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The Last Biblical Hero

Tom O'Leary

There is no definitive record of the life of Jesus of Nazareth. His chief biographers, John, Luke, Mark, and Matthew, differ greatly on not only how to interpret the events of his life, but the occurrence of the events themselves. John's Jesus is God incarnate. Luke's is the regal, misunderstood Son of God and servant of fate. Matthew's Jesus is the heir of David and Mark's is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecies. These last two accounts are particularly notable, as their narratives follow a similar path to the stories of David and Moses. Matthew expanded the framework laid down in the gospel of Mark, presenting Jesus as the last biblical hero, both fulfilling the Lord's promise to David of an eternal kingdom and establishing a new covenant with God, just as Jesus' predecessors did before him.

According to the gospels, the first time Jesus comes into direct contact with God is when John baptizes him; "he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased'" (Mark 1.10-11). Matthew, expanding this passage, says that "the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased'" (Matthew 3.16-17). Matthew emphasizes Jesus' divine contact by having the heavens "opened to him" rather than being "torn apart" and having the spirit "alight" on Jesus rather than simply "descending" on him. The event is also partly a demonstration to the crowd, as God announces "This is my son" rather than the more personal "You are my son" of Mark.

This event parallels other divine adoptions throughout the Hebrew Bible, specifically God's blessing of David in Second Samuel in which God explains that he "will be a father to him and he shall be a son to me" (2 Samuel 7.14). God refers to David in the third person here, just as he refers to Jesus in the third person in Matthew. Given the general assumption of Markan Priority, this suggests that Matthew edited the text of Mark to better parallel God's adoption of David in Second Samuel. The adoption is also depicted in two of the psalms. In Psalm 2 David says that God told him "You are my son; today I have begotten you" (Psalms 2.7). and in Psalm 89 God declares that David "shall cry to me, 'You are my Father,/my God and the Rock of my salvation'" (Psalms 89.26). Already bound in blood, Jesus and David are now explicitly linked as sons of God during Jesus' baptism. This is the first of many instances in which Matthew draws parallels between Jesus and other biblical heroes.

After his baptism, Jesus is whisked away "by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights and afterwards he was famished" (Matthew 4.2-3). The text of Mark, however, simply says that Jesus "was in the wilderness forty days" (Mark 1.13) without specifying the forty nights. The duration of Jesus' trial in Matthew, forty days and forty nights, harkens back to several other tests in the Bible. From the Flood, in which "The rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights" (Genesis 7.12); to Moses' revelation on Mount Sinai, where "Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights" (Exodus 6.18); to the Israelites' forty year sojourn in the Sinai Desert as they seek to return to their homeland, to Elijah's flight from Jezebel's purge of the prophets, "He went...forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God" (1 Kings 19.8). Brutal trials lasting "forty days and forty nights" are a motif throughout the Old Testament. Jesus' endurance of a similar test of faith firmly establishes

his place as the heir of the Biblical heroes of old. Again, Matthew expands Mark's basic outline by lifting diction from the stories of the heroes of the Hebrew Bible in order to depict more explicitly Jesus as being in the tradition of the Jewish ancestral heroes; having already established Jesus' link with David, Matthew now deliberately links him to Moses.

Satan's temptations of Jesus also follow a biblical archetype. By resisting the urge to "command these stones to become loaves of bread" (Matthew 4.3), Jesus shows the restraint that Moses could not when he struck the rock to draw water from it rather than obeying God's orders in Numbers 20. Moses' folly caused God to deny the Israelites a timely passage into the Promised Land. Jesus does not demand wonders aggressively; instead, he works through God's grace. By refusing to "fall down and worship" (Matthew 4.9) Satan, Jesus avoids Solomon's greatest moral failing, his idolatry in First Kings 11 which resulted in the division of his kingdom. While Matthew does not explicitly include motifs from the reign of Solomon as he does in other passages, the thematic link is clear as both are tempted to violate the First Commandment, but Jesus was able to resist where Solomon was not. By showing that he surpasses the greatest leaders in Jewish history in piety and wisdom, Matthew shows Jesus to be both like and unlike heroes past. Faced with the same temptations of his precursors, Jesus is able to overcome them.

Jesus' superior judgment then implies that his teachings must be superior to those of Moses or Solomon, as he is able to rise above their moral failings. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is a watershed moment in the gospel of Matthew, with no antecedent in Mark, which firmly establishes Jesus as both the heir to the priestly tradition of Moses, and Moses' superior. Having just established Jesus as the ultimate moral authority by example of his own righteousness in Matthew 4, the next three chapters summarize his moral teachings. He delivers these in the same style as Moses' pronouncements to the Hebrews in Deuteronomy. Jesus, in establishing his new moral code, deliberately draws upon the legacy of Moses, casting himself as Moses' successor as law giver to the Jewish community. He even contradicts Moses' teachings in some instances, suggesting a closer connection to God than Moses himself. He dismisses the idea of "an eye for an eye" in favor of a pacifistic philosophy in which it is necessary to "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5.44). He goes back to the teachings of Moses because they form the roots of the religion Judaism had become, and a fundamental reinterpretation of these roots is the only way to create the religion he wants Judaism to be.

Jesus even offers up a new central prayer, replacing Moses' Great Commandment with the Our Father, also known as the Lord's Prayer. Unlike Moses, Jesus gives these teachings on his own behalf, not as the mouthpiece of God. Jesus, as befits a son of David, is not just a prophet but also a king, with the ability to make pronouncements and have them be followed by his *own* authority as a leader, not just his status as a messenger of God. Throughout the gospel of Matthew, the author focuses on the fact that Jesus teaches "them as one having authority, and not as their scribes" (Matthew 7.29). This could even be a small dig at Moses himself, as Moses served as little more than God's scribe for the Torah and the Commandments, rather than as a teacher with his own voice and beliefs. In some ways, Moses was the ultimate scribe as he copied down the word of the Lord himself, as in Exodus 34 when God commands him to "Write these words; in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel...And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the ten commandments" (Exodus 34.27-28). Moses is just a messenger—he tells the Israelites what God wants them to do, but his own words do not matter. Jesus, as a synthesis of priest and king, has authority which derives from himself, not from his status as God's spokesperson. Jesus gives laws and teaches scripture—he is empowered to render moral judgments, not just repeat the words of God.

Finally, Jesus is responsible for a new covenant with God, just as many of his predecessors were. He offers his disciples bread as his body and wine as his “blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 26.28). Just as Noah (Genesis, 9.9-11), Abraham (Genesis, 17.2-14), Moses (Exodus, 19-24, 34.10-27) and David (2 Samuel, 7.5-16) formed covenants with God, signaling a paradigm shift in Jewish history each time, so too does Jesus. However, instead of the symbol of the covenant being a rainbow, circumcision, or obedience to a strict set of rules, the symbol is Jesus’ own suffering and death. Using the Passion as the symbol of the final Covenant with God both ties Jesus to the legacy of heroes past and exalts him above them. None of his predecessors had ever sacrificed so much in the name of God’s will.

Matthew supports the idea that Jesus’ arrival is a major event in Jewish history through his description of Jesus’ genealogy. He notes that “all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations,” (Matthew 1.17) so Jesus’ coming fits a generational pattern of fundamental changes to Jewish culture. This genealogy, like the Sermon on the Mount, has no roots in Mark, and even contradicts the genealogy presented in Luke (3.23-38). His interpretation of Jesus’ genealogy further shows how Matthew twists the established narrative of Jesus’ life in order to mold him into a hero of the Hebrew Bible’s tradition. Beyond even his immaculate conception, Jesus’ birth is significant because of its context in the patterns of Jewish history.

Common to Matthew and Mark, though, is the narrative of Christ’s death. Jesus remains human to the last and even doubts God as he suffers on the cross, crying “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15.34; Matthew 27.46). This moment of doubt shows that Jesus *is* fundamentally human. He is not just an avatar of God calmly accepting his fate—by suffering and dying on the cross he is making a sacrifice. This very humanity is what makes him a comparable figure to the biblical heroes to whom Matthew links him. Just like they, he is a human acting in God’s service, and his very humanity is what cements his superiority to them. If Jesus was simply an aspect of God on Earth, he could not be judged on the same moral grounds as David, Solomon, or Moses. But he is a man too. They were just as capable as he of avoiding their mortal sins of murder, idolatry, and directly disobeying God respectively, and yet they chose to commit them anyway. So, while he may not have had their victories in the physical world, never building the Lord’s Temple as Solomon did or destroying his people’s enemies in the vein of David and Moses, Jesus is vastly superior to his peers spiritually. So, Jesus both fits the archetype of the biblical hero and undermines it by showing that their earthly successes that are celebrated in the Hebrew Bible are less significant than the spiritual failings for which God condemns them.

Matthew and Mark use old biblical archetypes to tie Jesus into the familiar cultural heroes of generations past while also cementing his superiority to those figures. The basic outline remains similar, but Jesus is always just a little more pure, or gives just a little more in the name of God than any of his predecessors. Rather than violate God’s commands as Moses did, he fulfills them even at the cost of his own life. He refuses to commit idolatry as Solomon did, despite the promise of a much greater reward. He even surpasses Abraham as he refuses to lie to save his own life as Abraham did when he claimed Sarah to be his sister. He is an amalgam of their strengths with none of their failings spiritually, as instead he suffers in the less important physical world. By having his narrative so closely match the archetype of the biblical

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hero, the writer of the gospel according to Matthew demonstrates Jesus' transcendence of that archetype.

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