socio-rhetorical criticism as Jesus interprets David, Leviticus, Hosea, Isaiah, Jonah, and the Queen of Sheba. Specifically, the analysis should help Christians reflect on their importance, opportunities, and responsibilities in the world, especially relating to Christian leadership. Through the various interactions with the Pharisees, it looks at the purpose of authority, the use of power, and how Jesus “proves” his words when the Pharisees ask for a sign. The only sign Jesus offers, that of Jonah, will be also explored. Overall, Jesus points to an authority that enthrones God, using sacrifice and undesirable calling as proofs. Finally, reflection will be provided on Jesus’s invitation, especially as it contrasts with modern notions of leadership (charismatic, servant, transformational, and values-based). Ultimately, Christian leadership is more sacrifice than glory. Rather, it’s more sacrifice, then glory.

LEADERSHIP IN THE BOOK OF MATTHEW

Hackman & Johnson tell us, “Leadership seems to be linked to what it means to be human.”¹ Capitalizing on the incarnation, Jesus presents a fascinating look at leadership in Matthew, the gospel designed to establish him as king. However, Jesus engages the Pharisees in Matthew 12 in a manner that is not self-elevating, but one that simultaneously affirms and challenges their power and authority. Narratively, the escalating engagements between Jesus and the Pharisees are driven by the Pharisees own actions. It begins with the disciples picking grain, an innocuous action except for the day and ends with an invitation from Jesus to do God’s will. The passage is rife with Old Testament references, as Jesus structures his arguments from Israel’s history and characters the Pharisees would acknowledge. Framed in the larger context of Matthew, which attempts to establish Christ as king, chapter 12 contrasts the actions of that king against the current religious rulers of the time. Much practical application for Christian leadership emerges from the give and take of these interactions.

This paper applies the socio-rhetorical criticism method to study Scripture by exploring narrational texture/pattern, argumentative texture, opening-middle-closing texture/pattern, social texture, and inter-texture to understand the construction of this text. Geisler states, “As Christ is God and Man in one Person, so Scripture is, indivisibly, God’s Word in human language.”² Hence, analyzing the words of Jesus within scripture, especially as he quotes other scripture, should present insights in both method and result. Then, these insights are compared and contrasted with modern notions of leadership, generating recommendations for Christian leaders.

NARRATIONAL TEXTURE AND PATTERN

The Pharisees drive the engagements in Matthew 12. Robbins tells us, “Narrational texture resides in voices through which the words in texts speak.”³ The narrator of this passage uses both the words and actions of the Pharisees to propel the action. In verse 2, they “saw” and “said”. In verse 10, they “asked” to “accuse”. In verse 14, they “went out” and “conspired”. In verse 24, they “heard” and “said”. In verse 38, they “answered him, saying”. Each of these words and even the motives, known by Christ in verses 15 and 25, are contrasted by Jesus’s gentle reproaches and departures. Far from pursuing conflict, Jesus responds to each challenge by teaching both by word and action. In verse 3, he quotes David’s actions. In verses 11-12, he contrasts helping men with helping animals. In verse 15, he withdraws. In verse 25, he discusses divided kingdoms. Finally, in verse 39, he challenges the concept of “proving” his teaching through a sign.

It is important to recognize the narrational texture to see this pattern of give and take. While the disciples engage in actions, the Pharisees begin the challenge. The words and motives of the Pharisees are contrasted with the words and actions of Jesus. The “heart” of the Pharisees conflicts with the “heart” of Jesus, proven by his actions and upheld by his words.

ARGUMENTATIVE TEXTURE

A second texture of this passage looks at the “argumentative devices [used] to persuade the reader to think and act in one way rather than another.”⁴ Matthew 12:1-21 presents a fairly classic rhetorical model of theme, rationale, contrary with rationale, restatement of thesis and rationales, analogy, example and testimony of antiquity. The theme comes in verse 7, “you would have not condemned the guiltless.” The rationale is in verses 3-6 as Jesus discusses how David and the Pharisees break the law and are not guilty. The contrary with rational is in verse 10 in that the Pharisees still wish to accuse him. The restatement of thesis and rational comes in

verse 12 as Jesus presents the value of man and the lawfulness of doing good. The analogy is in verses 11-12 as man is compared to a sheep. A second contrary with rationale is presented in verse 14 as the Pharisees again conspired “how to destroy him.” Finally, the example and testimony from antiquity is the quote from Isaiah in verses 18-21. Overall, the major premise of this narrative is that power should be used to do good. The minor premise is that the Pharisees are misusing their power to condemn the guiltless. Verse 22 hints at the conclusion as it presents a demon-oppressed man both blind and mute. Jesus holds the power to reverse the Pharisees position as they follow the wrong leader, but they are blinded, unwilling to receive the healing he offers.

It is important to recognize the structure of the arguments presented to understand the strength of the case being made. The Pharisees are in authority and misusing it, and Matthew systematically undermines their position by the words and actions of Jesus chock full of direct Old Testament references in 1 Samuel, Leviticus, Hosea, and Isaiah and indirect references to 1 and 2 Kings. As such, the first half of Matthew 12 sets the tone for the conclusions that follow.

OPENING-MIDDLE-CLOSING TEXTURE AND PATTERN

Before those conclusions are explored, Robbins gives another lens: “Repetition, progression, and narration regularly work together to create the opening, middle, and closing of a unit of text.”⁵ Matthew 12 requires the reader to have an understanding of Israel’s history to see the centrality of the “stretched out hand” as a marker that separates these three sections of text. While most of the healings are unnamed in this chapter, the man with the withered hand is particularly identified in verse 15. Working backward, verse 7 quotes Hosea 6:6: “I desire mercy and not sacrifice.” The narrator uses this form of intertexture to shift the “word-string” to create “the force of a proverb, maxim, or authoritative judgment.”⁶ In Hosea, the prophecy was

originally delivered to Josiah, the king of Judah who, after finding the book of the law during Temple repairs, proceeded to clean house. He even burned the bones of the priests of Bethel at the high place set up by Jeroboam.⁷ These actions were previously prophesied in 1 Kings 13. Jeroboam had set up this high place, complete with a golden calf because he feared that if people returned to the temple for worship, “the kingdom [would] turn back to the house of David.”⁸ At its dedication, a prophet specifically identified Josiah as the “son born to the house of David” who would “sacrifice on you the priests of the high places ... and human bones shall be burned on you.”⁹ Jeroboam then “stretched out his hand from the altar, saying ‘seize him.’ And his hand, which he stretched out against him, dried up, so that he could not draw it back to himself.”¹⁰ This link gives an indication that the Matthew 12:7 reference concludes the opening section of this passage. Jesus has established himself as “lord of the Sabbath” by his use of power and authority. While the Pharisees look to condemn, an action Jesus relates all the way back to Jeroboam, Jesus offers a different approach: a heart-based acknowledgement into the motives driving behavior. Jeroboam’s motives are clear, and he’s “sold his soul” for fear of losing his power. When he stretches out his hand, he grasps to maintain that power. God withers his hand. The rule of the 10 tribes of the Northern Kingdom God has established for him has been misused, and the withered hand gives the metaphor for his weakened position as he’s sought worldly means to fortify his power. Essentially, the Pharisees are warned not to condemn in order to maintain or strengthen their authority. That approach has historically backfired.

The man with the withered hand in the synagogue begins the middle section of the passage. The Pharisees target this man as the basis of a healing question in order to accuse Jesus. The Pharisees treat him like an object, a means to gain an advantage over Jesus. While the Pharisees display their ignorance of the point of Jesus’s teaching in the opening section, Jesus

continues his description of the law by pointing to man's value over that of animals. In this section, Jesus orders the man with the withered hand to "stretch out your hand."¹¹ When the man obeys, his hand is restored. Jesus points to a better use of power—a power used to "do good"¹², not for the self-promotion and tight control of the opening section. In fact, "the withholding of good is an evil work that defiles the Sabbath."¹³

The closing section portrays an invitation with Jesus "stretching out his hand toward his disciples."¹⁴ His reaching out isn't to grasp power, nor does he have to reach out for healing. Jesus, instead, reaches out to invite others to join him as he "does the will of [his] Father in heaven."¹⁵ Narratively, Matthew presents the direction the Pharisees are reaching in the opening (for power and control), the direction the reader should be reaching in the middle (for healing), and the direction Jesus is reaching in the closing (for disciples).

THE GIVE AND TAKE

Now that the larger framework has been established, the various engagements with the Pharisees can be explored by their power contrasts. Seven distinct sections mostly align with the words of the Pharisees and can be divided into three categories: 1) purpose of authority; 2) use of power; and 3) "proving" it. Each section draws extensively from the Old Testament as Jesus adjusts the conventional wisdom of those currently "in charge".

Purpose of Authority

The first three engagements with the Pharisees all fall into the category of authority's purpose. At the chapter's opening, the disciples are plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath. When the Pharisees challenge these actions as unlawful, Jesus points first to David, then to priests. Jesus recites the narrative in substantially his own words, a specific form of intertexture.¹⁶ After Jonathan warns him to flee from Saul, David goes to Ahimelech in the

tabernacle to ask for food.¹⁷ This priest is unprepared for hospitality and only has the 12 show-bread loaves, which Leviticus tells us can only be eaten by a priest, his family, and his slaves.¹⁸ No “stranger” may eat of these loaves. Ahimelech wants some confirmation from David as to his worthiness to take the bread, introducing the idea that David and his companions “have kept themselves from women.”¹⁹ David takes it one step further, saying “the vessels of the young men are holy even when it is an ordinary journey.”²⁰ Basically, he claims holiness as a course, manner, habit, or way of life. Based upon this logic, Ahimelech gives him 5 of the 12 loaves. Showing his mastery of the scriptures, Jesus then points to the priests themselves, quoting (again in his own words)²¹ the adjacent verse to the one with which Ahimelech is concerned. In Leviticus 22:9, the priests are instructed to “keep my charge, lest they bear sin for it and die thereby when they profane it: I am the Lord who sanctifies them.” The verse says when they profane it because the priests work on the Sabbath in the performance of their duties. Their work isn’t sinful because the Lord sanctifies them.

Jesus doesn’t defend his disciples against the Pharisees by arguing that they aren’t breaking the law. Instead, he points to two other lawbreakers: David and Ahimelech. Neither followed the letter of the Levitical law. Then Jesus uses the same logic as David himself: mercy should be offered to those engaged in a life of holiness. Pointing to David’s own logic (a hero they would celebrate), he calls the Pharisees’ condemnation misdirected. Basically, they’ve misused their authority by not looking beyond the action to the heart behind it.

For the second engagement, Jesus yields home turf advantage by entering “their” synagogue in Matthew 12:9. Here’s the man with the withered hand and Jesus balancing the expectations of his Father without undermining the authority of the Pharisees. As shown earlier, the Pharisees are blinded not just by the authority they hold, but also by the responses Jesus

provides when they challenge his actions. Jesus turns their challenge back on itself and challenges their own use of authority if they aren't "doing good". As the Jewish community leaders, the Pharisees don't seem interested in having their authority questioned, and they don't respond to the challenge by changing. Instead, they seek to undermine the one reversing their challenge. In this honor culture, the Pharisees have lost two rounds of *riposte* (challenge-response), losing honor in each exchange. By picking this public fight, the Pharisees have sought to "usurp the reputation of [Jesus], to deprive [him] of his reputation."²² In fact, Robbins tells us "Every social interaction comes to be perceived as an affair of honor, a contest or game of honor, in which the players are faced with wins, ties, and losses."²³ Stinging from their twice-failed rebukes, the Pharisees leave.

Jesus isn't the antagonist in this passage, heckling the Pharisees for their scriptural misinterpretations. Quite the opposite, Jesus quietly uses his authority to "do good". The passage takes it a step further as he "ordered them not to make him known"²⁴ after various healings. Contrasted with the Pharisees' desire to trap him and cause him to lose honor (devaluing man), Jesus uses his authority to honor those who would follow and obey (valuing man). These social codes of honor are important to understanding not just the win/lose dynamic of *riposte*, but also the shift in how Jesus gains honor not by putting others in their place, but by elevating the unworthy.²⁵

Jesus, by these actions, embodies and exemplifies both the historic male and female ideals of honor. Robbins says, "The purpose of honor is to serve as a social rating that entitles a person to interact in specific ways with his or her equals, superiors, and subordinates, according to the prescribed cultural cues of the society."²⁶ Jesus, by the *ascribed* honor from his Father holds the culturally "male" version and, by his "sensitivity about what others think, say, and do

with regard to his honor”²⁷ simultaneously embodies the “female” version of honor of that time. Said another way, Jesus upholds his honor birth right (male) by appropriate responses to the Pharisees while also acting in a manner that positively portrays “following and serving”²⁸ (female). This combination is powerful, as Jesus does not pit the “male” and “female” versions against one another, a common historic and modern mistake. Instead, he offers believers an unearned inheritance (historically “male” honor) to enable them to follow and serve (historically “female” honor). Instead of putting everyone in his or her “rightful” place, Jesus both challenges and reconstructs the cultural understanding of honor.

Further explaining Jesus’s actions, the narrator then provides a long Old Testament quote that gives additional clarity to the authority interpretations of the first two interactions with the Pharisees. Jesus quotes Isaiah 42:1-4 with some interesting differences. Robbins calls this “narrative amplification.”²⁹

Isaiah 42:1-4

Behold my servant, whom I uphold,
 my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
 I have put my Spirit upon him;
 he will bring forth justice to the nations.
 He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice,
 or make it heard in the street;
 a bruised reed he will not break,
 and a faintly burning wick he will not quench;
 he will faithfully bring forth justice.
 He will not grow faint or be discouraged
 till he has established justice in the earth;
 and the coastlands wait for his law.

Matthew 12:18-21

“Behold, my servant whom I have chosen,
 my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased.
 I will put my Spirit upon him,
 and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.
 He will not quarrel or cry aloud,
 nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets;
 a bruised reed he will not break,
 and a smoldering wick he will not quench,
 until he brings justice to victory;
 and in his name the Gentiles will hope.”

Table 1

The narrator starts by changing the future tense prophecy into a present-day fulfilment. “Uphold” is removed. “My beloved” is added. The Old Testament meaning for “cry aloud” (*tsa`aq*)³⁰ has the implication of crying out for aid/help, and “lift up his voice” (*shama*)³¹ has the sense of making himself heard. Matthew changes it to wrangling (*erizō*)³² and shouting

(*kraugazō*).³³ This change creates more the sense of a calm temper that others may not hear. Linking the passage to Jesus's instruction to those he's healed to "not make him known", it seems that Jesus isn't healing for the sake of popularity. He neither lifts himself up nor asks others to do so.

Probably the largest difference between the passages is "until he brings justice to victory" replacing "he will faithfully bring forth justice". The "surety" of a coming justice turns into forceful (*ekballō*)³⁴ victory (*nikos*).³⁵ Hence, the new context looks like a final decision that comes by forceful action. Through the lens of the crucifixion, the implication becomes clearer, where a just, final decision is won. The promise is in Isaiah, and Jesus clarifies the cost in this quotation.

Finally, Jesus doesn't reference the fact that he won't grow faint or be discouraged, and the earth and coastlands are replaced by Gentiles. The final change replaces "wait for his law" with "hope in his name". As Christ fulfills the law, his name becomes the basis of hope.

Looking through an authority lens, Jesus presents a calm use of his power without self-promotion. Additionally, the promised force comes not from Jesus, but upon him. When Jesus accepts that undeserved condemnation, a final decision gets rendered, and man's hope becomes his name.

Overall, authority is reinterpreted within these interactions in three primary ways. First, it should not be misused to bring condemnation where it is not warranted. Second, it should be used to "do good". Third, it is not self-promoting. Ironically, it even presents the opportunity, when used properly, to accept undeserved condemnation when its source is secure. Applied in organizations, leaders can serve the needs of the organization by "doing good" and not bringing unwarranted correction—which requires knowing employees well enough to understand the

motives behind their words and actions. Finally, it allows for the more difficult decisions when that authority gets challenged. When the leader's motives are pure, not self-promoting, and used to "do good" and not condemn, it becomes very difficult to uphold charges against it. Sadly, charges may come and require standing in the midst of undeserved condemnation when the only recourse is to find security in Christ.

Use of Power

Authority shifts to power as Matthew 12:22 continues with a demon-oppressed man. Demon-oppressed (*daimonizomai*)³⁶ could just as easily have been interpreted as "under the power of a demon." Jesus heals this man, proving his power over demons. Amazing the people, they ask, "Can this be the Son of David?"³⁷ The Pharisees attribute his power to a higher demonic force. Instead, Jesus teaches on power's direction. For Jesus to overpower requires a different source, an opposition to the power currently wielded. Otherwise, the power is undermined from the same source that it originates. Metaphorically, that would be like using additional acid to decrease acidity. Looking at how the world uses power, it's not hard to see the source of their mistake. If every man constitutes his own kingdom, then the good/evil dichotomy gets replaced with an "every man for himself" power struggle. The Pharisees get caught in this misunderstanding. Their authority as Israel's spiritual leaders comes from God, but they aren't looking to Him for the correct use of that authority. The resulting internal division they feel boils over in the face of the Son of God's power and authority. As such, they attribute the division not to themselves, but to Jesus.

Satan's power is contrasted with the Spirit (*pneuma*)³⁸ of God, described by Thayer's Greek Lexicon as "God's power or agency". Jesus acts by this power,³⁹ and the Pharisees are positioning themselves against it.⁴⁰ Attributing the work of God to Satan constitutes the clearest

blasphemy that could be attributed to the Spirit. Jesus uses his power to gather.⁴¹ He asks his people to gather with him, direct praise toward God, and submit their own use of power to Jesus's teaching as an example. Power games that ignore the larger picture will only result in division, internally and externally.

Continuing this discussion of power, Jesus shifts to trees to look at the use of words in Matthew 12:33-37. Telling the Pharisees to "make"⁴² the tree either good or bad means they still have a choice. Yet that choice requires a joining of faith and works, which "cannot be divorced if regeneration involves a new inclination."⁴³ When Jesus moves from trees to vipers, he doesn't let the Pharisees off the hook that their bad fruit is only unintentionally bringing harm to others. In fact, deSilva describes this description (brood of vipers) as "the most virulent of insults available to people in the ancient world."⁴⁴ Jesus recognizes their motives, calling their actions purposeful poisoning. Jesus sees the evil intent behind their pretended good speech. He even tells them that people will give an account for every careless (fruitless) word they speak.⁴⁵ In short, these verses give four different powers of words: 1) good/fruitful; 2) bad; 3) poisonous; 4) fruitless.

Good fruit brings life and health. These seeds, planted in good soil employees, can multiply in effectiveness. Words crafted well can live long beyond their original use. Bad fruit sickens, whether half-baked or ill-chosen, and leaves employees looking elsewhere for nourishment. Poisonous words look good, tempting with the appearance of health, but result in only injury. Before others notice the effect, the poison spreads and twisted logic affects growing populations, even bringing a false comfort. In organizations, it can be bosses who give the appearance of help only to take the credit and bury your contribution. Lastly, fruitless words are meaningless. Like cocktail reception small talk, these words have no lasting effect.

The third power discussion acknowledges the struggle of power. In Matthew 12:43-45, there is a strange discussion of a man with an unclean spirit. Two connections show the logic of this passage. First, the healing of the demon-oppressed man had led to a debate about power. Important to note is that “demon possession is a state of impurity since one is inhabited by an unclean spirit.”⁴⁶ Jesus makes it clear that his decision is final if it comes by the Spirit of God.⁴⁷ This passage presents the contrasting position. In Matthew 12:43, it is unclear why the unclean spirit departs, but his return two verses later proves the temporary nature of his departure as he says to himself, “I will return to my house.”⁴⁸ Here, the decision is not final. The second connection is to Matthew 12:29. Jesus asks, “How can someone enter a strong man’s house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house.” The question for the “house” is one of ownership. The unclean spirit has claimed ownership. A cleanup project occurred during his absence, presuming improved, though temporary, self-control. What about Jesus?

Jesus isn’t content to be a tenement. He’s there for ownership. He isn’t looking for a beautification project to further the work of man or demon, and he isn’t there to clean. He’s there to plunder. Depending on man’s comfortable existence, he binds the power of Satan to take over the house. He’s not there to clean. He’s there to purify. Yet, this position should offer comfort, not concern. Isaiah 49:24-25 says, “Can the prey be taken from the mighty, or the captives of a tyrant be rescued? For thus says the LORD: ‘Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken, and the prey of the tyrant be rescued, for I will contend with those who contend with you, and I will save your children.’” Jesus usurping the power of Satan brings hope!

From a power perspective, he’s contrasting man’s traditional approaches to power against his. Using the world’s standards may appear successful in the short term as people admire how

“clean” others’ lives appear, but they aren’t realizing the secret invitation and risky position of the “self-made”. So many stories discuss a climactic encounter as people sell their souls. Jesus paints a picture here not of climax, but of slowly compounding compromise that accepts and celebrates worldly power, man’s praise. Focusing on ultimate power, Jesus asks for a reversal, not surface-level improvements. When he’s the owner, there is no room when the unclean spirit returns. Instead, you become transformed into a house built for his comfort. Only then will his power make sense, a power for others.

The final power discussion is an invitation in Matthew 12:46-50. Here, Jesus uses family to make his offer to an “alternative kinship group”.⁴⁹ He names his Father for the first time in the chapter. He’s called himself the “Son of Man” three times.⁵⁰ He’s spoken of the Spirit four times,⁵¹ but only in the last verse of the chapter does he mention his Father. It is here that he stretches out his hand to offer a better use of power and an invitation to become a child of God. This final section portrays Jesus as having what Robbins calls a “dyadic personality: one who needs another person continually in order to know who he or she really is.”⁵² What sets Jesus apart is that his interrelatedness is with God, not humans, and he offers that same connection to Christians. The Christian relates to Christ like Christ relates to the Father, and he gives an invitation to join his kingdom, one where power is used differently.

Jesus’s power is used to gather and praise in submission to God. It’s one where words are used to bring life and health, not twisted or wasted. Jesus’s power is also final as he takes up residence in the midst of life’s messiness. He uses it for one to multiply its effects for others. Finally, his power is an invitation to join him in gathering, praising, bringing life, and accepting him in a permanent decision to do the will of his Father.

“Proving” It

Interpretation is always stronger when it can be proven. Jesus has said some pretty challenging things to the Pharisees. Now they want him to “prove” it. Commonly, Old Testament prophets would prove their authority with a sign. In the earlier example of Jeroboam and the withering of his hand, the prophet gave a sign to prove his words: “The altar also was torn down, and the ashes poured out from the altar, according to the sign that the man of God had given by the word of the LORD.”⁵³ Here, though, the Pharisees are acting like the people asking Jesus for a sign to prove his words in John 6:30 after he had previously fed them with bread and fish. The Pharisees aren’t asking in order to believe, they are attempting to shift focus from Christ’s words to the requested sign, a logical red herring.

Jesus, knowing their motives, refuses. Instead, he repeats the theme established throughout the chapter by pointing them to an example that inverts power and authority, one proven by subjugation and sacrifice. In Matthew 12:39-41, Jesus presents the “sign” of Jonah, again in his own words.⁵⁴ Jesus proves his authority by its cost, a path of shame that leads to honor. In short, he tells the Pharisees that his authority requires subjugation to be fully realized. Using unlikely foreigners to make his case, Jesus points to the Ninevites and the Queen of Sheba. The Ninevites had to repent and the Queen of the South had to travel. Both left comfort to turn to God.

The sign of Jonah has significant implications for Christian leaders. First, it falls in Matthew 12, a chapter that consistently contrasts the differences in how authority and power should be used in the kingdom of heaven. Second, the top three leaders in Christian history all have links to this sign: Jesus, Peter, and Paul. Jesus provides the clearest linkage through this passage. Peter, then called Simon, receives his commission after Jesus asks, “Who do you say that I am?”⁵⁵ After Simon calls him “the Christ, the Son of the living God,” Jesus says, “Blessed

are you Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.”⁵⁶ Calling Simon “Son of Jonah” links Peter’s story to both Jesus and Jonah as Jesus then commissions him with both a name change and the keys to the kingdom. Later, Luke describes the Cornelius conversion in Acts 10 based upon the Jonah narrative, and Peter plays the part of Jonah. Robert Wall provides the following connections:

“Luke has not selected incidental catchwords, but decisive 'moments' in the Jonah narrative itself: the 'place' (Joppa) where the story begins; the number three which signifies where Jonah's 'conversion' takes place; the 'commission' (arise and go) to proclaim the Word of God for Gentiles, the 'conversion' (believe) of the Gentiles, and its 'consequences' (anger and God's rebuttal). In our opinion, Luke has rearranged his Cornelius tradition(s) according to the Jonah narrative in order to situate it against the backdrop of the account of Jonah in the Old Testament.”⁵⁷

Paul’s connection is more limited and potentially not intended in Galatians, but his commission from God for the Gentiles followed by three years away still reflects the actor (God), audience (Gentiles), and number (three) of the Jonah story.

Each actor, save Jesus, receives a “three” correction. Jonah is corrected for his denunciation of a foreign kingdom. Peter is corrected on the source of his cleanliness. Paul is corrected in his understanding of the scriptures, and each had misinterpreted the nature of Christ’s kingdom. In his sign of Jonah, Jesus doesn’t receive correction. Instead, he “earns” his kingdom title by what he suffers. In all cases, the kingdom is one that exalts God as the primary actor. As the only and independent Sovereign, God often commissions in ways that may give each player pause. Even Jesus struggles with his commission in the garden.⁵⁸

Turning back to the book of Jonah to better understand the “sign” Jesus offers, James Watts offers some clarifying observations. First, Watts calls Jonah an “orthodox and pious man who responds to salvation with appropriate thanksgiving.”⁵⁹ Yet, the Jonah story also “ignores the essential issue between the prophet and God: Jonah’s refusal of a prophetic commission.”⁶⁰

The song in Jonah 2

“is used in a subtle manner to draw out readers’ sympathies for Jonah’s predicament at sea, by playing on the expectation that the psalm’s presence marks the climax and immediate resolution of the story’s main conflict. The sympathies thus engendered remain after this expectation has been disappointed, thereby leaving readers vulnerable to the implications of the book’s quite different climax two chapters later.”⁶¹

To make his case, Watts turns to the modern example of musical theater:

“the bulk of a musical play’s dialogue is usually spoken, but the action is periodically punctuated by musical numbers involving song and dance either by the main actors alone or with a chorus. In contrast to the prose dialogue, which is spoken between characters and passively observed by the audience, the songs are often performed facing the spectators and addressed to them, establishing a more direct rapport between actors and audience. The most successful numbers may elicit such a positive reaction from the spectators that they become “show-stoppers,” literally bringing the action to a momentary halt while the audience registers its approval and, occasionally, prompts a repetition of the song. The writers of musicals therefore invariably place their best number, or at least a reprise of it, at the very end of the performance in order to finish the show on as good a note as possible.”⁶²

Jonah is strange in that it challenges reader expectations. The central psalm isn't the final story. Watts says, "the narratives of Jonah turn the tables on readers who, finding themselves typified in the psalm, identify with the prophet only to have his discredit reflect on themselves at the end of the story."⁶³ Jesus likewise inverts the power and authority expectations of his own readers by pointing to his "show-stopping" death and resurrection. He uses his power and authority as the "orthodox and pious" man to descend into the "heart of the earth",⁶⁴ purposefully fulfilling his commission in a manner none would expect.

The leadership implications of this Jonah "proof" are significant. Jesus offers a sign to prove his words, serving as a living example that typifies the leadership he endorses. Christian leadership likewise shifts expectations as leaders act out of an authority not their own, where the only sign offered is the resurrection, the seal where God accepts Christ's sacrifice. Ultimately, Christians are then freed to do the right thing because their deference is to the Lord of lords. Ironically, this second "lords" (*kyrieuō*)⁶⁵ is part of the Greek word, along with *kata*,⁶⁶ that would have been translated as leadership in that timeframe (*katakyrieuō*).⁶⁷ The connotation is movement from higher to lower combined with power or dominion. In other words, it discusses those who rule over others by virtue of their position. Jesus elevates that view by his position over all those rulers. Then he asks Christians not to elevate themselves, but by virtue of their relationship to this highest authority, to subjugate themselves to him.

CONTRAST WITH MODERN NOTIONS OF LEADERSHIP

Four of the more popular notions of leadership today are charismatic, transformational, servant, and values-based leadership. Each has an interesting history and contrasts with the leadership Jesus endorses within this passage.

Gardner tells us, “Max Weber borrowed the term *charisma* from Rudolph Sohm, the church historian, who had in turn borrowed it from St. Paul. As the latter used it, the word referred to gifts or powers that were manifestations of God’s grace. Weber used the term somewhat differently.”⁶⁸ Paul glorified God. Weber glorified men “endowed with supernatural, superhuman or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities.”⁶⁹ Clearly, this misconception misses the point that Jesus emphasizes. By removing the source, Weber makes the mistake of the Pharisees, disconnecting the gift from its purpose: to glorify God.

Bass defines transformational leaders as

“those who stimulate and inspire followers to both achieve extraordinary outcomes and, in the process, develop their own leadership capacity. Transformational leaders help followers grow and develop into leaders by responding to individual followers’ needs by empowering them and by aligning the objectives and goals of the individual followers, the leader, the group, and the larger organization.”⁷⁰

Jesus goes beyond stimulation and inspiration. He lives a life that reflects his teaching. Growth in disciples comes by both learning and living that teaching. As leaders, it requires pure motives, not self-promotion, along with doing good and not condemning. It means gathering, praising, bringing life, and accepting Jesus in a permanent decision to do the will of his Father. Finally, it means not elevating one’s self, but by virtue of a relationship to this highest authority, subjugating to him.

Greenleaf gives his thesis, “that more servants should emerge as leaders, or should follow only servant-leaders.”⁷¹ Unfortunately, no promise exists within scripture that service on earth will result in elevation this side of heaven. Neither do most have the benefit of picking and choosing under whose charge they will find themselves. Jesus offers not elevation, but

subjugation, which fits into Greenleaf’s construction of an honorable servant. Yet serving the needs of an organization can sometimes conflict with serving the people within it. Jesus presents a model that serves down only because it first serves up, as any reasonable servant should expect.

Kuczmariski and Kuczmariski tell us, “to make values-based leadership work, senior management must accept a shared leadership construct. This means that each individual in the organization, in effect, takes on a leadership role in some dimension. There is no hierarchy—it is unnecessary.”⁷² This modernistic notion of shared leadership sounds promising if all employees would “play the game”. Unfortunately, man’s nature reflects the greatest challenge to this notion. If there is no eternity, no higher power, then subjugation for later elevation makes no sense, and the get and grab of self-focus will undermine even the greatest efforts in power distribution and shared leadership. In fact, one only needs to look to the military forces of the world to realize the greatest threat to any society comes not from misunderstanding, but from perceived inequitable power distribution. Like the Pharisees’ response to Jesus, threats to the current order require getting rid of the threat given the values mismatch.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Thomas Paine once said, “A long habit of not thinking a thing wrong gives it the superficial appearance of being right, and raises at first a formidable outcry in defense of custom. But the tumult soon subsides. Time makes more converts than reason.”⁷³ If only leadership would follow this model. Yet, the only way to challenge wrong thinking is to present thinking derived from truth. As Christians, Jesus gives that truth in scripture by both word and deed, and Matthew constructs a solid case that kingdom leadership differs from the most popular leadership models in profound ways.

The biggest leadership risk in any organization is organizational schizophrenia, “as employees simultaneously try to achieve organizational goals and their own personal interests.”⁷⁴ Jesus challenges this notion by pointing followers toward kingdom goals as ideal to their personal interests, of which organizational goals should be a subset. The risk of a study like this is a common refrain when studying the actions of Christ: “I’m not Jesus”.

Even by that remark, people prove their desire to not subjugate themselves, leaving no room for elevation from God or others. When others want to see authority, leaders often prove it by asserting themselves in the small spans they control, giving orders or threats for non-compliance. Holding power tightly, leaders prove it to themselves by what they do to others.

Jesus presents a different way. Taking the weak position is an option because he receives his honor from the Father. John 13:3 says, “Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands ... began to wash the disciples’ feet.” Matt 28:18 says, “all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me ... go therefore and make disciples.” Jesus’s actions derive from the authority he’s already received. Likewise, Christians can take the weak position because they’ve already received undue honor. By Christ’s sacrifice, Christian positions are secure, meaning that it doesn’t have to be proven. That security provides freedom to quietly, consistently, and sacrificially honor the Savior. It also allows service in organizations and to people, not by orders, but by elevating their gaze. True authority is proven by sacrifice. To hold a position loosely, Christians have freedom to do the right thing. Clinging for security or the next position creates opportunities for steady compromise. Know your security in Christ. Sacrifice for both your organization and your people. Let others do the elevating. Ultimately, Christian leadership is more sacrifice than glory. Rather, it’s more sacrifice, then glory!

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- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.
- ⁶ Vernon K. Robbins. *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996, 41.
- ⁷ 2 Kings 23:16
- ⁸ 1 Kings 12:26
- ⁹ 1 Kings 13:2
- ¹⁰ 1 Kings 13:4
- ¹¹ Matt 12:13
- ¹² Matt 12:12
- ¹³ David deSilva. *Honor, Patronage, Kinship, and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000, 290.
- ¹⁴ Matt 12:49
- ¹⁵ Matt 12:50
- ¹⁶ Vernon K. Robbins. *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996, 43.
- ¹⁷ 1 Samuel 21
- ¹⁸ Leviticus 22:10
- ¹⁹ 1 Samuel 21:4
- ²⁰ 1 Samuel 21:5
- ²¹ Vernon K. Robbins. *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996, 43.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 80.
- ²³ *Ibid.*
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- ²⁵ Vernon K. Robbins. *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996, 63.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 76.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.
- ²⁹ Vernon K. Robbins. *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996, 51.
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<https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong=G4151&t=ESV>
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- ⁴⁰ Matt 12:31-32
- ⁴¹ Matt 12:30
- ⁴² Matt 12:33
- ⁴³ Dane Ortlund. *A New Inner Relish: Christian Motivation in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards*. Scotland, UK: Christian Focus, 2008, 163.
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- ⁴⁵ Matt 12:36
- ⁴⁶ David deSilva. *Honor, Patronage, Kinship, and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000, 284.
- ⁴⁷ Matt 12:28
- ⁴⁸ Matt 12:44
- ⁴⁹ David deSilva. *Honor, Patronage, Kinship, and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000, 197.
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- ⁵⁶ Matt 16:16-17
- ⁵⁷ Robert W. Wall "Peter, 'Son' of Jonah: The Conversion of Cornelius in the Context of Canon" *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 1987, 79-90.
- ⁵⁸ Matt 26:39
- ⁵⁹ James W. Watts, "Song and the Ancient Reader" *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, 22 no 2 Sum 1995, p 135.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 145.
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, 139-140
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*, 146.
- ⁶⁴ Matt 12:40
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