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THE LIBERATING CHRIST:
FROM THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW TO MODERN DAY LIBERATION

Matthew Nelson

INTRODUCTION

Jesus has played multiple roles throughout the four Gospels such as Christ the Teacher, Christ the Healer, and Christ the Suffering Servant. All of these roles are all extremely important for understanding the nature of God. Among those we see the Liberating Christ, most present in the Gospel of Matthew. Throughout the entire Gospel we see Christ acting in ways that undermine the rule of the Roman Empire, an oppressive system that heavily favored the elite members of society. The Liberating Christ can be summed up best in Matthew 9:35-36: “Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”¹ The Gospel writer’s use of the word shepherd is a directed critique of the Roman social structures that oppressed and marginalized the majority of the Roman Empire. This direct confrontation is a timeless call, present in modern day liberation theology, as Christians are called to confront unjust social structures and distill hope in the lives of the oppressed and marginalized members of society by making God’s promises of Gustavo Gutiérrez’ utopia known.

METHODOLOGY

In the words of Oscar Cullmann, “all attempts to confront Jesus with the *present* questions presuppose the answering of the *historical* ones.”² If we are going to make sense of modern liberation theology and the theology of hope³, we must first look at the Liberating Christ in the context of the writing of the Gospel of Matthew. To do this, we will first look at the Gospel text itself and what the writer of the Gospel of Matthew meant with his use of the word Shepherd and its connection to the Old Testament as well as to Greek thought. It is also important to understand the social structures that would have influenced the writing of the Gospel of Matthew. For that reason, we will take a look at what the city of Antioch most likely was like based on Roman society and Roman Imperial Theology. From there, we will explore Christ’s call to confront structures of systemic oppression in modern day liberation theology as well as what it means to spread hope in the lives of the oppressed based on the pericope of the Final Judgement in Matthew 25:31-46.

MATTHEW 9:36 AND SHEPHERD

The word shepherd is frequently used throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and would be something that the readers of the Gospel of Matthew with Jewish background would understand.⁴ In Genesis, we see Israel blessing Joseph, saying “The God before whom my ancestors Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my *shepherd* [emphasis added] all my life to this day.”⁵ In the Psalms it is written, “The Lord is my *shepherd* [emphasis added], I shall not want.”⁶ Both of these passages, as well as others, refer to God being the shepherd of the people. But we also see it used in the Old Testament to “denounce national leaders as unfaithful

shepherds who abuse the flocks in their care,” such as in Isaiah and Zechariah.⁷ It is most prominently used, though, by Jeremiah⁸—a prophet that is directly referenced in the Gospel of Matthew three times⁹—as well as Ezekiel, specifically chapter 34, which has numerous parallels with the Gospel of Matthew.¹⁰ Because of the number of parallels between Matthew and Ezekiel 34, it is important to fully explore the meaning of the text. The chapter begins by calling out the false shepherds of Israel:

Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to them—to the shepherds: Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them.¹¹

Ezekiel is directly criticizing the leaders of Israel that had only focused their attention on the powerful and forgotten about the weak and oppressed. With this in mind and because of how frequently the Gospel of Matthew can be linked to Ezekiel 34, Jesus, when he refers to the people as “sheep without a shepherd,”¹² he is indirectly criticizing the Roman rule, claiming that they don’t “[strengthen] the weak,... [heal] the sick,... [bind] the injured,... [bring] back the strayed,... [or seek out] the lost.”¹³

Greek and Roman gentiles would also be familiar with the term shepherd. Similarly to the Hebrew Scriptures, this phrase was used to describe a king or an emperor. We see this in popular ancient Greek writers.¹⁴ For example, Philo (20 BCE – 50 CE), one of the most important Jewish authors of the first century¹⁵, uses the Greek word for shepherd three times in *On the Embassy to Gaius*, two out of the three times¹⁶ referring to an emperor

or ruler.¹⁷ The writer of Matthew chose the word shepherd very carefully, so the Hebrew people and the gentiles familiar with Greek and Roman culture would fully understand that Jesus was criticizing the Roman Empire and its ruling authorities.

ROMAN SOCIETY AND IMPERIAL THEOLOGY

Now the question is: what was the Liberating Christ criticizing about the Empire? To answer that, we have to understand what the Roman Imperial Theology was as well as the political and social structures of the Roman Empire during the time of the writing of the Gospel of Matthew.

Most scholars place the Matthean community in Syrian Antioch, in modern day southern Turkey, close to the Syrian border. This is the most likely location for the writing of the Gospel of Matthew “because of (1) its well-established and predominately Greek-speaking Jewish community and (2) the traditions of early Christian activities (and tensions) there.”¹⁸ Not only does this place the Gospel in a Greek and Jewish context, but Antioch “was the capital city of the Roman province of Syria and so was the base for the personnel needed for the province’s government.”¹⁹ This means that not only was it a very Roman city, but it also held great importance in the Empire itself and reflected the social structures that were in place in other important cities across the empire, including Rome.

To be able to understand Roman Imperial Theology and Roman society in general, it must first be noted that the Roman Imperial Theology was “the ideological glue that held Roman civilization together.”²⁰ This ideology swept through the Empire through advertisements on coins, statues, and poems²¹ (especially prominent in the large cities such as Antioch) and played a large role in keeping the ruling elite in control.²² It did this by not

only making Roman rule and the expansion of that rule the will of the gods,²³ but also centering Roman rule on the divinity of its emperor.²⁴ Emperors were frequently described as either Jupiter/Jove on Earth or Jupiter/Jove incarnate,²⁵ directly referring to him as divinely instituted and even as a god.

The Roman Empire's social structure typically had three levels: the ruling elite, the retainers, and the peasants and artisans.²⁶ The ruling elite, as the title implies, were the men and wives of those men who had some sort of political power. Along with the Roman emperor, "those with inherited wealth, land, and social status, officials appointed by the emperor, bureaucrats, military leaders, and religious officials" all make up the ruling elite, a total of one to two percent of the population of the Empire. The ruling elite would maintain the control and power they had in the empire by using a legionary economy based completely on taxation and waging war.²⁷ This is how the elite ruling class protected the status quo.

Under the ruling elite, about five percent of the population of the Roman Empire was the retainer class. This was a class solely created to serve the ruling elite and was comprised of professional soldiers, officials, and household servants.²⁸ Warren Carter explains that:

...retainers are the agents of the aristocracy, personalizing and representing its power among the lower orders, performing its wishes, enacting its decisions, and maintaining its hold over land and people. Their association with the deference to the aristocracy elevates them above most of the common folks, and enables them to share in the benefits of its rule, notably significant power, status, and wealth.²⁹

Though they had many different roles in society, all members of the retainer class had the basic function of serving the ruling elite.³⁰ "Upper-level priests and religious leaders"³¹ as well as a handful of

merchants³² were some of the members of the retainer class.³³

The rest of the Roman Empire, roughly ninety-three percent of the population, were peasants and artisans. While the ruling elite and the retainers benefited from the wealth of the empire, the peasants and artisans were the ones that produced the wealth. Even though there aren't many records left by the peasant and artisan class because of their illiteracy, scholars have been able to prove that they were frequently exploited as their "labor [produced] the goods and services, rendered in taxes and rents (often paid in kind), that [sustained] the wealth and lifestyle of the ruling elite."³⁴ Peasants and artisans were unable to partake in any sort of political decision making and were frequently the victims of political, economic, and military exploitation.³⁵

Knowledge of the living conditions of a city like Antioch is also needed to fully understand the Roman society and how the place of the peasants and artisans:

Any accurate portrait of Antioch in New Testament times must depict a city filled with misery, danger, fear, despair, and hatred. Antioch was a city where the average family lived in squalid life in filthy and cramped quarters, where at least half of the children died at birth or during infancy, and where most of the children who lived lost at least one parent before reaching maturity. This city was filled with hatred and fear rooted in intense ethnic antagonisms and exacerbated by a constant stream of strangers. This city was so lacking in stable networks of attachments that petty incidents could prompt mob violence. Crime flourished and the streets were dangerous at night. And, perhaps above all, Antioch was repeatedly smashed by cataclysmic catastrophes. A resident could expect literally to be homeless from time to time, providing that he or she was among the survivors.³⁶

This was the class that the Liberating Christ was born into and the class in which he spent the majority of his time. These are the sheep that he looked compassionately on that did not have a true and just shepherd. These are the sheep Christians are called to

liberate.

THE LIBERATING CHRIST CALLING US TO BE SHEPHERDS

It is always easy, particularly in a modern context, to criticize people of power, especially when we disagree with them. It is much harder to propose solutions and alternate ways of leadership. In the Gospel of Matthew and only in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus gives us a detailed description of who will be saved:

And he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'³⁷

There are two important points to bring out of this passage. First, Jesus is pointing to God not only as the true shepherd of the people but also as the example of how a shepherd should act towards his flock. Our social analysis of Antioch at the time of the writing of Matthew shows that the ruling elite and the retainer class did not treat the peasant and artisan class in this way. Once again, the Gospel writer is providing a direct critique of Roman rule by praising those who made efforts to take care of the members of their society that were often ignored and taken advantage of by Roman rule.

The second and arguably the most important point to take out of Jesus' statement of the last judgment is that he is calling the sheep to act as true shepherds should. It is not just the job of the ruling elite and the retainers to help those marginalized in society, but it is also those members who have less power in society that are called to feed and clothe the poor. This is where our modern society and the ancient society of Antioch collide. We are suddenly drawn into the timelessness of love and are bridged together by a common goal of bringing the Kingdom of God to all people. Today's societies have ruling elites, people who abuse their power and take advantage of those below them. Today's societies have retainer classes, people who fight to protect their own wellbeing by protecting the status quo. Today's societies have peasant and artisan classes, people who are oppressed and marginalized in society and frequently taken advantage of for the betterment of the ruling elite and the retainers. And the Liberating Christ is calling all Christians to confront and break down these social injustices.³⁸

BEING SHEPHERDS AND SHEEP TODAY

In the Gospel of Matthew, we are given two concrete ways of helping those individually as well as reforming the unjust social systems that create the systemic oppression that marginalizes people. The first way, as we have spent the majority of the paper exploring, is to directly confront the social system. In his book *Teología de la Liberación*, Gutierrez writes that the Gospel message at its very core calls us to action not only to individually help the oppressed individuals as Christ spoke of in Chapter 25 of the Gospel of Matthew, but Christians must also reform unjust social structures that by their nature are oppressive. "To show the universal love of the Father goes inevitably against all injustice, privilege, oppression and narrow nationalism."³⁹ As the Liberating Christ directly denounced the Roman social structure that created

oppressive and inhuman living conditions for the majority of the empire, we must also call out the social injustices we see today.

This act of confronting unjust social systems, though extremely important, is not the only action Jesus is calling us to take. We, as sheep of the same flock, must also work to distill hope in the lives of the oppressed. Hope, as defined in the very basic sense by William Lynch, is the belief that there is a way out of difficulty and that we, as human beings, can manage the internal and external struggles of hopelessness.⁴⁰ It is the knowledge that whatever problem that you are facing, whatever oppressive system you are under, there is a way out. Many people, especially in a modern context, see hope only as a personal and interior resource.⁴¹ Instead, it is fully relational, for “hope cannot be achieved alone” and is not the final, internal act done to get out of a difficult situation but rather, it is an act of a community that is struggling together to liberate itself from hopelessness.⁴²

This is the same hope that Jürgen Moltmann defines as Christianity, for “Christianity... is hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionizing and transforming the present”⁴³ and always moving toward the fulfillment of the promises of God. It is directed toward a new creation not only in our lives but in all things by God.⁴⁴ Because of this hope, it is the call of Christians and all human beings to announce that hope and to remind the entire world of this hope, especially to those who are systematically oppressed and are drowning in a sea of hopelessness.

But this hopelessness isn’t something that is easy to overcome. First, it must be noted that hopelessness is a natural part of the world and is not necessarily a bad thing. “Within this universe, [humanity] occupies a single island of possibility” and surrounding that island is what is impossible, things that humans simply cannot do.⁴⁵ In other words, what is humanly possible is

significantly smaller than what is impossible. To hope in what is humanly impossible would create a hopeless cause, for the task is humanly impossible to complete.⁴⁶ Though both hope and hopelessness must exist together, there is nothing inherently wrong with hopelessness until the two mix and hopelessness starts contaminating hope.⁴⁷ This contamination begins when those in what seem to be hopeless situations, and the other person trying to help them, distinguish incorrectly hope from hopeless, the possible from the impossible. That hopelessness becomes unbearable when a separation between the other person and those in seemingly hopeless situations begins⁴⁸ because, as Lynch argues, hope is fundamentally relational, for hope “is an interior sense that there is help on the outside of us.”⁴⁹

This relationality of hope is where our call from the Liberating Christ meets the theology of hope. If Jürgen Moltmann’s definition of hope as a promise from God is added to William Lynch’s understanding of hope, suddenly the impossible fight for liberation becomes a possible hope that we must strive to achieve. The fight to give the oppressed and marginalized freedom, however impossible it may seem, is a promise from the Liberating Christ, given to us in the beatitudes of Matthew 5:3-12. Though Jesus here speaks of receiving blessings in the kingdom of heaven—giving the marginalized hope for the future—Jesus also tells his disciples two separate times in the Gospel of Matthew that “the kingdom of heaven has come near.”⁵⁰ The Greek word the Gospel writer uses for ‘has come near’ is ἤγγιζον, the imperfect form of ἐγγίζω, which not only means ‘has come near,’ but also has the connotation of imminent arrival or nearness.⁵¹ This means that the promises that the Liberating Christ gave to us in the beatitudes are promises that we can strive for now, promises that we can hope for today. Using this logic, liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez calls for a movement towards a new utopia.

It must be noted that to Gutiérrez, utopia is not how most understand it today. Instead of it referring to societies that lack an understanding of reality and is based off illusions, he bases his understanding of utopia off its original meaning which can be broken down into three characteristics, “its connection to historical reality, its verification in praxis, and its rational nature.”⁵² To fight for a utopia would mean take part in its revolutionary call, to denounce the current oppressive social order and understand and implement its prophetic call for a new, just society. Utopia is a call for a new social consciousness with deeper and true relationships among people, always spilling over to the future,⁵³ just as the promises of God do.⁵⁴ If utopia is truly a promise of God and to be fully hoped in, Christians “can no longer put up with the reality as it is, but begin to suffer under it, to contradict it,” for this hope in liberation “causes not rest but unrest, not patience but impatience,” not a hermeneutic of self, but a hermeneutic of other.⁵⁵

CONCLUSION

The hope that Christians, as fellow sheep of the flock of Christ, must work to distill in the lives of the oppressed and marginalized is the hope of fulfillment of God’s promise of utopia. This can only be done by following Christ’s call to not only calling out the social structures that cause the oppression but also physically work for their liberation not only by taking care of temporary—but still important—needs but also by taking political action against systematic oppressive structures. As we see Jesus take direct action against the unjust Roman rule, so must we - for Christ is the “permanent and uncomfortable memory of that which we ought to be and that which we are not.”⁵⁶ When the Gospel of Matthew is read, especially when the Gospel writer uses the word shepherd in 9:36, it must be read with hermeneutic of the

Liberating Christ directly confronting the unjust social structures of his time. Antioch, where the Gospel was most likely written and a place filled with injustice and oppressed peoples, gives context to what exactly the Gospel writer had Jesus confronting. These injustices are still very present today and Christ's call for liberation extends through time, calling Christians near and far to enter into the fight for liberation and freedom of those suffering under systemic oppression. It is the Christian duty to not only hope and work for a future that reflects the kingdom of heaven, but to also to distill that same hope in the lives of those who have lost hope. For Christians aren't only responsible for having faith in a liberating God, but it is the Christian commitment, made in baptism, to transform this world in expectation of the divine transformation to come.⁵⁷

Notes

- 1 Mt 9:35-36 NRSV
- 2 Oscar Cullmann, *Jesus and the Revolutionaries* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1970), viii.
- 3 *Theology of Hope* is the title of Jürgen Moltmann's book on hope and eschatology. Though we will be using this book, the term theology of hope will be used in a broader sense to encompass other studies of hope in relation to God.
- 4 Warren Carter, "Matthew Negotiates the Roman Empire," in *In the Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 121.
- 5 Gn 48:15 NRSV
- 6 Ps 23:1 NRSV
- 7 *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, s.v. "Shepherd."
- 8 Jeremiah refers to national leaders as poor shepherds three times, first in

12:10 (“Many Shepherds have destroyed my vineyard and trampled down my portion; they have turned my pleasant portion a desolate wilderness.”), second in 23:1-2 (“Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!”), and third in 50:6 (“My people have been lost sheep; their shepherds have led them astray, turning them away on the mountains”).

- 9 Martinus J J. Menken, “The references to Jeremiah in the Gospel according to Matthew (Matt 2:17, 16:14, 27:9).” *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 60, no. 1 (1984): 5.
- 10 H. Daniel Zacharias, *Matthew’s Presentation of the Son of David* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 97.
- 11 Ezek 34:2-4 NRSV
- 12 Mt 9:36 NSRV
- 13 Ezek 34:4 NSRV
- 14 Carter, “Matthew Negotiates the Roman Empire,” 121.
- 15 David M. Scholer, foreword to *The Works of Philo*, ed. C.D. Yonge (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), xi.
- 16 Philo first uses the word shepherd to refer to a governor over a city (20). He then uses it to describe an emperor (44). The third use of shepherd by Philo is in reference to the literal definition of the word shepherd (76).
- 17 Philo, “On the Embassy to Gaius,” in *The Works of Philo*, ed. C. D. Yonge (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993), 757-790.
- 18 L. Michael White, “Crisis Management and Boundary Maintenance: The Social Location of the Matthean Community,” in *Social History of the Matthean Community*, ed. David L. Balch (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 214.
- 19 Warren Carter, *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 2001), 38.
- 20 John Dominic Crossan, “Roman Imperial Theology,” in *The Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 59.
- 21 Ibid., 61.
- 22 Warren Carter, *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations* 20.
- 23 Ibid.

- 24 John Dominic Crossan, “Roman Imperial Theology,” in *The Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance*, 60.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Ibid., 11-17.
- 27 Ibid., 11.
- 28 Ibid., 17.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Gerhard E. Lenski, *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 243.
- 31 Warren Carter, *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations*, 17.
- 32 Gerhard E. Lenski, *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification*, 248.
- 33 Knowing this, we can now look at Jesus arguing with the religious leaders (especially in 23:1-38) and merchants (21:12) with as challenging the social construct of the Roman Empire as well.
- 34 Warren Carter, *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations*, 17-18.
- 35 Ibid., 19.
- 36 Rodney Stark, “Antioch as the Social Situation for Matthew’s Gospel” in *Social History of the Matthean Community*, ed. David L. Balch (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 198.
- 37 Mt 25:33-40 NRSV
- 38 Though this fight against social injustices is a timeless fight that every society has and will always experience, we must always remember that each fight is not the exact same. The women’s suffrage movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries confronted many different social realities than the current fight for healthcare benefits for the poor. Each society and each social campaign will always face different cultural realities and “liberation is not possible apart from the beliefs and values of the people” (Christina Astorga, *Catholic Moral Theology & Social Ethics: A New Method* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2014), 96.) Even though those realities might change, the search for human dignity in the fight remains the same.
- 39 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Teología de la Liberación* (Lima: Centro de Estudios Y

Publicaciones, 1988), 353.

- 40 William Lynch, *Images of Hope: Imagination as Healer of the Hopeless* (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1965), 32.
- 41 There is some truth to this statement, though only half-truth. Lynch writes that “like most human statements this one [that hope is only an internal resource] contains some truth, but in its substance it contains a broadly prevalent clinical, philosophical and theological lie... It is a romantic notion that will make more people sick and sick people sicker still if it is not qualified,” where sick people are those without hope (Ibid., 39).
- 42 Ibid., 24.
- 43 Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (London: SCM Press, 2002), 2.
- 44 Ibid., 18.
- 45 William Lynch, *Images of Hope: Imagination as Healer of the Hopeless*, 54.
- 46 As Christians, we believe in unexplainable miracles of God, that through the intercession of God we are capable of doing all things. These impossible actions that are being discussed are those that are impossible through human action alone. As human beings *alone* we cannot fly and we cannot corporeally be eternal. To believe in such things would be what Lynch calls a gnostic imagination, that we are exempt from human realities (William Lynch, *Images of Hope: Imagination as Healer of the Hopeless*, 54-55.).
- 47 Ibid., 47.
- 48 Ibid., 58.
- 49 Ibid., 32.; Lynch acknowledges the internal aspect of hope as well, but argues that it is an internal acknowledgement of external help (Ibid., 40.).
- 50 Mt 4:17 and 10:7 NRSV
- 51 Warren Carter, “Narrative/Literary Approaches to Matthean Theology: The ‘Reign of the Heavens’ as an Example (MT. 4.17-5.12),” *Journal For the Study of the New Testament* 67 (1997): 17, accessed December 8, 2017, *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost.
- 52 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Teología de la Liberación*, 355.
- 53 Ibid., 355-357.
- 54 Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 93.

- 55 Ibid., 7.
- 56 Leonardo Boff, *Jesucristo el Liberador: Ensayo de Cristología Crítica para Nuestro Tiempo* (Santander: Sal Terrae, 1985), 258.
- 57 Jürgen Moltmann gives this responsibility to theologians, who are “not concerned merely to supply a different *interpretation* of the world” but are to “*transform* [it] in expectation of a divine transformation” (Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 71.) but all Christians must be held accountable to this worldly transformation.