

Christians as Members of a 'Royal Family' in the Gospel of Matthew

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This essay seeks to contribute to Matthean scholarship by exploring the concept of Christians as members of God's royal family in Matthew's Gospel. It argues that the first Evangelist views Jesus' followers of all times as members of a 'royal family'. This is made clear through passages in the Gospel that use the royal family membership language, a fact to which no attention seems to have been paid so far in Matthean studies. Engaging in the study of such a topic would involve discussing aspects of theism and of Christology in the Gospel of Matthew. It is not my intention to engage in the debate about complex issues related to Christology in the first Gospel attempting to address, for example, the question of whether or not Jesus 'imagined himself to be the Davidic Messiah, or envisaged himself as the eschatological Son of Man, or thought himself to be God's Son in a singular sense.'¹ Others have dealt with this quite thoroughly.² In an attempt to make sense of how Matthew views the followers of Jesus, conceptual analysis will be used. It will be used to explain the concept of Christian royal family membership within Matthean texts related to the subject under scrutiny.

The essay is structured in three parts, the first of which discusses the idea of Christians as members of God's royal family in Matthew's Gospel. The second part explores the notions of the kingship and fatherhood of God, together with that of the royalty of Jesus. The third part discusses some ethical and practical implications. A conclusion then is drawn from the essay, giving a summary of the findings.

Christian Membership in God's Royal Family

In several passages in the first Gospel the language of diversified family membership is employed to describe the followers of Jesus, all related to the kingdom of heaven/God. Jonathan Pennington has recently explored the theme of the kingdom of heaven in Matthew's Gospel, focusing on the meaning of Matthew's distinctive expression 'the kingdom of heaven'. More precisely, he concentrates on the purpose of the use of Matthew's phrase 'the kingdom of heaven'. He challenges the traditional reverential circumlocution explanation for Matthew's expression (i.e., the common understanding that Matthew uses 'kingdom of heaven' instead of 'kingdom of God' out of a desire

¹ E.g., Robert Funk, *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium* (New York: Macmillan, 1996), 320; cp. James M. Robinson, 'Theological Autobiography', in *The Craft of Religious Studies* (ed. Jon R. Stone; New York: Palgrave, 2000), 144-45.

² For example, Dale C. Allison, *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History* (London: SPCK, 2010), esp. 221-32.

to avoid using the word ‘God’).³ He proposes that Matthew’s choice to speak of the kingdom in this unique way serves to articulate a deep and powerful theological point, namely, to emphasize the apocalyptic and eschatological contrast between two realms – the heavenly and the earthly – standing for God on one hand, and humanity on the other.⁴

Pennington’s argument in rejecting the reverential circumlocution explanation for Matthew’s ‘kingdom of heaven’ has strong textual support from within the Gospel itself. The proposal that Matthew has conscientiously avoided the use of “God” (θεός) by employing the phrase ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν (‘the kingdom of heaven’) does not stand at all when one considers the following Matthean texts where the Evangelist does use the phrase ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ (‘the kingdom of God’): Matthew 12:28 (cf. the phrase ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ [‘the kingdom of God’]); 19:24 (cf. the phrase τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ [‘the kingdom of God’]); and 21:31, 43 (cf. τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ [‘the kingdom of God’] and ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ [‘the kingdom of God’], respectively). Moreover, as Pennington has also correctly seen, Matthew employs θεός (‘God’) freely throughout the Gospel.⁵

To return to the family membership language used of the followers of Jesus in Matthew in connection with the kingdom, it may seem odd to make a case out of only a few passages. But, as we shall see, these texts speak volumes in favour of the thesis propounded in this essay. Two of these texts (5:3, 10; 12:46-50) are worth discussing in detail.

1. Royal Family Membership in Matthew 5:3, 10

To begin with, Matthew 5:3, 10 states quite explicitly that the βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν (‘kingdom of heaven’) is for οἱ πτωχοὶ τῷ πνεύματι (‘the poor in spirit’) and for οἱ δεδιωγμένοι ἕνεκεν δικαιοσύνης (‘the persecuted for justice’). Two things are most important in identifying these people Jesus said would receive the kingdom. First is determining the meaning of οἱ πτωχοὶ τῷ πνεύματι (‘the poor in spirit’ [v. 3]). For some scholars, the added τῷ πνεύματι (‘in spirit’) is taken literally.⁶ For others, the phrase is understood as referring to God’s people who depend on his protection from oppression by the rich. For France, for example, [p]overty in spirit is not speaking of weakness of character (‘mean spiritedness’), but rather of a person’s relationship with God.⁷ The latter seems most likely.

³ Jonathan T. Pennington, ‘The Kingdom of Heaven in the Gospel of Matthew’, *SBJT* 12.1 (2008), 42.

⁴ Pennington, ‘The Kingdom of Heaven in the Gospel of Matthew’, 45-46.

⁵ Pennington, ‘The Kingdom of Heaven in the Gospel of Matthew’, 45-46.

⁶ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13* WBC 33A, ed. Ralph P. Martin, (Dallas, Texas: World Books, 1993), 91.

⁷ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 165.

The Lukan counterpart of this phrase lacks the added τῷ πνεύματι ('in spirit' [cf. Luke 6:20]). The main question is whether the Matthean οἱ πτωχοὶ τῷ πνεύματι ('the poor in spirit' [5:3]) are to be identified with, or to be distinguished from, the Lukan οἱ πτωχοὶ ('the poor' [6:20]).⁸ What is quite certain is that the Lukan form of the beatitude has spiritualized its subjects while the Matthean form has kept them literal. Gary T. Meaders has said it well: '[w]hile Matthew's statement is clear, Luke's is strikingly specific.'⁹ Based upon the use of this expression in the Old Testament, R.T. France has interpreted the 'poor in spirit' in terms of a person's relationship with God in the face of subjugation suffered at the hands of others. For him, these πτωχοὶ τῷ πνεύματι ('poor in spirit') refer to 'God's faithful people, humbly dependent on God's protection in the face of the oppression which they endure from the ungodly rich.'¹⁰

The phrase ὁ πτωχός τῷ πνεύματι ('the poor in spirit') is not found in the LXX. We find there its counterpart ὁ ταπεινός τῷ πνεύματι ('the humbled in spirit', or 'the humble in spirit', or 'the lowly in spirit'), which occurs in Psalms 33:19 (cp. Isa 61:1 and related LXX texts, e.g., Pss 146:7; 34:19; Isa 57:15; 66:2; Prov 16:19; 29:23).¹¹ In the context of these texts, this phrase has to do with the proximity of God to the afflicted righteous and his rescue of them, which may allow one to think of a possible indirect link between οἱ πτωχοὶ τῷ πνεύματι ('the poor in spirit') and οἱ ταπεινοὶ τῷ πνεύματι ('the humbled in spirit'). The exact expression 'poor in spirit' occurs at Qumran (1QM 14.7) and reads as follows:

He has taught war [to the hand] of the feeble
and steadied the trembling knee;
he has braced the back of the smitten.
Among the poor in spirit (עֲנֹוֹי רוּחַ) [there is power]
over the hard of heart,
and by the perfect way
all nations of wickedness have come to an end:
not one of their mighty men stands,
but we are the remnant [of Thy people].¹²

In this text, the expression עֲנֹוֹי רוּחַ, the Greek equivalent of οἱ πτωχοὶ τῷ πνεύματι ('the poor in spirit'), clearly speaks of the members of the Qumran

⁸ I. H. Marshall understands the Lukan οἱ πτωχοὶ ('the poor') to mean the completely destitute, *The Gospel of Luke*, NIGTC, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 249.

⁹ Gary T. Meaders, 'The "Poor" in the Beatitudes of Matthew and Luke', *Grace Theological Journal* 6.2 (1985), 306.

¹⁰ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 165.

¹¹ So also John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NIGTC. eds. I.H. Marshall and Donald A. Hagner; (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 200, n. 28.

¹² Translation by Geza Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (rev. ed; London: Penguin Books, 2004).

community. These members, who identified themselves elsewhere as the 'sons of light' and the 'righteous', are here the 'remnant of God's people' and most importantly the poor to whom the eschatological promises apply (so also 1QM 15.1-2). As with the context of the LXX texts mentioned above, these 'poor in spirit' are the afflicted righteous awaiting imminent divine intervention to rescue them from oppression.

The second phrase to define is οἱ δεδιωγμένοι ἕνεκεν δικαιοσύνης ('those who are persecuted for righteousness' [Matt 5:10]) which refers to those who are faithful to God in spite of all kinds of oppression.¹³ The persecution of the faithful prophets was an Old Testament theme (eg. 2 Chron 36:16; 1 Kings 19:10, 14; Neh 9:26; Jer 2:30). Furthermore, the persecution of God's people plays a significant role in the Psalms (Pss 7; 31:15; 69:26; 109:16; 119:86).

One may suggest that Matthew is assuring his readers - God's faithful people who are humbly dependent on his protection - that indeed the kingdom of heaven is *theirs* (ὅτι αὐτῶν ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν ['theirs is the kingdom of heaven'], Matt 5:3b), which is good news for them. The personal pronoun αὐτῶν ('theirs') is placed in the emphatic position to highlight the fact that these faithful and humbled people possess the kingdom. In its Matthean context, this kingdom is God's kingdom, as will be shown later in this essay. Elsewhere in Matthew, the kingdom of heaven is also spoken of as something that may be possessed. In 19:14, for example, the βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν ('kingdom of heaven') belongs to those who are like the παιδιὰ ('little children') who have been given high priority to come to Jesus.

2. Royal Family Membership in Matthew 12:46-50

Matthew 12:46-50 is another text that uses family membership language to speak of the relationship of Jesus' disciples to the kingdom. The primary focus of this pericope is on the 'true family' of the disciples of Jesus. As France has pointed out, though it begins with Jesus' mother and brothers, the pericope is not really about them.¹⁴ Matthew's use of 'disciple' in verse 49 allows for a wider group (cp. 8:11), and the inclusion of 'sister' in verse 50 demands it. It is these disciples who constitute Jesus' true family.

In the text above {note especially a redactional change to πατὴρ ἐν οὐρανοῖς ('Father in heaven') in verse 50 [cp. Mark 3:35 and Luke 8:21]}, the disciples of Jesus are explicitly called his ἀδελφοί ('brothers and sisters'). They are the doers of the will of the Father in heaven. A similar note is sounded in 7:21, where we are told that it is the one who 'does the will' (ποιῶν τὸ θέλημα) of 'my Father in heaven' (πατὴρ μου τοῦ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς) who will enter the kingdom. Pennington states that the phrase ὁ πατὴρ ὁ ἐν [τοῖς] οὐράνιος ('Father in heaven') occurs thirteen times in the Gospel of Matthew, and the similar ὁ

¹³ John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 207.

¹⁴ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 494.

πατήρ ὁ οὐράνιος ('heavenly Father') occurs seven times. He points out the remarkable fact that the phrase 'Father in heaven' occurs elsewhere in the Gospels *only* in Mark 11:25, which is indeed evidence of a particular Matthean emphasis.¹⁵ In 12:46-50, the brotherhood of Jesus' disciples to Jesus himself is linked to the concept of God as both king and father.¹⁶

3. Royal Family Membership in Other Matthean Texts (13:24-30,43; 25:34)

The καλὸν σπέρμα ('good seed') of the parable of the weed and wheat in 13:24-30 is likened to the υἱοὶ τῆς βασιλείας ('sons of the kingdom', 13:38). In 13:43 we are informed that the δίκαιοι ('righteous') will shine like the sun in τῆ βασιλείᾳ τοῦ πατρὸς αὐτῶν ('the kingdom of their Father'). Matthew 25:34 identifies Jesus (the Son of Man) with the βασιλεὺς ('King') and it is as King that Jesus will declare that his Father has blessed those at his right hand, and that they are to *inherit* the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world.

To recap, the πτωχοὶ τῷ πνεύματι ('poor in spirit') of 5:3, the δεδιωγμένοι ἕνεκεν δικαιοσύνης ('those who are persecuted for righteousness') of 5:10, the καλὸν σπέρμα ('good seed') of 13:24-30, together with the υἱοὶ τῆς βασιλείας ('sons of the kingdom') of 13:38 and the ποιῶν τὸ θέλημα ('those doing the will') of the heavenly Father and to whom entrance to the kingdom has been promised (7:21), the δίκαιοι ('righteous') of 13:43 who will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father, those likened to the παιδία ('little ones') of 19:14 to whom high priority to come to Jesus have been given, those at Jesus' right hand who are declared 'blessed' by his Father and who are welcomed by Jesus to inherit the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world (25:34), can be best understood as Christians. The main question is whether they are understood simply as citizens of the kingdom or as members and heirs of the kingdom. The Matthean evidence just surveyed strongly suggests that they are more than just citizens of the kingdom. It is worth mentioning in passing that the negative picture of the children of the kingdom we find in 8:12 probably applies to those who pretend that they are the 'heirs' of the kingdom, but are not in reality.¹⁷

4. The Meaning of Royal Family Membership

What the notion of the royal family membership of the disciples may have meant to the first Evangelist and his audience is a reasonable question to ask. Two possible explanations have been proposed. In the first place, Antony J. Saldarini has observed that the community to and for whom Matthew wrote was one with a strong sense of group cohesion, emphasised in the use of kinship language to describe its members. He argues that at the core of

¹⁵ Pennington, 'The Kingdom of Heaven in the Gospel of Matthew', 47.

¹⁶ The concept of God as king and father is discussed later in this article.

¹⁷ 'But the sons of the kingdom (οἱ δὲ υἱοὶ τῆς βασιλείας) will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' (NKJ)

Matthew's identity is the relationship of Jesus to God as Son and the analogous relationship of his disciples to God as sons/daughters and servants.¹⁸

Saldarini's observation points to *identity* as the meaning of the fictive kinship in Matthew's Gospel. For him, the kinship language in this Gospel serves to highlight Jesus and the believers' identity with God as both sons and servants. To this aspect of meaning, John K. Riches has added another: *commitment*. He traces the notion of fictive kinship from Philo, who speaks of all humans as judged worthy of kinship with God because in principle they share the gift of reason.¹⁹ From this parallel, he suggests that for Matthew, the central mark of the members of his community, which makes them brothers and sisters of Jesus – and who therefore share kinship with one another – is doing the will of the heavenly Father. He goes on to argue that there is a clear sense in which those who become brothers and sisters of Jesus by doing God's will leave their former ways behind them and become members of a new family centered on Jesus.²⁰

These two features of the meaning of kinship in Matthew are not mutually exclusive; they are helpful because they shed some light on our understanding of Matthew's recipients' filiation with God. It can be suggested that both Matthew and his audience most likely understood their kinship to mean their *identity* and *commitment* to doing God's will. This reading is supported especially by Matthew 12:46-50 and 7:21. This would be reflected in their mutual relationships in several ways, as will be shown later in this essay.

The Kingship and Fatherhood of God, and Jesus' Royal Status

1. Kingship and the Fatherhood of God in Matthew's Gospel

1.1 God as King

The notion of God as king is central to Matthew's thinking. It is striking to realise that, among the Gospels, Matthew alone uses the metaphor of king frequently - a 'predominant relational metaphor used of God in the Bible', according to Brettler.²¹ Along the same lines, Allison has reasonably suggested that, given the fact that the kingdom of God/heaven was the major theme of Jesus' preaching, one might then expect the tradition about Jesus to depict God as a king.²² The following chart gives C. C. Caragounis' statistics

¹⁸ Antony J. Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 94-99.

¹⁹ Cf. Philo, *De Abrahamo*, 41.

²⁰ John K. Riches, "Conflicting Mythologies: Identity Formation in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew" in *Studies of the New Testament and Its World*; eds J. Barclay and J. Marcus and J. Riches; (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), 209, 210.

²¹ Marc Zvi Brettler, *God Is King: Understanding an Israelite Metaphor* (JSOT Sup 76; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 160.

²² Allison, *Constructing Jesus*, 244.

for the Gospel data on the distribution of the various expressions for the kingdom.²³

Expressions	Matt	Mark	Luke	John
Kingdom of God	5	14	32	2
Kingdom of heaven	32	–	–	–
The Kingdom	13	–	7	3
Total	50	14	39	5

The kingdom of heaven/God (ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν/τοῦ θεοῦ) was at the centre of the message of Jesus, and in this case of the Matthean Jesus (4:23; 9:35; cp. 6:10; 12:28). This understanding is also widely accepted among scholars. As Pennington has noted,

Each of the Synoptics clearly portrays Jesus' ministry as one that focuses on the kingdom, but Matthew stands out among the Evangelists. At the basic level of vocabulary, we see that Matthew uses βασιλεία some fifty-five times in a wide variety of phrases, including "kingdom of heaven," "kingdom of God," "the Father's kingdom," and simply, "the kingdom."²⁴

It is the βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν ('kingdom of heaven') that was to be preached throughout the whole world to all the nations (24:14).

The teaching about the present reality of the kingdom appears at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry (4:17), and continues throughout it (10:7: Ἦγγικεν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν [The kingdom of heaven has come near]; 12:28: ἄρα ἔφθασεν ἐφ' ὑμᾶς ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ [then the kingdom of God has come to you]; 19:14, by implication). In 13:11, we are informed about Jesus' proclamation of τὰ μυστήρια τῆς βασιλείας τῶν οὐρανῶν ('the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven'). In addition Jerusalem is described as 'the city of the great king', that is 'God's city' (5:35, cf. Ps 48:2). The parable of the unmerciful slave in 18:23-35 likens God to 'a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves'. As Allison suggests, 'Jesus' pronouncement regarding the temple tax in this text [17:24-27] presupposes that, in one important respect, God relates to the disciples just as earthly kings relate to their children.'²⁵ Jesus' question and Peter's answer in verses 25b-26 are worth quoting: 'What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tribute? From their children or from others?' When Peter said, 'From others,' Jesus said to him, 'Then the children are free.' The parable of the wedding banquet in 22:1-14 also likens God to a king. Taken all together the evidence gathered above confirms that God is king and has a kingdom.

²³ C. C. Caragounis, 'Kingdom of God/Kingdom of Heaven', in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (eds. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight and I. Howard Marshall; Downers Grove: IVP, 1992), 426.

²⁴ Pennington, 'The Kingdom of Heaven in the Gospel of Matthew', 44.

²⁵ Allison, *Constructing Jesus*, 245.

1.2 God as Father

The idea of God as father can also be found in the first Gospel. God's fatherly care and aid for all the needs of his people is clear in the Gospel. Roger Mohrlang is probably correct when he writes that 'of all the synoptic writers it is Matthew that draws the most winsome picture of God as a kind and caring heavenly Father, concerned to meet the everyday needs of his children ... indeed it is to him that disciples are invited to look for *all* their needs ...'.²⁶ Indeed, in Matthew's Gospel the notion of the fatherhood of God abounds. In 6:9-15, for example, this notion is central, *πατήρ* ('father') being a key term in this text. At the beginning of the pericope (v. 9), the disciples are instructed to address God as their Father in heaven (*Πάτερ ἡμῶν ὁ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς* ['Our Father in heaven']). The pericope ends with the fatherhood of God language (*ὁ πατήρ ὑμῶν ὁ οὐράνιος/ὁ πατήρ ὑμῶν* ('the heavenly Father'/your Father', vv. 14-15). The same is true of Matthew 6, as a whole, which begins by describing God as the Father in heaven (*τῷ πατρὶ ὑμῶν τῷ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς* ['your Father in heaven', v. 1]), and concludes by describing him as the disciples' heavenly Father (*ὁ πατήρ ὑμῶν ὁ οὐράνιος* ['your heavenly Father', vv. 26, 32]). Within this framework, fatherhood of God language abounds. God is described as Father (*ὁ πατήρ σου/ὑμῶν* ['your Father'] and *τῷ πατρὶ σου* ['your Father', vv. 4, 6, 8, 18]): he is a Father who is in secret (vv. 6, 18), who can see into the secrets of his children (vv. 4, 18) and can reward his children (vv. 1, 4, 6, 18); he always knows and hears the pleas of his children before they ask him (vv. 7-8, 18, 33); he cares for his children and for his creation and provides for them (vv. 26-30); he cares for them and for the creation and provides for them altogether (6:6-13, 25-30; cp. 7:7-11; 10:20, 29-32; 18:10-14, 19-20; 24:20; 26:36-44).

God's fatherly care and aid includes his readiness to deliver his children from the evil one (6:13). Martin Stiewe and François Vouga have reasonably described this action of God as '*l'expression de l'esprit de la gratuité et du don*'²⁷ (i.e., 'the expression of the spirit of gratuity and of gift'). The experience and promise of God and Jesus' continual presence, as an expression of God's grace, also strongly adds to the evidence. At the beginning of Matthew's Gospel, God is said to be with his people (including the disciples) in Jesus' presence (cf. the name Ἐμμανουήλ 'Emmanuel', 1:23; cp. 8:25; 14:30; 18:20; 28:20).

2. Jesus' Royal Status

The emphasis on Jesus' royal status is one of the particularities of Matthew's Gospel. This is made clear through a number of features, the main ones being Jesus' title υἱὸς Δαυὶδ ('son of David') and its frequency in the

²⁶ Roger Mohrlang, *Matthew and Paul: A Comparison of Ethical Perspectives* (SNTSMS 48; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 80 (italics original).

²⁷ Martin Stiewe, François Vouga, *Le Sermon sur la montagne: un abrégé de l'Évangile dans le miroitement de ses interprétations* (Genève: Labor et Fides, 2002), 128-33.

Gospel, and the title Χριστός (the 'Messiah') ascribed to him. The literary placement of the Jesus' Davidic origin texts in the first Gospel and the structure of Matthew's genealogy of Jesus are very important for discerning and explaining this emphasis. R.T. France is among a few who have recognised the emphasis on Jesus' royal rank in the first Gospel. He writes, 'The theme of Jesus' Davidic descent and the actual title 'Son of David' are no less emphasized in Matthew's prologue.'²⁸ More than just acknowledging this fact, he also links the υἱός Δαυίδ theme to that of Χριστός ('Christ') highlighting the clear role played by David the *king* in the structure of the Matthean genealogy of Jesus, and the significance of that. In his own words,

The title "Son of David" stands alongside Χριστός in the first verse in Matt 1, and David "the king" plays a key role in the structure of the genealogy (1:6,17), which is in fact a tracing of the line of Davidic kings of Judah, actual or presumptive. The following narrative focuses on Joseph, the final name in the list, and explains how he came to accept Jesus into his family, and the theological point of this opening scene is underlined when the angel addresses Joseph as "son of David" (1:10).²⁹

Regarding the title 'son of David', we note that at the very beginning of the Gospel, Jesus is called υἱός Δαυίδ ('son of David', 1:1). Then the υἱός Δαυίδ ('son of David') motif is taken up throughout the Gospel (1:17; 9:27; 15:22; 20:30-31; 21:9, 15; 22:42; in 12:23 the crowds are wondering about his identity as υἱός Δαυίδ - 'son of David'). Jesus' birth in the royal town of Bethlehem adds significantly to the evidence and it also appropriately fulfills the Davidic prophecy (2:6). France has recognised this feature; he has highlighted this title of Jesus by contrasting its occurrences in the first Gospel with the other Gospels and the rest of the NT. He writes:

[T]he title "son of David" occurs more frequently in Matthew's Gospel than in the whole of the rest of the New Testament; and seven of his nine uses of it are peculiar to his Gospel. Mark and Luke both share the double use of the title in the story of Bartimaeus, and the discussion about whether the Messiah is the son of David, but otherwise make no use of the title as such, even though Luke's introductory chapters emphasise the fact of Jesus' Davidic descent no less than Matthew does (Luke 1:27, 32, 69; 2:4, 11). John raises the issue only as a matter of public speculation (John 7:42). It is clear that Jesus' Davidic origin was a feature of early Christian preaching (Acts 2:29-36; 13:22f; Rom 1:3), but other New Testament references to Jesus' Davidic origin are very few (2 Tim 2:8; Rev 3:8; 5:5; 22:16). It seems clear then that Matthew had an unusually strong interest in this issue.³⁰

Jesus' title Χριστός ('Christ') is another distinctive feature that can be taken as evidence for the emphasis on Jesus' royal rank in Matthew. The Messiah motif appears at the beginning of the Gospel (1:1) and runs throughout (1:16-

²⁸ R.T. France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1989; reprinted in 1997), 281.

²⁹ France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher*, 284.

³⁰ France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher*, 284.

17, 18; 2:4; 11:2; 16:16; 27:17, 22; 26:68). In Luke's Gospel this title does not appear until 1:26.

Further evidence for Jesus' royal status in the first Gospel can be discerned from people's actions towards him, feelings about him, and their expectations of him as the prince/king and the Messiah. It is as a king/prince that the baby Jesus is honoured by the Magi who give him presents of great value (2:11); it is as 'king of Jews' (2:2) that he is perceived as Herod's rival (cp. 2:3-8,13-18); it is as 'king of Jews' (28:37) that Jesus is crucified. Additionally, the kingdom of heaven (6:10; 18:23; 21:43; 26:29) is God's kingdom, God being depicted as the king who owns the kingdom. Yet at the same time, we also read from the Gospel that Jesus also owns the kingdom. As a matter of fact, in 16:28 and 25:31-34, it is clear that Jesus as the Son of Man owns the kingdom. In 25:34, it is as king that Jesus the Son of Man himself carries out the final judgement. The request from the mother of the sons of Zebedee in 20:20-23 presupposes that Jesus is king. Jesus holds the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and promises solemnly to Peter that *he* will hand over these keys to him (16:19). In 6:10, Jesus is prince by implication.

As noted previously, Allison has observed that, if one leaves aside the sentences with ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ/τῶν οὐρανῶν ('the kingdom of God/of heaven'), one is surprised to realise that in the Synoptics God is seldom portrayed as a king.³¹ Why is it so? One possibility is to think of 'Jesus' habit of speaking of the deity as father.³² Another possibility is to imagine that 'Jesus himself is ... the eschatological king, or destined to be such.'³³ There is some logic in each line of thought. These proposals are not mutually exclusive; rather they are complementary insofar as both link the frequency of depicting God as a king to Christology in the Synoptics. Perhaps the second proposal is more direct in stating clearly that Jesus is more than just a prince, he is a king.

Matthew's narrative on Jesus' infancy serves to highlight the reality of the birth of the Messiah and king as well as Jesus' mission as both the Messiah and king. Allison is probably correct as he writes, 'The mainspring of Matthew's infancy narrative is that the Davidic Messiah (Χριστός) has been born, and he will rule "my people Israel" (2:6).'³⁴ This prophecy about Jesus clearly states his future kingship. As 'son of David' and the Messiah to come, Jesus was meant to both shepherd his people Israel (2:5, cp. Micah 5:1,2) and 'save his people from their sins' (σώσει τὸν λαὸν αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν αὐτῶν [1:21]). His shepherding and saving mission can be discerned from his life and ministry. He was active among his people, shepherding them in various ways.

³¹ Allison, *Constructing Jesus*, 244-45.

³² See Richard Bauckham, 'Kingdom and Church according to Jesus and Paul', *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 18 (1996), 1-27.

³³ Allison, *Constructing Jesus*, 245.

³⁴ Allison, *Constructing Jesus*, 245.

His activities included teaching and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing diseases and sicknesses (4:23; 9:35). Jesus' deeds spread far and wide, eventually reaching even John the Baptist who was in prison (11:2). With these signs Jesus fulfilled eschatological messianic expectations, and the coming of a Messiah in God's name has long been the expectation of Israel. As Francois P. Viljoen has written, 'For Matthew to associate Jesus as Messiah follows from expectations attested in many texts, according to which another eschatological figure would bring eschatological instruction.'³⁵ What this Messiah was to look like, however, seems not to have been that obvious. Whether or not Jesus was this very figure has been a puzzle for many people ever since. In this essay, it is assumed that he was the Messiah.

Summarising the Exegesis

These texts show as clearly as possible that the themes of the kingship and fatherhood of God, and Jesus' royal status were significant for the first Evangelist. It was also noted that the literary placement of the 'Jesus' Davidic origin' texts in Matthew's Gospel and the structure of Matthew's genealogy with regard to Jesus' royal status stress that Jesus is the Messiah and king.

The following implications can be drawn from the concepts of the kingship and fatherhood of God, together with Jesus' royal status in Matthew's Gospel. The picture of God in this Gospel can be summed up as follows: a gracious, merciful, loving and forgiving king (except in 18:23-35) and father. These attributes of God seem to be so interwoven in the Gospel that one cannot easily or neatly separate them. To begin with God as a gracious king and father, the Evangelist seems to have viewed God's person, character and behaviour through Jesus' person, life and ministry towards his people and children as an expression of grace. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus' sympathy with tax collectors (*τελώναι*), Gentiles (*τελώναι... ἔθνηκοί/ἔθνη*), sinners and prostitutes (*πόρναι*) supports this. Jesus turns Matthew, a tax collector (*τελώνης*), into a disciple (9:9). The disciples had experienced God's grace by their initial calling, as well as in their walk with the earthly Jesus. Jesus was known as a friend of tax collectors and sinners (11:19) because he could eat and drink with them (9:10-13). A prophecy was made about his mission to the Gentiles and that they would find hope in his name (12:18, 21, for Jesus' mission to the Gentiles, cp. 10:18; 24:14; 28:19). This is supported when he heals a centurion's servant (8:5-13) and the Canaanite woman's daughter and then praises her faith (15:21-28). All these are expressions God's grace.

The Gospel's portrait of God as a merciful and forgiving king and father can be found in the following texts: 6:12, 14; 9:2-8, 13 (Jesus); 12:7 (Jesus); 18:23-35. The concepts of mercy and forgiveness are more prominent in the

³⁵ Francois P. Viljoen, 'Jesus' Teaching on the Torah in the Sermon on the Mount', *Neotestamentica* 40.1 (2006), 149.

Gospel of Matthew than in the whole of the rest of the NT.³⁶ The payment of a full day's wage to labourers who have worked only one hour is such an act of God's mercy (20:1-16). Jesus' attention to the children (παῖδια) and the 'little ones' (μικροί in Matt 18), and to the blind and the lame in the temple (21:14-16) also add to the evidence.

Finally, we have the picture of God as a loving person. In Matthew, God's love is described as reaching beyond boundaries of racial differences or social rank. In 2:1-12, for example, God brings Gentile wise men to worship Jesus. He chooses Galilee of the Gentiles as the place for Jesus to begin his earthly ministry (4:15-16). The faith of the Roman centurion (8:5-13) and that of the Canaanite woman (15:21-28) are probably best understood as acts of God's love and grace. For Matthew, the love of God/Jesus to the world is the model *par excellence* for the love of the disciples to humankind (25:31-46).

Ethical and Practical Implications

The fundamental issue in this section is how one should treat others, as members of the kingdom. Findings of this study can be discussed under the *imitatio Dei/Christi* ('imitating God/Christ'). As Allison suggests, the main focus seems to be on 'abandoning animosity and demonstrating unexpected generosity.'³⁷ The *imitatio Dei*³⁸ ('imitating God') in the first Gospel includes being a loving person (5:44-45); this command is given to the disciples who are to emulate the heavenly Father. The concept of *imitatio Dei* ('imitating God') also comprises being perfect (5:48); the disciples of Jesus are to be perfect just as their heavenly Father is perfect. Furthermore, this concept includes being forgiving (18:32b). The *imitatio Christi* ('imitating Christ') aspect can be found in the way in which Matthew related the mission of the disciples to that of Jesus: as Jesus is meant to *primarily* preach to Israel (9:35), so the disciples are sent *primarily* to Israel (10:5-6); as Jesus has power to heal the diseases (4:24; 9:35), so have the disciples (10:1); as Jesus shows mercy and forgives sins (9:2-8, 10-13), so the disciples are expected to do the same (6:12; 9:13; 18:27, 32b-33). To extend this aspect a bit further, in the first Gospel the call to exercise mercy and forgiveness towards others is grounded in the person and character of God and Jesus. So, God's mercy and

³⁶ The notion of mercy is conveyed by the verb ἐλεέω (8x in Matt vs. 3x in Mark and 4x in Luke), by the adjective ἐλεήμων (1x vs. 0x in Mark and 0x Luke) and by the noun ἔλεος (3x [9:13; 12:7; 23:23] vs. 0x in Mark and 6x in Luke). Other instances of mercy may include Joseph's attitude in not wanting to put Mary to open shame (1:19) and an appeal that a husband is to show mercy to his wife by not divorcing her (5:31-32). The discussion over this theme is provided elsewhere (cf. Isaac K. Mbabazi, 'The Significance of Interpersonal Forgiveness in Matthew's Gospel'; a PhD Thesis; The University of Manchester [2011], 44-51).

³⁷ Allison, *Constructing Jesus*, 322.

³⁸ For more discussion on the notion of *imitatio Dei/Christi* ('imitating God/Christ'), see Allison, 311, 320-22, 325, 349, 355-56, 358, 368, 375.

forgiveness exemplified in Jesus' person, life and ministry constitutes a paradigm for the disciples to teach and practice mercy and forgiveness.

The central point of Matthew's teaching about discipleship is the necessity for radical obedience to Jesus' commandments. Disciples are radically conformed to Jesus' teaching and commandments (cf. 28:19). In Matthew's view, it appears that a disciple is somebody to whom Jesus' commandments have been taught, and of whom obedience to them is expected. A change of one's way of life is thus required from a disciple of Jesus. Therefore, being a true disciple is being a Christian and a member of the new people of God.

Clearly, in the Gospel of Matthew, the Christians' mercy, love and forgiveness are modelled from God's mercy, love and forgiveness. Christians are called to love others, including their enemies, as God/Jesus loves the righteous and the unrighteous. They are called to be merciful as God/Jesus is merciful (5:7, 48). They are called to forgive people as God/Jesus forgives them (6:14; 9:2, 6; 12:7, 31-32; 18:21-22, 27, 33; 26:28). They are thus called to be perfect as God/Jesus is perfect (5:48). Although important qualifications must be made because God is God and humans are humans, for the first Evangelist, the mercy, love and forgiveness of God as displayed by Jesus provide the paradigm for how the members of his community understand their status and vocation as members and heirs of the 'royal family'.

Conclusion

This essay has explored the notion of royal family membership of Christians in the Gospel of Matthew. This teaching is typically Matthean. Although similar teaching may be found in other Gospels, in Matthew the note is sounded much more loudly through family membership language. It refers to the relationship between God and Jesus' followers (5:3, 10; 5:44-45, 48; 12:46-50). As members of a 'royal family', contemporary Christians in all contexts – even in a violent world similar to Matthew's – are to behave in a certain way whether others are within the family or outside it. They are to show behaviour worthy of their family membership, a behaviour that reflects the character of their king and father. This translates into showing mercy (5:7; 18:22b-33), loving their enemies (5:44-47), not taking revenge (5:38-41), seeking and granting forgiveness (6:12b, 14; 18:21-22, 32b-33), and seeking and granting reconciliation (5:23-24; 18:15-17). Grant Osborne says it well:

We are to love our neighbors even when they are hostile and do evil acts against us. Love for enemies, moreover, is not restricted to feelings of benevolence but meant to be shown in acts of kindness. The model for this difficult activity is nothing less than God himself, our Father. Like obedient children we must emulate our Father and act toward evil people as he does. If God can be merciful to wicked as well as good people, so must we. The perfect love of God will guide our reactions to their animosity.³⁹

³⁹ Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew* (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary: New Testament; ed. Clinton E. Arnold; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 214.

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