

*The Last and the First (Matt 21:16; 19:30):
Women and Empire in Mathew's Narrative*

Dorothy Jean Weaver
Professor Emerita of New Testament
Eastern Mennonite Seminary
weaverdj@emu.edu

Abstract: To reflect on the role of empire within Matthew's narrative is to ask a question which spans the Gospel from beginning to end. And the language of imperial power within Matthew's narrative functions above all to depict a male-oriented world and the actions of men vis-à-vis men. Accordingly, the interface between empire and women has been a question largely overlooked within Matthean scholarship. This article will highlight and assess the rhetorical interface between the powers of empire depicted by Matthew and numerous women within Matthew's narrative, both women *of* empire and women identifiably *subject to* empire. And I will demonstrate not only the extraordinary presence of women vis-à-vis the powers of empire within Matthew's narrative but also the heavily ironic character of most of these encounters between empire and women.

Keywords: Disciples, Empire/Imperial, Irony/Ironic, Power and Powerlessness, Rhetoric/Rhetorical, Women

Introduction

To reflect on the role of empire within Matthew's narrative is to ask a question which spans the Gospel from beginning to end.¹ Matthew dates the birth of Jesus in conjunction with "the days of Herod the king" (2:1a),² an Idumean client king over Judea on behalf of Rome. Jesus' life, from infancy onward to his death by crucifixion, is both

¹ I use "Matthew" throughout this study as the traditional nomenclature for the author of the First Gospel.

² All biblical citations reflect the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise indicated. All biblical references refer to the Gospel of Matthew unless otherwise indicated.

profoundly and strategically impacted by the machinations of rulers—whether Roman or empowered by Rome—who carry out Rome's imperial policies: Herod the king and his son Archelaus (2:1–23); Herod the tetrarch (14:1–13a); and Pilate the governor of Judea (27:1–54, 62–66; 28:1–4, 11–15).³ Throughout his ministry Jesus engages the Roman empire in various and nuanced ways. He commends the faith of a Roman centurion and heals his servant from a distance (8:5–13). He calls a Jewish tax collector hired by the Romans into his disciple group (9:9), feasts with this tax collector and his colleagues (9:10–13) and commends tax collectors as those who will “[go] into the kingdom of heaven” ahead of the Jewish religious leadership (21:31; cf. 21:23). He engages in debate with the Pharisees concerning the payment of taxes to “the emperor” (22:15–22). He warns his disciples that they will one day “be handed over to governors and kings” (10:18). And he gives them notice that they will in future encounter “wars and rumors of wars” (24:6), experience the conflict of “nation . . . against nation and kingdom against kingdom” (24:7), and be forced to “flee to the mountains” (24:15–16) in the “flight” of the powerless and miserable (24:17–22).

The language of imperial power within Matthew's narrative functions above all to depict a male-oriented world and, in specific, the actions of men vis-à-vis men, most prominently the actions of (male) Roman officials and (male) Roman military figures vis-a-vis the (male) Jewish Jesus. In the androcentric worlds both of Matthew himself and of the story that he tells, this is hardly surprising. In this male-oriented world, where “women and children” must be pasted into a traditional story in which Jesus feeds thousands of “men” (Matt 14:21; cf. Mark 6:44; Matt 15:38; cf. Mark 8:9), Matthew's narrative is significantly at home in its first-century Mediterranean cultural context, as it depicts predominantly male/male interactions.⁴ So to engage the interface

³ For a discussion of these Roman officials and their impact on the life of Jesus and his associate, John the Baptist, see Dorothy Jean Weaver, *The Irony of Power: The Politics of God within Matthew's Narrative*. Studies in Peace and Scripture, Vol 13: Institute of Mennonite Studies (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017), 27–43. In the genealogy which opens his narrative (1:1–17) Matthew points, in similar fashion, to the Israelite monarchy preceding the current Roman empire (1:6ff.) and in the process alludes to reprehensible actions of David (1:6b; cf. 2 Sam 11:1–12:25), without question the most prominent Jewish king (1:6; cf. 1:1, 17).

⁴ On the androcentric character of Matthew's narrative, see Janice Capel Anderson, “Matthew: Gender and Reading,” *Semeia* 28 (1983), 3–27; Janice Capel Anderson, “Mary's Difference: Gender and Patriarchy in the Birth Narratives,” *Journal of Religion* 67 (1987), 183–202.

between empire *and men* is deeply instinctive for biblical scholars.

But to consider the interface between empire *and women* is a question largely overlooked and unaddressed within Matthean scholarship.⁵ Reasons for this lie on multiple levels. On the most obvious level the androcentric world of Jesus which Matthew depicts is one in which the lives of women and the stories about women are, *ipso facto*, widely deemed to be of less significance than those of men, as, for example, Matthew's patrilineal genealogy of Jesus clearly attests (1:1-17). So women are, for the most part, simply not visible either in the sources on which Matthew draws or in the narrative which he crafts on the basis of those sources.⁶ Accordingly, women are largely not available as characters for consideration vis-à-vis empire.⁷

But there is a second and more fundamental reason underlying the first. Matthew's own cultural world is equally androcentric. So not only does Matthew depict the male-oriented world of *Jesus* as he narrates his story, but writing within the same first-century Mediterranean cultural milieu as the story that he narrates, Matthew likewise betrays *his own* male-oriented cultural instincts and writes a narrative, accordingly, which reflects his own realities.⁸ As Rosemary M. Dowsett notes, "Clearly none of the Gospels was written as a feminist tract, and it is inappropriate to judge them from such a framework. Nor were many of the questions that exercise us about the role of women in home, society and church issues that Matthew could have dreamed of."⁹

⁵ But see on this topic the essay by Jean K. Moore, "Matthew's Decolonial Desire (Matthew 12:42; 27:19). A Postcolonial Feminist Reading of the Two Royal Women" ("lectio difficilior," 1/2013, <http://www.lectio.unibe.ch>).

⁶ But women are obviously there all along. Take, for example, the women who "had followed Jesus from Galilee" and "had provided for him" (27:55), but most of whom are invisible within Matthew's narrative until after the death of Jesus (27:55–61; 28:1–11a). But see Matthew's prior reference to "the mother of the sons of Zebedee" (20:20–21).

⁷ And when visible, they are largely unnamed. As Ian Boxall notes (*Discovering Matthew: Content, Interpretation, Reception*. Discovering Biblical Texts [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2014], 56–57), "With the notable exception of Jesus' mother Mary (1.16, 18, 20; 2.11; 13:55), and the mothers listed in the genealogy, the women in Matthew's story remain unnamed almost until the end.... Feminist critics would find in the lack of names evidence for the essentially androcentric perspective of the evangelist, or of the inherited tradition."

⁸ Formal discussion of the extent to which this is likewise true for the exegetical work of biblical scholars as well over the centuries lies beyond the scope of this study.

⁹ Rosemary M. Dowsett, "Matthew," in *The IVP Women's Bible Commentary*, Catherine Clark Kroeger & Mary J. Evans, eds. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002),

But it is precisely due to Matthew's obvious rootedness in his own androcentric cultural world that Matthew's narrative has such power to surprise its readers. As Dowsett observes, "Yet given the male domination of the culture at that time and the wholly male worldview of most contemporary literature, the extraordinary thing is how much Matthew draws attention to women as well as men from start to finish of his Gospel."¹⁰

Nor is that all. In accordance with Matthew's striking propensity to exhibit irony in crucial fashion throughout his narrative,¹¹ much of the interface between empire and the women of Matthew's Gospel is deeply ironic in character. Here, as elsewhere, Matthew's narrative inhabits a "two-storey" world in which "appearance"—i.e., the way things "appear" to be in the everyday world—is visible on the "lower level" of the narrative, the level accessible to all of the characters in the story, while true reality—i.e., the way things truly are from the "God's-eye" perspective—is visible only from the "upper level" of the narrative, a level inaccessible to the characters in the story but visible to the observant reader.¹²

This article will highlight and assess the interface between the powers of empire visible within Matthew's narrative and the women of Matthew's narrative whose lives intersect in identifiable fashion with these imperial powers: Mary, mother of Jesus (1:16; 1:18–2:23); the women of Bethlehem, identified collectively as "Rachel" (2:16–18); Herodias and her daughter (14:1–12); the woman who anoints Jesus' head at the home of Simon the leper in Bethany (26:6–13); the servant girls

519. Cf. Russell Pregeant (*Matthew*, Chalice Commentaries for Today [St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 2004], 26), who notes, "In many ways, the gospel of Matthew remains within the world of patriarchy and male domination, even though at various points it makes a partial break with it. It is therefore important to claim neither too much nor too little for Matthew in relation to the contemporary struggle of women for full equality."

¹⁰ Pregeant, 26. Cf. Weaver, *Irony*, 248–61. See also Pregeant (*Matthew*, 27), who notes, "But to the extent that elements in the text depart from [patriarchal] values, they create competing strains of meaning that the reader must consider. It is therefore appropriate for the experiences of contemporary persons in the struggle for women's rights to draw on the presence of women in Matthew's genealogy and on the motif of the virgin birth itself as resources in that struggle."

¹¹ Thus, for example, Weaver, *Irony*; Inhee C. Berg, *Irony in the Matthean Passion Narrative* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014).

¹² On this "two-storey" definition of irony, see D. C. Muecke, *The Compass of Irony* (London: Methuen, 1969), 19–20.

at Caiaphas' palace (26:69–75); Pilate's wife (27:19); and the women at the cross, tomb, and post-resurrection scenes (27:55–61; 28:1–11a). In addition I will also consider the roles of three women/groups of women who are not characters contemporary to the story of Jesus, but whose female experiences—whether past or future from the perspective of Matthew's narrative—likewise speak to the interface between empire and women: the wife of Uriah (1:6b); the “queen of the South” (12:42); and the pregnant women and nursing mothers of Jesus' eschatological discourse (24:19; cf. 24:3–21). Overall, I will demonstrate not only the extraordinary presence of these women within Matthew's narrative but also the ironic character of many of these encounters between empire and women. In conclusion I will reflect on the narrative rhetoric of Matthew's Gospel vis-a-vis women and empire and on the theological message conveyed by Matthew to his readers through this narrative rhetoric.

“The Daughter of Herodias Danced” (14:6): Everyday Life for Imperial Women

While it is clear from Matthew's cast of characters that the women of his Gospel do not for the most part inhabit the halls of imperial power, Matthew nevertheless provides his readers with crucial windows into the lives of four such imperial women: the “queen of the South” (12:42); Herodias and her daughter (14:1–12); and Pilate's wife (27:19). The stories of these women are as varied as they are intriguing. And they reflect a wide range of female experiences vis-à-vis imperial power. But it is above all the commonalities between these women that define their imperial status.

Arguably the most crucial commonality that these women share is their access—whether public or private—to power, namely to the king or governor in question. The “queen of the South,” a regent herself, demonstrates free and public access to other regents, as she sits in the king's court in Jerusalem and “listen[s] to the wisdom of Solomon” (12:42b).

Herodias, the wife of Philip, brother of Herod the tetrarch (14:3), has access to Herod on multiple levels. The issue which lies at the heart of her story is her intimate physical liaison with Herod, who “[has] her” as his consort in defiance of Jewish law (14:4; cf. Lev. 18:16; 20:21). Further, Herodias clearly knows Herod well and is fully aware of his personal and

political issues vis-à-vis John the Baptist. And she has a direct, if conspiratorial, public channel to communicate her wishes effectively to Herod. When Herodias' daughter conveys to Herod her demand for the head of John the Baptist (14:8b), Matthew notes that she has been "prompted by her mother" to do so (14:8a). And when Herodias' daughter receives the head of John the Baptist as demanded (14:11a), she promptly "[brings] it to her mother" accordingly (14:11b).

Pilate's wife, while not conspiratorial like Herodias, has similar power of access to her husband. For her part, she "sends" a messenger to Pilate (27:19a), interrupting him with an urgent message in the very midst of his public judicial deliberations vis-à-vis Jesus, precisely as he is "sitting on the judgment seat" and preparing to pronounce his verdict (27:19; cf. 27:24).¹³

The daughter of Herodias, as Matthew depicts her, needs neither public go-betweens (as Herodias) nor messengers (as Pilate's wife). Instead, she has unmediated and public access to Herod the tetrarch as she "dances in the midst" of Herod and his assembled guests (14:6; DJW) and speaks with Herod face-to-face (14:8b; cf. 14:7).

But beyond this prominent commonality between these imperial women, their stories diverge in significant ways. The "queen of the South" (12:42a) is arguably the most highly placed and thus the most powerful of these women. Remarkably, within the androcentric world that she inhabits, the "queen of the South" is a regent in her own right. Just as remarkably, she has come "from the ends of the earth" (12:42b)¹⁴ and without a male consort to validate her presence, precisely in order to sit face to face with Solomon as a royal equal, regent with regent, to "listen to [his] wisdom" (12:42b) and likewise, as scriptural tradition indicates, to "test him with hard questions" (1 Kgs 10:1b) and "[tell] him all that [is] on her mind" (1 Kgs 10:2b).¹⁵ In Matthew's account

¹³ Cf. Moore (*Decolonial Desire*, 13), who notes, "It is not coincidental that Pilate's wife sends her message to Pilate at the very moment he is sitting on the judgment seat."

¹⁴ This is clearly an allusion to the "Sheba" of 1 Kings 10:1a, in southern Arabia. As Jeffrey A. Gibbs notes (*Matthew 11:2–20:34*, Concordia Commentary: A Theological Exposition of Sacred Scripture [St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 2010], 647), Sheba is "southeast of Israel, on the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula."

¹⁵ See Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading*, The Bible and Liberation (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000), 278.

this queen exhibits significant persistence and evident wealth,¹⁶ as she travels the earth to come to Jerusalem. And she likewise exhibits the same “wisdom” attributed to Solomon, as she chooses him as a peer mentor for her own education.¹⁷ Thus Matthew’s “lower-level” portrait of the “queen of the South” reflects a woman of royal power, wealth, and wisdom, who takes extraordinary initiative to engage in international diplomacy as an equal, regent to regent, with a “wise” compatriot in a distant land.

Herodias does not fare so well, as Matthew depicts her. Obviously aware of John the Baptist’s denunciation of Herod on her account—“It is not lawful for you to have her” (14:4b)—Herodias is clearly threatened by John’s prophetic authority among the crowds (14:5c) and enraged by John’s blunt and repeated challenges to Herod (14:4a).¹⁸ As Craig S. Keener suggests, Herodias “want[s] vengeance on John for daring to denounce her sin publicly,” since “a member of Herod the Great’s royal family would never have tolerated John’s audacity (cf. Mk 6:19).”¹⁹

But not only is Herodias threatened and enraged. She is likewise calculating, conspiratorial, and cunning. When Herod swears under oath before his banquet guests to give Herodias’ daughter “whatever she might ask” (14:7), Herodias realizes immediately that her moment has come for “removing a critic and securing [her own] power.”²⁰ Accordingly, she inveigles her daughter into a cunning and grotesque conspiracy and sends her back to Herod with the immediate and public demand for John the Baptist’s head, delivered “here on a platter” (14:8). And the trap snaps shut.²¹ Herodias’ powers of calculation, conspiracy, and cunning are easily sufficient to manipulate the king, a man of demonstrable weakness and paralyzing contradictions,²² into action that he both “wants” to do (14:5a) but likewise

¹⁶ See 1 Kings 10:2, which describes her “very great retinue” and the conspicuous wealth of gifts that the queen brings to Solomon: “camels bearing spices and very much gold, and precious stones.” Cf. 1 Kings 10:10.

¹⁷ That this queen ultimately acknowledges the truth of the rumors which she has heard about Solomon and previously discounted (1 Kgs 10:6–9; cf. David E. Garland, *Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the First Gospel*. Reading the New Testament [New York, NY: Crossroad, 1993], 142) does not discredit her own “wisdom” in engaging the “wise” king, Solomon, as a peer mentor.

¹⁸ The imperfect verb ἔλεγεν (14:4a) suggests that John “kept on” denouncing Herod’s liaison with Herodias.

¹⁹ Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 401.

²⁰ Carter, *Margins*, 304.

²¹ Cf. Gibbs, *Matthew 11:2-20:34*, 743–44.

²² Cf. Weaver, *Irony*, 35–38.

“fears” (cf. 14:5b) and is “grieved” (14:9a) to do.²³

The bottom line is clear, for both king and consort. As Jeffrey A. Gibbs notes, “King Herod has been manipulated; the real power belongs to Herodias.”²⁴ And Amy-Jill Levine concludes—rightly, if somewhat more cautiously than narrative outcomes warrant—that this story “indicates the influence women *might* wield in politics (emphasis mine).”²⁵ In short, Herodias has effectively used and abused her daughter, manipulated a weak and vulnerable king, and succeeded in wreaking vengeance on her prophetic nemesis, John the Baptist. Her power has prevailed to all appearances. Her reward for her actions is the severed head of John the Baptist staring at her from the “platter” she has demanded, in the grotesque banquet of the vengeful and the victim. Such is Matthew’s “lower-level” portrait of Herodias. Stanley P. Saunders sums up the impact of this scene with regard to imperial power:

[Matthew’s] focus is on the power dynamics at work in Herod’s family. In Herod’s house, power is not shared but contested, no one seems to wield power completely, and cunning and manipulation rule the day. The story thus reveals something of the conflicted, incestuous character of a family trapped in the quest for self-preservation and power.²⁶

Pilate’s wife (27:19), for her part, stands as a clear parallel and, by the same token, in sharp contrast to Herodias within Matthew’s narrative. The parallels are unmistakable. These two women share similar positions as the wife or consort of an imperial ruler serving at the behest of Rome (14:3–4//27:19a). In addition, their stories both focus

²³ Cf. Stanley P. Saunders (*Preaching the Gospel of Matthew: Proclaiming God’s Presence* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010], 141), who notes that Herod “does what he had first wanted to do, kill John—but only because his own weaknesses have made him vulnerable to the manipulations of the women in his household.” See also Gibbs (*Matthew 11:2-20:34*, 740), who depicts Herodias as a “scheming wife” who “manipulate[s] her royal husband.”

²⁴ Gibbs, *Matthew 11:2-20:34*, 744. But note Carter’s cautionary words (*Margins*, 304), “[John’s] head ends up with Herodias, who prompted the request (14:8). But the blame is evenly spread, since her request enacted Herod’s will (14:5). Their [i.e., collective] exercise of power is destructive.”

²⁵ Amy-Jill Levine, “Matthew,” in Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, eds., *The Women’s Bible Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 258. More accurately stated, this scene portrays the real and destructive power that one woman *actually does* wield in politics.

²⁶ Saunders, *Preaching*, 142.

on urgent and forceful messages which these women convey via channels—for Herodias, her daughter (14: 8); for Pilate’s wife, a messenger (27:19a)—to the ruler in question. Accordingly, the story of Herodias serves, by contrast, to be sure, to “foreshadow” the story of Pilate’s wife.²⁷

Beyond these parallels, however, the stories diverge in crucial ways. Where Herodias’ motives are personal revenge against her prophetic nemesis (14:8; cf. 14:3–5), Pilate’s wife acts in response to a “dream” (27:19d; cf. 1:20; 2:12, 13, 19, 22), which, within Matthew’s narrative, is clearly of divine origin and conveyed by an “angel of the Lord” (1:20, 24; 2:13, 19). Where Herodias manipulates Herod to bring about the death (14:8) of a man who through his ministry “fulfills all righteousness” (3:15) and upholds the Jewish scriptures (14:4), the wife of Pilate engages her access to power in order to save the life (27:19b) of “that righteous man” (27:19b, DJW) about whom she has had a harrowing dream (27:19c). And where Herodias achieves her goal and succeeds with her conspiracy (14:10–11), Pilate’s wife is ultimately unsuccessful with her quest to save the life of Jesus. Instead, Pilate acknowledges his own powerlessness vis-à-vis the crowds (27:24a), “washes his hands” of the blood he is about to shed (27:24b), proclaims his own “innocence” (27:24c) rather than that of Jesus (cf. 27:19b), then has Jesus “flogged” (27:24d) and “hand[s] him over to be crucified” (27:24e).²⁸

Matthew’s “lower-level” portrait of Pilate’s wife—a striking contrast both to that of Pilate, her husband, and to that of Herodias, her counterpart—reflects a deeply courageous woman, obedient to divine messages, who “stands straight and tall” vis-à-vis her husband’s ethical contortions,²⁹ “suffer[s] many things . . . on account of [Jesus]” (27:19c, DJW), and takes crucial and bold initiative to speak truth to power and to “resist” the

²⁷ Thus Levine (“Matthew,” 258), who notes that Herodias’ story “foreshadows the unsuccessful attempt by Pilate’s wife to rescue Jesus (27:19).”

²⁸ Cf. Weaver, *Irony*, 260. Contra Douglas R. A. Hare (*Matthew*, Interpretations: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching [Louisville: John Knox, 1993], 317) who notes that “Pilate accedes to this divine warning and refuses to take responsibility for Jesus’ death,” Matthew neither exonerates Pilate nor ultimately shows him to be “acceding” to the wishes of his wife. Instead, Pilate’s subsequent actions of “flogging” Jesus and “handing him over to be crucified” demonstrate Pilate’s full and active responsibility for the death of Jesus, despite his ritual and verbal protestations of “innocence.”

²⁹ Weaver, *Irony*, 260.

Roman empire,³⁰ even as her efforts to effect change are ultimately fruitless. Vis-à-vis Herodias, her Matthean counterpart, Pilate's wife negotiates empire with consummate honesty and courage, even as she fails to bend the arc of justice on behalf of Jesus.

Herodias' daughter, the youngest and arguably least powerful of Matthew's quartet of imperial women, is a complex figure within Matthew's narrative. To begin with, Matthew depicts her as both "daughter" (θυγάτηρ:14:6)³¹ and "young girl" (κοράσιον:14:11, DJW).³² These depictions in tandem clearly establish her identity as that of a female child, or at most a female adolescent, vis-à-vis the two powerful adults in her world: Herodias (14:3, 6), her "mother" (14:8, 11), and Herod (14:1, 3, 6), the "tetrarch" (14:1) or the "king" (14:9).³³

If Herodias' daughter is young, and, by implication, less powerful than her significant elders, she is likewise profoundly vulnerable to their evil influence. Herod, for his part, tempts her successfully with "whatever she might ask" (14:7), a more than intoxicating offer for any "young girl" with imagination. Herodias, for her part, supplies the imagination required by Herod's intoxicating offer and inveigles her daughter just as successfully into a grotesque and conspiratorial plot against the life of John the Baptist (14:8). Accordingly, Matthew's depiction of Herodias' daughter is, on the one hand, that of a "young girl" who is effectively used, abused, and "exploited" by the significant elders in her world,³⁴ the very

³⁰ Thus Moore ("Decolonial Desire," 13), who notes that Pilate's wife takes "an action of disturbance and of disapproval" and that Matthew uses her action in order "to resist the Roman empire" and "to shame Pilate," her husband.

³¹ Cf. the reciprocal references to the daughter's "mother" (14:8, 11).

³² As Max Zerwick and Mary Grosvenor (*A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament, Vol. I: Gospels—Acts* [Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1974], 46) indicate, the term κοράσιον is the diminutive form of κόρη ("girl"). Cf. Gibbs (*Matthew 11:2–20:34*, 740), who refers to Herodias' daughter as "a 'young girl' rather than a (mature) woman."

³³ Note that Matthew uses the same term, κοράσιον (9:24), to identify the 12-year-old "daughter" (θυγάτηρ: 9:18) of a synagogue official. Speaking historically, Keener (*Gospel of Matthew*, 400) notes, "According to some accounts the girl ... may ... have been between six and eight years old; more likely, she was a virgin of marriageable age (twelve to fourteen)." Cf. Hare, *Matthew*, 163; Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8–20: A Commentary*, Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible, James E. Crouch, tr., Helmut Koester, ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 307.

³⁴ Cf. Pregeant (*Matthew*, 119), who refers to "the exploitation of a young woman by her mother, within the context of the intrigues of a corrupt ruling class..." See also Dorothy Jean Weaver, "Do You Hear What These Are Saying?" (Mt 21:16):

“parents” (cf. 6:9) who should be protecting her from “temptation” (cf. 6:13a) and its “evil” outcomes (cf. 6:13b).³⁵ Without question Matthew portrays Herodias’ daughter as a child/adolescent victim of “parental” abuse, with clear or potential sexual innuendo on both fronts, namely, the unrestrained lascivious impulses of Herod and the coldly cunning orchestrations of Herodias.³⁶

But regardless of her vulnerability to “parental” abuse, Herodias’ daughter is ultimately no passive victim of imperial malfeasance. Instead, she herself is a crucial actor within the narrative and fully complicit in the imperial evil that transpires. And it is her own initiatives which move the plot of this narrative forward toward its grisly conclusion.

To begin with, the daughter of Herodias “dance[s] in the midst” of Herod and his birthday guests (14:6a, DJW), a socially “unprecedented” act for one of her royal status.³⁷ This birthday banquet is without question a raucous Hellenistic stag party, marked characteristically by excessive drinking and sexually explicit entertainment of a type normally provided by “harlots”³⁸ and “courtesans,”³⁹ with unmistakable expectations of sexual favors to follow.⁴⁰ As Keener notes, “[I]f dancing was a regular feature of such drinking parties, only in a drunken stupor would one invite another member of the royal family to engage in such a sensuous Hellenistic dance.”⁴¹ But Herod’s

Children and Their Role within Matthew’s Narrative,” *HTS Theologese Studies/Theological Studies*, 75 (4), a5513, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i4.5513>, 3.

³⁵ Thus Weaver, “Do You Hear,” 3.

³⁶ While Matthew is silent on this point, Richard B. Gardner (*Matthew*, Believers Church Bible Commentary [Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1991], 224) associates the dance itself with the “bidding” of Herodias, while Gibbs (*Matthew 11:2–20:34*, 740) notes that Herodias “manipulate[s] her royal husband by illicit desire.”

³⁷ Thus Gardner, *Matthew*, 224.

³⁸ Gardner, *Matthew*, 224; Hare, *Matthew*, 163.

³⁹ Luz, *Matthew 8–20*, 307.

⁴⁰ Thus Carter (*Margins*, 303), who cites Kathleen Corley (*Private Women, Public Meals: Social Conflict in the Synoptic Tradition* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 24–79): “K. Corley notes that women who attended public meals, traditionally male events, were commonly understood to provide sex whether they did so or not.” Cf. Saunders, *Preaching*, 142.

⁴¹ Keener, *Gospel*, 400. Cf. Hare (*Matthew*, 163), who first notes, “It is alleged that in that culture it would be most improbable that a princess would perform a solo dance in front of strange men,” but then refers to others who argue that “given the morals of the Herodian court, such a departure from accepted standards is not impossible,” since “the men would not have been so fascinated if an ordinary harlot had entertained them with her dancing.”

“pleasure” (14:6b) at this “apparently lascivious dance”⁴² clearly demonstrates both the skill and the success of Herodias’ daughter at arousing Herod with the erotic dance she performs as a birthday gift for him.

And the dance is only the beginning. When Herod, clearly overcome with desire, offers Herodias’ daughter “whatever she might ask” (14:7), she takes her second decisive action. While acquiescing to her mother’s sinister “prompting” (14:8a) concerning this extraordinary offer, Herodias’ daughter, at the same time and by the same token, takes initiative into her own hands and speaks, insistently and in her own voice, to demand the head of John the Baptist: “Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter” (14:8b).⁴³ Thus, as Gibbs observes without absolving Herodias of her own guilt in the matter, John the Baptist meets his fate “at the behest of a mere child.”⁴⁴

Nor is this the end of the matter. Herod, who regretfully recognizes that he is completely outmaneuvered on all sides (14:9a/b), capitulates to the demand of Herodias’ daughter (14:9c), has John “decapitated . . . in the prison” (14:10), and sees that the head is “brought on a platter and given to the girl” (14:11a/b), just as she has demanded (cf. 14:8b). In response to this imperial capitulation Herodias’ daughter then takes her final decisive initiative, as she “[brings]” John’s head “to her mother” (14:11c).

While she is clearly vulnerable to the evil influence of her imperial elders and victim of their respective forms of “parental” abuse, Herodias’ daughter is ultimately a crucial and decisive actor in her own right throughout the account, as evidenced by her dance (14:6), her demand (14:8), and her delivery (14:11). In the end Herodias’ daughter, to all surface appearances the least powerful of the imperial women within Matthew’s narrative, nevertheless succeeds in bending empire to her

⁴² Thus Ben Witherington III, *Matthew*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2006), 283. Cf. Pregeant (*Matthew*, 119), who speaks of “voyeuristic speculation about the nature of Herodias’s daughter’s dance.” And Gibbs (*Matthew 11:2-20:34*, 740) notes, “That her dancing before Antipas and his guests was seductive in nature is a plausible assumption that highlights the depravity involved.”

⁴³ Scholars differ on the reason for which Herodias’ daughter consults her mother. Keener (*Gospel*, 401) attributes this consultation to the daughter’s young age: “Naturally [she], being a minor, would seek her mother’s counsel.” Witherington (*Matthew*, 284) concludes that “the girl apparently has no strong feelings about the matter.” Regardless of the reason for this consultation, a reason which Matthew does not offer his readers, Herodias’ daughter transforms her mother’s “prompting” into her own insistent and personal demand.

⁴⁴ Gibbs, *Matthew 11:2-20:34*, 740.

will and forcing “the king” himself (14:9a) to meet her demands. Such is Matthew’s complex “lower-level” portrait of Herodias’ daughter.

“The Queen of the South Will Rise Up”: Imperial Women from the God’s-Eye Perspective

Matthew’s portraits of imperial women on the “lower level” of his narrative demonstrate a striking diversity of experiences vis-à-vis the ultimate powers of empire, namely, the king or governor in question. And these women exhibit greater or lesser degrees of success in their everyday negotiation of empire. It is the “upper level” of his narrative, however, on which Matthew ultimately assesses the character of these imperial women and the significance of their everyday life in the halls of power. And, as is the case throughout Matthew’s narrative, the “God’s-eye” perspective frequently turns “lower-level” reality on its head in ironic fashion.

The “queen of the South,” however, does not fit this pattern. Instead, her already positive “lower-level” portrait in her own real world finds added strength in Matthew’s “upper-level” assessment. Within Matthew’s narrative the “queen of the South” appears not as a character “on stage,” as it were, but rather in a response by Jesus to the scribes and Pharisees who “wish to see a sign” from him (12:38). Here Jesus first excoriates the “evil and adulterous generation” who request this “sign” (12:39a) and warns that “no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah” (12:39b).

By contrast Jesus then commends the “people of Nineveh” (12:41a) for their “repentant” response to the “proclamation of Jonah” (12:41b) and the “queen of the South” (12:42a) for her travel “from the ends of the earth” in order “to listen to the wisdom of Solomon” (12:42b). And Jesus goes on to proclaim that both of these parties will “rise up” at the judgment with this generation “and condemn it” (12:41a, 42a), since they responded faithfully in their own day (12:41b, 42b), while “this generation” has failed to respond faithfully to “something [even] greater” than Jonah or Solomon (12:41c, 42c).

Accordingly, in a move clearly as astonishing as his subsequent commendation of present-day “tax collectors and sinners,” who will precede the Jewish religious leadership into the kingdom of heaven (21:31), Jesus transforms a strikingly “odd couple” of historical Gentile parties, people with vastly different historical reputations (Jon 1:2; 1

Kgs 10:1–2), into human agents of God's judgment. This move is rhetorically strategic. Jesus himself has recently pronounced "woes" on Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum (11:21a; cf. 11:23a) and warned them of dire outcomes—worse than those for Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom—"on the day of judgment" (11:22//11:24) for their failure to "repent" (11:21c; cf. 11:23c) vis-à-vis the "deeds of power" (11:21b//11:23b) done in their midst. Now Jesus hands just such words of eschatological "condemnation" (12:41a//12:42a) over to the "people of Nineveh" and the "queen of the South" for their own proclamation "at the judgment" (12:41a//12:42a) against "this [evil and adulterous] generation" (12:41a//12:42a; cf. 12:39a), who have likewise failed to "repent" (12:41b; cf. 12:42b).

Equally remarkable here, within the cultural world of Matthew's narrative, is Jesus' portrayal, in Levine's words, of "[t]he woman's role as a witness in a lawcourt," a portrayal which "shows that Matthew [and clearly the Jesus of Matthew's narrative along with Matthew] elevates those who do not exploit positions of power and condemns attitudes of complacency."⁴⁵ Thus Jesus himself raises the status of the "queen of the South" both culturally and eschatologically through his commendation of her vis-à-vis "this evil and adulterous generation."

But this is not all. Through the rhetorical crafting of his narrative Matthew depicts the "queen of the South" (12:42) as an unmistakable female parallel to the "wise men from the East" (2:1).⁴⁶ The parallels here are crucial to Matthew's narrative rhetoric. Not only are both characters/character groups associated with "wisdom," the "queen of the South" through association with Solomon (12:42b) and the Persian astrologers through their star-gazing activities (2:2). They are both likewise Gentiles, who travel long distances from their Gentile lands of origin in "the South" (12:42a) and "the East" (2:1) to come to Jerusalem, the central locus of the Jewish community, in order to engage and honor Jewish royalty. For her part the "queen of the South" seeks out the "wise" king, Solomon (12:42b; cf. 1 Kgs 10:1–13), while the "wise men" seek "the [one] who has been born king of the Jews" (2:2, DJW). And both of their searches are ultimately successful. The "queen of the South" reaches Jerusalem, sits in the king's court, and "listen[s] to the wisdom of Solomon" (12:42b), while the "wise men" reach Bethlehem (2:1–10), "see" the child they are seeking (2:11a), "worship" the child (2:11b, DJW), and "offer

⁴⁵ Levine, "Matthew," 257.

⁴⁶ Keener, *Gospel of Matthew*, 368–69.

him [royal] gifts” (2:11c).

In both stories Matthew offers highest rhetorical commendation for Gentiles who have engaged with “wisdom” or offered “worship” which their Jewish counterparts have failed to do (2:1–12; 12:42). And both accounts clearly reflect Matthew’s missionary agenda, which ultimately reaches far beyond the Jewish community (10:5–6; cf. 15:24) and extends to “all the nations” (28:19a, DJW).⁴⁷ Such is Matthew’s “upper-level” commendation of the “queen of the South,” as she negotiates empire within her world.

Herodias and her daughter (14:1–12), to the contrary, who are both clearly successful in manipulating the power of empire to achieve their personal goals in the real world they inhabit, do not receive the same commendation from Matthew on the “upper level” of his narrative. To begin with, Herodias’ evident vendetta against John the Baptist (14:3–4) and her subsequent conspiracy to bring about his death (14:8) associate her unmistakably with a biblical villain of major reputation. Here Matthew depicts Herodias as the biblical “Jezebel”⁴⁸ (1 Kgs 16:31), a royal consort seeking to destroy the prophet of the Lord, “Elijah” (1 Kgs 19:1–2; cf. Matt 3:1–12; 11:7–19; 17:9–13), who has challenged her husband Ahab (1 Kgs 18:1–46; cf. Matt 14:3–4) precisely on her account (1 Kgs 18:17–19; cf. Matt 14:3–4).⁴⁹ And as the “Jezebel” figure within Matthew’s narrative and the one who succeeds, in contrast to her biblical counterpart, in securing the death of her prophetic nemesis (14:8–11; cf. 1 Kgs 19:1–3), Herodias joins the ranks of the Jewish “prophet-killers”—whether past (5:12; 21:35–36; 23:29–32, 35), present (17:12), or future (21:38–39; 22:6; 23:34)—whom Jesus decries repeatedly in his public proclamation and private teaching.⁵⁰ Further, Herodias’ “Jezebel” role as the present-day “prophet-killer” within

⁴⁷ Cf. Keener (*Gospel*, 368–69), who notes that “Matthew here reemphasizes the Gentile mission: those who know little about Israel’s God (like the Ninevites or the Queen of Sheba, or the Magi earlier in his Gospel) are often least arrogant and hence most responsive to the gospel. (The context of the Queen of Sheba in 1 Kings 10, as with the Ninevites in Jonah, is an Israelite’s witness to the nations.)”

⁴⁸ Gardner, *Matthew*, 224.

⁴⁹ Jezebel’s evil reputation as one who promotes the worship of Baal (1 Kgs 16:31; 18:17–19) lives throughout the New Testament era all the way to John’s Apocalypse, where she resurfaces (Rev 2:20) in the church at Thyatira and receives John’s strong condemnation as “that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practice fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols.”

⁵⁰ Cf. Luz (*Matthew* 8–20, 307), who associates John the Baptist with “the Old Testament tradition of ‘murdered prophets.’”

Matthew's narrative will shortly align her with the role of the Jewish religious leadership, as they maneuver to secure the death of Jesus (26:3–5, 57–68; 27:1–2, 20). As Ben Witherington III notes, “Just as John's ministry has foreshadowed Jesus', so does John's death. . . , for Herodias, like the chief priests later, finally gets her way through scheming and pressure.”⁵¹

But arguably the most direct rhetorical linkage between Herodias, her daughter, and the ongoing narrative is that which Matthew, borrowing from his Markan source, builds between the story of John the Baptist's death (14:1–12//Mark 6:1–29) and the immediately following story in which Jesus feeds the multitudes (14:12–21//Mark 6:30–44). Here Matthew contrasts the grotesque and death-dealing meal orchestrated conspiratorially by Herodias and secured by her daughter with the bountiful and life-giving meal multiplied by Jesus and served up by Jesus' disciples to “five thousand men, besides women and children” (14:21).

The parallels and contrasts are instructive. Herodias' daughter plays the deadly counterpart to Jesus, demanding the head of John the Baptist, and thus John's *death*, in language clearly parallel to that of Jesus as he calls for the bread and fish that he will multiply to *nourish human lives*: 14:8, DJW: “Bring me here the head”//14:18, DJW: “Bring me here the loaves.” John's head is then served up as a solitary “meal” for the most powerful woman in the land (cf. 14:11), while the bread and fish that Jesus multiplies serve as sustenance for vast thousands of powerless peasants (14:21).⁵² And in the end Herodias has a grisly and inedible “head” on a royal “platter” to contemplate (14:8–11), while the peasant masses “satisfy” their physical hunger with bread and fish enough and to spare (14:20, DJW). As Levine summarizes this scene:

The perverse image of John's head on a dish is replaced by the feeding of the five thousand (14:13–21); the meal of horror gives way to the foreshadowing of the messianic banquet. The explicitly noted presence of women and children at the miraculous meals (14:21; cf. 15:38) contrasts with the presence of Herodias and her daughter at Herod's feast.⁵³

NOT TO BE USED WITHOUT COPYRIGHT PERMISSION

⁵¹ Witherington, *Matthen*, 284. Cf. Hare, *Matthen*, 165; Luz, *Matthew 8–20*, 307.

⁵² The crowd which Matthew describes, including the women and the children, is clearly much larger than the “five thousand men” whom Matthew enumerates, based on his Markan source (14:21//Mark 6:44).

⁵³ Levine, “Matthew,” 258.

The ultimate outcome is clear for Herodias and her daughter. Success in manipulating and outmaneuvering the powers of empire does not ensure commendation at the “God’s-eye” level of the story. To the contrary, Herodias receives the sharpest rhetorical condemnation of any woman within Matthew’s narrative, condemnation that ranks her not only with a biblical villain of major reputation but also with Jesus’ prominent antagonists, the Jewish religious leadership. And Herodias’ daughter figures as the deadly counterpart to Jesus himself. Such is Matthew’s “upper-level” portrait of Herodias and her daughter.

By contrast, Pilate’s wife, Herodias’ narrative counterpart and the last of the imperial women within Matthew’s narrative, receives the rhetorical approbation that Herodias and her daughter fail to garner, approbation no less than that accorded to the “queen of the South” (12:38–42). Despite her brief appearance within Matthew’s narrative (27:19) and her failure to bend the will of empire to her urgent plea (cf. 27:26), Pilate’s wife ranks rhetorically alongside Joseph, the “righteous man” (1:19, DJW), and the “wise men from the East” (2:1), characters highly acclaimed within Matthew’s narrative. Like Joseph and the “wise men” Pilate’s wife responds obediently to what she has heard “in a dream” (27:19c; cf. 2:12, 13, 19, 22) from God and engages her access to empire in a courageous, if futile, attempt to save Jesus, “that righteous man” (27:19b, DJW), from crucifixion on a Roman cross. As Warren Carter notes, “Her appeal to **a dream** echoes the birth story, in which dreams reveal God’s will, guard God’s purposes, and guide appropriate behavior.”⁵⁴ And her actions on Jesus’ behalf clearly establish her own character as “righteous” along with the character of Joseph, the “righteous man” whom she emulates with her actions, and Jesus, “that righteous man,” whose cause she undertakes.⁵⁵

Further, while Herodias, her Matthean counterpart, ranks within

⁵⁴ Carter, *Margins*, 526. Cf. Gardner, *Matthew*, 389; Levine, “Matthew,” 262; Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 312; Saunders, *Preaching*, 282.

⁵⁵ With regard to her assessment of Jesus as “that righteous one” (27:19b, DJW), *Matthew likewise links Pilate’s wife—materially, if not in verbatim fashion—with Judas Iscariot, who proclaims the “innocence” of Jesus in his confession to the chief priests and elders (27:4): “I have sinned by betraying innocent blood. Thus Carter, *Margins*, 526; Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 498. In fact, however, Judas plays the more obvious narrative counterpart to Pilate himself, who ultimately proclaims *his own* “innocence” rather than that of Jesus (27:24c).

Matthew's narrative rhetoric among *Jewish "prophet-killers"* (5:12; 21:35–36, 38–39; 22:6; 23:29–32, 34–35; cf. 17:12), Pilate's wife joins the Persian astrologers/"wise men" of 2:1–12 among the ranks of *faithful Gentiles who seek to save the life of Jesus*. But she does so not merely as a *Gentile*, but precisely as a *Gentile woman* standing against both the *all-male Jewish religious hierarchy* collaborating with Rome⁵⁶ and the *masculine powers of empire itself*, embodied by her Gentile husband Pilate.

Such is Matthew's "upper-level" portrait of Pilate's wife, whose space in his narrative—ironically and by contrast to the space devoted to Pilate himself (27:3–26, 62–66; 28:14)—occupies a miniscule 27 words total in Matthew's Greek text. The crucial impact of Pilate's wife and her positive assessment within Matthew's narrative rhetoric far outweigh the tiny space that Matthew allots to her story. Levine, for her part, goes beyond the positive impact of Pilate's wife within Matthew's narrative rhetoric to assess Matthew's own rhetorical intentions in telling her story as he does, "The evangelist attempts to eliminate all relationships in which one group exploits or dominates another. Thus, in the Gospel rulers like Herod and Pilate are found wanting in comparison with relatively powerless people like Joseph and Pilate's wife."⁵⁷

"Rachel Weeping for her Children" (2:18): Everyday Life for Non-Imperial Women

Most of the Matthean women whose stories intersect identifiably with empire have neither the imperial status nor the imperial access of the "queen of the South," Herodias and her daughter, and Pilate's wife. Rather, they are ordinary women, whether from village or city, who

⁵⁶ Thus Carter (*Margins*, 526), who notes, "In contrast to the male (Jewish) religious and political leaders, it is a (Gentile) woman who gains more insight into Jesus." See also Luz (*Matthew 21–28*, 498), who observes in somewhat more oblique fashion, "As in 2:1–12 . . . , a Gentile [here a Gentile woman] sees clearly while a Jewish king and the Jewish leaders [all of them men] are blinded. Against the dark background of the increasingly obvious Jewish guilt the message of the *Gentile woman* [emphasis mine] appears as a 'bright foil.'" Cf. Long (*Matthew*, 312), who highlights the Jewish/Gentile dimensions of this incident without noting the male/female dimensions: "In both cases [i.e., those of the "wise men" and Pilate's wife], while his own people plot and scheme to destroy Jesus, the king of the Jews, Gentiles receive communication from God in dreams to preserve his life. . . ."

⁵⁷ Levine, "Matthew," 252.

negotiate empire each from their own respective distance and position of powerlessness. And the collective impact of empire on these women is far more challenging and, in many instances, far more dangerous than that experienced by Matthew's imperial women.

Clearly at the bottom of the collective social ladder in this regard are the women enslaved to the powers of empire, whether to the Romans themselves⁵⁸ or to their Jewish collaborators, the religious elite. Notable within Matthew's narrative are the accounts of a "servant-girl" (παίδισκη: 26:69) who shows up "in the courtyard" (26:69) of Caiaphas, the Jewish high priest (cf. 26:3, 57) and "another servant-girl" (ἄλλη: 26:71) who shows up "on the porch" (26:71) of that same complex. These "servant-girls" are clearly enslaved members of Caiaphas' household, very possibly born into such slavery or enslaved as debtors.⁵⁹ And while Matthew offers no indication of their assigned tasks as "παίδισκαι" (26:69/71) of the high priest,⁶⁰ their very position as *female slaves* within an *androcentric and hierarchical* culture establishes without question their essential powerlessness vis-à-vis Caiaphas.⁶¹ These women, in their role as "servant-girls" in the household of Caiaphas, have the freedom to converse with and/or pose questions to persons of no major status, who cross their paths "in [Caiaphas'] courtyard" (26:69a) or "on [his] porch" (26:71a). But they have no apparent means to influence the affairs of empire regardless of their association with an imperial household.

And if powerlessness vis-à-vis empire is inherent, if not vividly

⁵⁸ Cf. 8:5–13, the story of a Roman centurion and his male "servant" (παῖς: 8:6, 8, 13). Within the scope of his narrative Matthew does not, however, recount any stories of "servant-girls" (παίδισκαι) enslaved to Roman officials.

⁵⁹ As S. Scott Bartchy notes ("Slavery" in *ABD* 6:67–68), "By the first century C.E. . . . the children of women in slavery had become the primary source of slaves [in the Mediterranean world]... A further source of slave labor was the enslavement of debtors by their creditors... Enslavement of debtors was a widespread practice in Palestine."

⁶⁰ But note John 18:16, which speaks of "the woman who guarded the gate" (ἡ θυρωρὸς; cf. John 18:17: ἡ παίδισκη ἡ θυρωρὸς) in recounting the story of Peter's denial. This woman, in apparent contrast to the mere "servant girls" of Matthew's narrative, is invested rhetorically by John with crucial authority (over men) to grant or withhold access to Caiaphas' courtyard (John 18:16).

⁶¹ Cf. Keener (*Gospel*, 654), who depicts the "servant-girl" as "one of minimal social status" and notes that "though the high priest's servants wielded considerable power, a 'slave girl' would have quite little." But see Carter's ambiguous assessment (*Margins*, 516), first describing "the servant-girl" as "one who in terms of gender in an androcentric society is Peter's inferior," but then concluding that "[t]hough a slave, she has some status as the slave of the high priest."

demonstrated, in the lives of these “servant-girls” in Caiaphas’ household, such powerlessness becomes unmistakably visible in the lives of other Israelite/Jewish women whose everyday domains lie well beyond the courtyards and porches of imperial power but whose lives intersect demonstrably with the world of empire. The first such woman in Matthew’s narrative is “the wife of Uriah” (1:6b), identified within the messianic genealogy (1:1; cf. 1:16, 17, 18) as the one “by whom” David becomes the father of Solomon (1:6b). Matthew nowhere recounts the story that lies behind this brief mention of “the wife of Uriah.” He does not need to. The account of David’s cynical use of royal power vis-à-vis Bathsheba (aka “the wife of Uriah”: 1:6b; cf. 2 Sam 11:3b) and her husband Uriah is well known to his Jewish readers from their scriptures (2 Sam 11:2–12:25). And the very insertion of “by the wife of Uriah” (1:6b) into Matthew’s patrilineal genealogical formula (“and _____ was the father of _____”: Matt 1:2–16) serves rhetorically to highlight the “tawdry” and violent sexual scandal that leads to the birth of Solomon (2 Sam 12:24–25).⁶²

The story, as told in 2 Samuel 11:2–12:25, portrays royal evil well beyond that reflected in Samuel’s warning to the people of Israel, when they beg for “a king to govern us” (1 Sam 8:5). As Samuel warns the Israelites (8:13, 16), the king they seek “will take [their] daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers ... He will take [their] male and female slaves ... and put them to his work.” But David’s abuse of his royal powers goes even further, above all on the sexual and marital front.

David first takes advantage of his visual access to the people under his rule, as he “[walks] about on the roof of the king’s house” (11:2b). From the heights of this royal vantage point (11:2c) David “[sees]” a “very beautiful” woman—evidently down below his rooftop lookout in the supposed privacy of her own courtyard—in the act of “bathing” (11:2c/d).

Having first violated the woman’s privacy, David next engages in royal espionage, “[sending]” someone to “inquire about the woman” (11:3a), namely “Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, *the wife of Uriah the Hittite*” (11:3b, emphasis mine). Then, in full awareness that he is dealing

NOT TO BE USED WITHOUT COPYRIGHT PERMISSION
OF ASBURY THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

⁶²Thus, Garland (*Reading Matthew*, 18), who comments, “The name of Uriah, a Hittite, dredges up the tawdry story of David’s adultery and death-dealing (2 Sam 11–12).” For a discussion of the strategic insertion of women’s names into Matthew’s messianic genealogy, see Weaver, *Irony*, 126–28.

with another man's wife, David makes still more brazen use of his royal power of command, "send[ing] messengers to get her" (11:4a), an action that she as a "subject" of the king has no power to refuse.⁶³ So she "[comes] to [David]" (11:4b), as sent for and commanded by the king. David then "[lies] with [the wife of Uriah]" (11:4c), the central act toward which this entire narrative has been driving from its inception. Nor is this, as it is frequently portrayed, *Bathsheba's* act of adultery with *David*.⁶⁴ Instead, this is clearly *David's* act of adultery with *Bathsheba*, an act best described by the language of "rape." In Dowsett's words:

Like Tamar, Rahab and Ruth before her [in the messianic genealogy], Bathsheba could be seen as the hapless victim of a society whose rules were heavily biased in favor of men. When David, lustful, sends "messengers to get her" (2 Sam 11:4), she could hardly choose whether or not to comply: a subject, especially a woman whose husband was away from home, would have no option but to obey the king. The story is usually retold as one of adultery, implying mutual consent. In today's terms, it was probably closer to rape.⁶⁵

⁶³ Thus Dowsett ("Matthew," 521), who highlights Bathsheba's powerlessness by identifying her as a "subject" of the king.

⁶⁴ Thus, for example, Levine's reference ("Matthew," 253) to "Bathsheba, who committed adultery with David." Gardner (*Matthew*, 30) similarly notes that Matthew "[refers to Bathsheba] in a way that underscores her role as an adulteress...." See also Robert H. Gundry in reference to other scholars (*Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1982]), 15; Keener, *Gospel*, 79; Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary*, Wilhelm C. Linss, tr. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 109.

⁶⁵ Dowsett, "Matthew," 521–22. See also Sebastien Doane ("La Caractérisation des personnages royaux en Mt 1–2," *Laval Théologique et Philosophique*, 75:3 [October 2019], 366), who speaks of the "l'adultère—voire du viol—commis par David"; Gundry (*Matthew*, 15), who "faults" Judah and David over against Tamar and Bathsheba; Francis Wright Beare (*The Gospel According to Matthew: Translation, Introduction and Commentary* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981], 63), who charges David with "seducing" the wife of Uriah; Carter (*Margins*, 59), who notes "David's terrible abuses of power in his acts of adultery and murder"; Hare (*Matthew*, 6), who attributes the "adultery" in question to David; Long (*Matthew*, 11), who describes Bathsheba as "the victim of David's lust"; Saunders (*Preaching*, 3), who notes that Matthew's reference to "the wife of Uriah" serves to "[highlight] David's covetousness and deceit in arranging the death of Bathsheba's husband; and Boxall (*Discovering Matthew*, 82), who notes that the decision to view the women of Matthew's genealogy as "morally dubious ... may betray the androcentric presuppositions of commentators who promote [this viewpoint] as much as the

Nor is this the end of the matter. David's rape of the wife of Uriah happens, as the narrator adds, precisely at a crucial monthly moment, just as she is "purifying herself after her [menstrual] period" (11:4d; cf. Lev. 15:19–33).⁶⁶ Accordingly Bathsheba, who has by now returned home after her sexual liaison with David (2 Sam 11:4e), "conceives" (11:5a) and "sends" a message back to David, announcing that she is "pregnant" (11:5b).

But David's violation of Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, has only just begun. David next engages in cynical and scheming, if ultimately unsuccessful, efforts at royal cover-up. He brings Uriah home from the Israelite battle with the Ammonites (11:1–2, 6–7; cf. 11:11)—which is where Uriah was when David first requisitioned Uriah's wife for his sexual gratification—and attempts by every royal ruse possible to get Uriah back into his own house and in bed with his wife (11: 6–8, 12–13a). But David's efforts are in vain. Uriah refuses on principle, not once but twice, to go home and "lie with [his] wife (11:9–11; cf. 11:13b).

So, David finally pulls out the most powerful weapon in his royal arsenal, namely a scheme to destroy Uriah altogether. And, with the secret collusion and active collaboration of his military general, Joab, David sends Uriah back not merely to war but also to certain death on the fiercest front of the battle with the Ammonites (11:14–17; cf. 11:18–27).⁶⁷ Uriah dies. Bathsheba no longer has a husband. And with this two-sided *fait accompli* David now takes full possession of Bathsheba, "[sending] and [bringing] her to his house" (11:27b). For her part "the wife of Uriah" can only "[make] lamentation" over the death of "[Uriah] her husband" (11:26) and "become the wife" (11:27c) of her husband's effective murderer.⁶⁸

On the "lower level" of this narrative (2 Sam 11:2–12:25)—encapsulated in four cryptic words within Matthew's messianic genealogy, "by

androcentrism of Matthew's text (what, for example, of the culpability of David in the story of Bathsheba?)."

⁶⁶ Cf. the footnote on 2 Sam 11:4 (*The Harper Collins Study Bible, Fully Revised and Updated*, ed. Harold W. Attridge [San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2006], 450), which notes that "Bathsheba's intercourse with David occurred at a time that was propitious for conception."

⁶⁷ The ultimate irony here is that David co-opts Uriah himself as the unwitting messenger who "carries his own death sentence to Joab" (footnote on 2 Samuel 11:14–15, *Harper Collins*, 450).

⁶⁸ See 2 Samuel 12:9, where Nathan charges David personally with "[striking] down Uriah the Hittite with the sword" and "[killing] him with the sword of the Ammonites."

the wife of Uriah” (Matt 1:6b)—the outcome of this royal grab for sexual gratification is undeniable. David has won. The wife of Uriah has lost. *Vis-à-vis* the apparently limitless power of the king this Israelite woman is essentially powerless, above all with regard to her marriage and her sexual life. She cannot shield her private activities from the eyes of the king (11:2). She cannot prevent the king from co-opting her and violating her body by royal command (11:3–4). She cannot hinder the king from impregnating her (11:5), thus threatening her reputation,⁶⁹ her marriage to Uriah,⁷⁰ and, potentially, her life itself.⁷¹ She cannot deter the king from plotting and securing the death of her husband via royal subterfuge and conspiracy (11:6–25; cf. 11:26a). And she will in fact never know about David’s conspiracy, even as she learns of her husband’s death (11:26a). In the end, she cannot save herself from enforced marriage to the perpetrator of these royal crimes (11:27).⁷²

Vis-à-vis the overwhelming royal power exhibited by the king—both lustful and brutal in turn—the wife of Uriah has only the power to name her situation (11:5a/5b) and to “lament” her loss (11:26; cf. 12:24a). Thus, Matthew’s cryptic, four-word insertion into his messianic genealogy (“by [the wife] of Uriah”: Matt 1:6b), points to a “lower-level” story of powerful royal malfeasance against a powerless woman and her innocent husband.

But within Matthew’s narrative the powers of empire have a profoundly negative impact well beyond the sexual lives and the marriages of the women who live as imperial subjects. For some women—Mary, the mother of Jesus (2:13–15, 19–23); her village compatriots, the women of Bethlehem (2:16–18); and the pregnant and nursing women of Jesus’ eschatological discourse (24:19; cf. 24:3–21)—the losses

⁶⁹ Cf. Matthew 1:19a, where Joseph wishes to save Mary from “public disgrace” on account of her—so far as he knows, illicit—pregnancy (cf. 1:18c). Luz (*Matthew 1–7*, 119) considers Joseph’s knowledge of the Holy Spirit’s action, before he appears to dismiss it: “*The main question is whether Joseph knew of Mary’s pregnancy by the Spirit before the announcement of the angel. If he did not know*, then it is most likely that he suspected his fiancée of adultery and therefore wanted to dismiss her” (emphasis mine). But Matthew’s account of Joseph’s initial response and, above all, the angel’s subsequent message makes narrative sense only in light of Joseph’s initial ignorance concerning the role of the Holy Spirit.

⁷⁰ Cf. Matthew 1:19b–20a, where Joseph plans to “dismiss [Mary] quietly.”

⁷¹ Cf. Leviticus 20:10: “If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death.”

⁷² Nor can she ultimately keep the child of her body and of David’s passion, a child who dies on account of God’s judgment on David (12:14–23) and a child for whose death David himself must “console” her (12:24a).

inflicted on them by the powers of empire impact family life as a whole, both the lives of the children to whom these women have given birth (or will soon do so) and the women's lives as mothers of their children.

Mary and the women of Jesus' eschatological discourse, for their part, become political refugees facing the direst of circumstances.⁷³ They must "flee" (2:13; 24:16; cf. 24:20) or be "taken" from (cf. 2:13, 14, 20, 21) their homes and/or homelands, together with their husbands and their children, whether born or unborn, for distant lands (Egypt: 2:13) or challenging destinations ("the mountains": 24:16), due precisely to the cruel and dangerous exigencies of life under empire.

Mary's encounter with empire in Matthew 1–2 plays itself out predominantly through the two men in her family, her infant son Jesus (2:1–12) and her husband Joseph (2:13–15, 19–23). Matthew's narrative focuses almost entirely on these two male figures and their male-oriented encounters with/negotiations of empire.⁷⁴ By contrast, Matthew never recounts Mary's thoughts, her words, or, for the most part, her actions.⁷⁵ Instead, she functions almost entirely as the object of the thoughts, decisions, words, and actions of men or male-depicted angelic beings.⁷⁶ But, while Mary is silent and passive throughout much of Matthew's narrative,⁷⁷ she is both present and central to the imperial action highlighted here.

In fact, Mary encounters the brutal face of empire precisely

⁷³ Cf. Keener (*Gospel*, 109), who notes, "Jesus and his family survived, but they survived as refugees, abandoning any livelihood Joseph may have developed in Bethlehem and undoubtedly traveling lightly."

⁷⁴ By contrast, as universally noted by commentators, Luke tells the story of Jesus' birth predominantly through Mary's story (Luke 1:26–45, 56; 2:1–7) and Mary's voice (1:46–55).

⁷⁵ Note, however that Matthew attributes one joint action to Joseph and Mary with the temporal clause, "before they lived together" (1:18b)."

⁷⁶ Mary "[is] engaged" to Joseph (1:18b) and "[is] found" [presumably by Joseph] to be pregnant (1:18c). Joseph does not wish "to expose [Mary] to public disgrace" (1:19b) and thus decides to "dismiss her quietly" (1:19c). The "angel of the Lord" (1:20b) tells Joseph not to fear "[taking] Mary as [his] wife" (1:20c) and informs him that the child "conceived in [Mary]" (1:20d) is from the Holy Spirit. Joseph then "[takes Mary] as his wife" (1:24c) but "has no marital relations with her" (1:25a) before she gives birth (1:25b). The magi "[see] the child with Mary, his mother" (2:11b). Later the angel twice directs Joseph to "take the child and his mother" to appointed places (2:13c/20a). Joseph then "[takes] the child and his mother" just as commanded (2:14a/21a).

⁷⁷ Cf. Boxall, (*Discovering Matthew*, 84), who notes, "In contrast to Joseph's lead role, Mary is hardly an active participant in the drama, although she is mentioned almost as often in 1:18–2:23. Almost all the verbs describe actions done to her rather than by her." See also Levine ("Matthew," 254) and Pregeant (*Matthew*, 19), who depict Mary as "passive."

because of her sole (and crucially feminine and family-oriented) action in this narrative.⁷⁸ Mary “[bears] a son” (1:21a//23a, 25; cf. 1:21a//23a; cf. 1:16) and thereby becomes “his mother” (2:11b, 13c, 14a, 20a, 21a). As it turns out, she has given birth to royalty. Joseph—“son of David” (1:20c) and now Mary’s husband (1:24; cf. 1:19–21)—adopts her child into the royal/messianic line of David (1:25; cf. 1:1, 16, 17, 18),⁷⁹ while Persian astrologers from the East come to Jerusalem and announce Mary’s child as “the [one] who has been born king of the Jews” (2:2a, DJW). And with Joseph’s private act of adoption and the astrologers’ public announcement of “the king of the Jews,” Mary’s “child” (2:8b, 9c, 11b, 13c, 13d, 14a, 20a, 21a) comes immediately into imperial focus. And Mary herself, as the child’s “mother,” is likewise subject, along with her “child,” to profound threat by the powers of empire.

“King Herod” (2:1, 3; cf. 2: 7, 9, 12, 13, 15, 16, 19, 22), the Idumean client king installed by Rome to rule over Judea, is “terrified” (2:3, DJW) at the prospect of a rival king, however newborn he might be (cf. 2:1, 7, 16b). Accordingly, he wields his royal power swiftly and strategically to eradicate this royal threat. Within Matthew’s narrative Herod’s power is visible on crucial fronts.⁸⁰ He has a royal title (2:1, 3, 9) that conveys his power audibly. He has political clout with the people under his rule, with an ability to bend the emotions of “all Jerusalem” (2:3b) toward his own emotional state. He has power of connections, with access not only to the entire class of Jewish intelligentsia in Jerusalem (2:4a) but also to visiting dignitaries from distant regions (2:1b). He has power of command, with the authority to “call” people into his presence (2:4a, 7a) and to “send” them out to do his bidding (2:8a, 16b). He has strategic skills, the ability to conduct “secret” espionage (2:7a), to interrogate others for useful information (2:4b, 7b), and even to delegate his espionage to those others (2:8b/c). He has a politician’s ability to practice deception effectively vis-à-vis unsuspecting victims (2:8d). Most crucially, Herod has the power of life and death over his subjects, to carry out “search and destroy” missions (2:13d) and to “kill” all those who present a threat to his kingship (2:16c).

⁷⁸ Apart, that is, from her joint action with Joseph, as noted in the temporal clause, “before they lived together” (1:18b). See footnote 75.

⁷⁹ See Raymond E. Brown (*The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke* [Garden City, NY: Image, 1979], 139), who identifies Joseph’s “naming” of the child (1:21, 25) as an act of adoption.

⁸⁰ Cf. Weaver, *Irony*, 30–32.

By contrast, Mary, the mother of the child, has no visible powers at her command.⁸¹ Matthew's narrative grants her neither access to Herod nor any other means, whether vocal or physical, to protect her child. She is, as Matthew depicts her, completely vulnerable to a vicious and politically instigated death threat against her child.⁸² All she can do in response to this threat is acquiesce silently and passively, as Joseph, her husband, takes bold action to "flee" hometown and homeland (2:13c), and to "[take] the child and his mother by night and [relocate] to Egypt" (2:14, DJW//2:13c; cf. 2:21//2:20a). In Matthew's narrative Mary does not even have the power to become a refugee on her own.

The women of Jesus' eschatological discourse (24:15–22; cf. 24:3–14)—"those who are pregnant" (24:19a) and "those who are nursing infants" (24:19b)—do not face royal death threats issued against their children (2:8d cf. 2:13d//20b). But they find themselves in an equally challenging situation, needing to "flee" (24:16; cf. 24:20) a far more common danger posed by empire, namely the massive chaos and violence resulting from warfare between nations, accompanied by natural and human-caused disasters (24:6a,7): "And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. . . . For nation will rise up against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places."

Accordingly, the women of Jesus' eschatological discourse find themselves forced by the cynical machinations of empire and the unrestrained brutality of imperial armies into a refugee status so horrific that Jesus himself pronounces a "woe" on these women (24:19a/b) which portends the "destruction" to come.⁸³ Jesus then underlines this "woe" with a dire warning to these female refugees with their children, born and unborn (24:20–21): "Pray that your flight [to the mountains: cf. 24:16] may not be in winter or on a sabbath. For at that time there

⁸¹ As Keener (*Gospel*, 110) observes, "Five times Matthew mentions 'the child and his mother,' thereby underlining the senselessness of Herod's paranoid brutality. . . ; texts sometimes emphasized the physical powerlessness of the oppressed to underline the act's heinousness."

⁸² Cf. Weaver, (*Irony*, 252), who notes, "Beyond the vulnerability of women's status within a patriarchal society lies the vulnerability associated with women's physical and political powerlessness vis-à-vis the forces of violence in the world that they inhabit. . . . They are vulnerable to vicious death threats on their children that transform entire families into political refugees (2:13–15; cf. 2:22)."

⁸³ Thus Carter (*Margins*, 474), who notes, "The introductory **woe** suggests possible destruction (cf. 11:21; 18:7; 23:13, 15, 16, 23, 25, 27, 29; 26:24)."

will be great suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be.” In Francis Wright Beare’s words: “The headlong flight suggests a civilian population trying frantically to escape the onset of an invading army.... [These] words speak... of people who leave their home in helter-skelter flight.”⁸⁴

And while such unprecedented “suffering” (24:16) will without question fall calamitously on the entire Jewish population faced with the military wrath of empire, this “time of intense, unsurpassed suffering” is in fact one “that poses a particularly strong risk to the most vulnerable (24:19–21),” namely pregnant women and mothers with their infant children.⁸⁵ As Levine notes, “[N]ot only will they too undergo the tribulation in fleeing and finding refuge; they will have the added physical burdens unique to women.”⁸⁶

The challenges that such women face during wartime “flight” (24:16; cf. 24:20) are undeniably daunting. In Ulrich Luz’s words, “Matthew may have been thinking of the danger of premature births (cf. 2 Esdr 6:21) or that pregnant women cannot move quickly enough in flight or that nursing women might lose time when feeding their children.”⁸⁷ Keener, for his part, highlights the potentially tragic outcomes of such flight:

The ‘woe’ (cf. 18:7; 25:13) over the pregnant and nursing (24:19; cf. Sib. Or. 2.190–92, if pre-Christian) signifies the difficulty of the flight and survival ...; the pregnant may also be more susceptible to death.... But it probably indicates no less the sorrowing of losing infants in the trauma (cf. 2 Bar. 10:13–15).⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Beare, *Gospel*, 469. Cf. Garland (*Reading Matthew*, 237), who notes, “This command to take wing ... alludes to the horrible devastation to be wrought on Jerusalem. The breakout to the mountains whose caves provided traditional hideouts ... makes sense only to escape the temporal dangers of a brutal war.” But while Beare and Garland discuss the historical origins of this saying of Jesus within the context of the historical war of 66–70 CE, this narrative study accepts Matthew’s own narrative designation of these words as Jesus’ discourse depicting the tribulations preceding “[his] coming” (24:3d) and “the [consummation] of the age” (24:3d, DJW).

⁸⁵ Saunders, *Preaching*, 246. Cf. Witherington (*Matthew*, 447), who notes, “Jesus foresees that the time of destruction will be most difficult on those most vulnerable and immobile—those who are pregnant or those who have newborns.”

⁸⁶ Levine, “Matthew,” 260.

⁸⁷ Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 197. Cf. Garland (*Reading Matthew*, 237), who cites the concern, expressed by Jesus to his disciples, “about those things that might hinder flight—pregnancy and nursing children.”

⁸⁸ Keener, *Gospel*, 580.

And in the end these pregnant women and nursing mothers have no power to exert against the empire that threatens their lives and the lives of their children, whether born or unborn. In the face of such unprecedented terror and suffering, these women can only “flee to the mountains” (24:16: cf. 24:20) in the desperate attempt to save both their own lives and the lives of their children.⁸⁹

But for the mothers of Bethlehem—all those whose “children,” like the “child” Jesus himself, “were two years old or under, according to the time that [Herod] had learned from the wise men” (2:16c)—it is too late even for “flight.” There is no time for these women to “flee” the gut-wrenching destruction that lies ahead. Herod—who is “infuriated” (2:16b) that the Persian astrologers whom he has cleverly attempted to deceive with his politician’s rhetoric (cf. 2:8) have now “tricked” him instead (2:16a)—takes immediate and brutal action to recoup his loss of crucial intelligence and to alleviate his bitter humiliation. Without any hint of due process,⁹⁰ Herod “[sends] and [kills] all the [male] children in and around Bethlehem” (2:16c, DJW) whose ages fit the time frame of the astral appearance.⁹¹

And with this massacre, Herod, the Roman-authorized face of empire within Judea (cf. 2:1), decisively demonstrates his imperial power. By the same token he leaves the powerless mothers of Bethlehem—identified collectively and metaphorically as “Rachel,” their ancestral mother (2:18c; cf. Jer 3:15)—“weeping” (2:18c) and utterly “inconsolable”

⁸⁹ Cf. Weaver, *Irony*, 252.

⁹⁰ Thus Eugene Eung-Chun Park (“Rachel’s Cry for Her Children: Matthew’s Treatment of the Infanticide by Herod,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 75:3 [2013], 477), who notes, “It is important to observe Matthew’s succinct way of telling this incident. There is nothing between Herod’s rage and his action to kill. The former directly causes the latter . . . ; there is no legal proceeding that endorses the massacre.”

⁹¹ Park (“Rachel’s Cry,” 478) challenges the widely held view that Matthew necessarily refers to the massacre of male children only: “Matthew says that Herod killed πάντας τοὺς παῖδας (“all the children”). The forms are masculine accusative plural, and it has been almost unanimously interpreted as meaning only male infants. . . . Strictly speaking, however, this phrase could be construed as a common gender inclusive of both male and female infants. The singular form of the noun παῖς can either be masculine or feminine in its grammatical gender.” But in light of the apparent biblical allusion to Pharaoh’s death edict against the *male* children of the Hebrews (Exod 1:15–22; cf. Doane, “Rachel Weeping: Intertextuality as a Means of Transforming the Readers’ Worldview,” *Journal of the Bible and Its Reception*, 4:1 [2017], 2; Park, “Rachel’s Cry,” 479), it is far more likely that Matthew intends to speak of *male* children.

(2:18d, DJW) over the loss of their children “[who] are no more” (2:18e). Within Jeremiah 31:15—the text which Matthew cites here to identify Herod’s massacre as fulfillment of biblical prophecy (2:17)—the biblical Rachel once mourned the loss of her adult “children,” as they trudged past her tomb in Ramah (cf. 1 Sam. 10:2) on their bitter journey into exile.⁹² Now, from Matthew’s new narrative perspective, the present-day “Rachel”—here associated with Bethlehem according to Gen. 35:16–19; 48:7—becomes, in strategic fashion, “a witness to the slaughter carried out by Herod’s officers. Weeping over the loss of her latter-day children, she cries out with a voice that is heard as far away as Ramah!”⁹³ In Keener’s words, “Rachel, who wept from her grave . . . during the captivity, [is] now weeping at another, nearer crisis significant in salvation history.”⁹⁴

On the “lower level” of Matthew’s narrative—i.e., for the actors “on stage”—it is clear that empire has won and the mothers of Bethlehem have lost. Herod, *so far as he knows*, has annihilated the threat to his imperial power. The mothers of Bethlehem, by contrast, have undeniably lost their children, the future that these children signify for their mothers, and—with their children and their future—everything but their collective “voice,” a “voice” filled with “wailing and loud lamentation” (2:18a/b; cf. Jer 31:15). For these women, who could by no means “flee” a disaster for which they had no warning (cf. 2:13),

⁹² Whether this journey into exile takes the “children” of Rachel to Assyria (thus Beare, *Gospel*, 83; John Bright, *Jeremiah: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* [Garden City: Doubleday, 1965], 281–282, as cited in Doane, “Rachel Weeping,” 7) or Babylonia, as per Jer 40:1 (thus Doane, “Rachel Weeping,” 8; Hare, *Matthew*, 16; Keener, *Gospel*, 111; Park, “Rachel’s Cry,” 481) does not alter the emotional impact of Rachel’s grieving over her lost “children.” Nor does it exhaust the semantic possibilities of this allusion. As Park (“Rachel’s Cry,” 482) notes, “Matthew’s citation of Jer 31:15 in conjunction with Herod’s infanticide would have evoked in the minds of the Jewish Christian audience, who directly or indirectly would have experienced another fall of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., a highly complex set of emotions. . . . In that context, mentioning the Jeremian verse on Rachel’s cry would create overlapping images of the first and the second falls of Jerusalem. Then in the new literary context of Matthew’s birth narrative of Jesus, the same Rachel’s cry is now more vividly heard as her mourning for all the slaughtered infants and their bereaved mothers in Bethlehem, all anonymous and yet named here as the beloved children of Rachel.”

⁹³ Gardner, *Matthew*, 54. Cf. Beare, *Gospel*, 83; Keener, *Gospel*, 111; Witherington, *Matthew*, 70.

⁹⁴ Keener, *Gospel*, 111.

there is no hope in this moment, only grief and despair.⁹⁵ “And in the face of all the violence that Herod has planned, and his soldiers have carried out, these women can do nothing more than “weep’ for their murdered infants (2:17–28).”⁹⁶

And while the unnamed women of Bethlehem loudly mourn the loss of their children, whose brutal deaths have occurred at the hands of empire (2:16–18), the unnamed woman of Bethany (26:6–13)⁹⁷ goes one step further in an equally empire-laden context. This woman takes proleptic action, silent but symbolic, to anoint Jesus at a moment fraught with tension, as Jesus has just announced his impending crucifixion (26:1–2; cf. 16:21–23; 17:22–23; 20:17–19) and the Jewish religious leaders, collaborators with empire, have just plotted in secret to bring about his death (26:3–5). As Jesus now reclines at table in Bethany at the home of Simon the leper (26:6, 7c), this unnamed, and

⁹⁵ Many scholars (thus Carter [*Margins*, 87], Hare [*Matthew*, 16], Keener [*Gospel*, 111–112], Saunders [*Preaching*, 16], Witherington [*Matthew*, 71]) point to the wider context of Jeremiah 31:15, which opens out (31:16ff) onto a “hope”-filled horizon, where “there is hope for your future” and where “your children shall come back to their own country” (31:17; cf. 31:23–34). But within Matthew’s present narrative context, there is no immediate warrant for future “hope.” Instead, Matthew’s citation in 2:18 of Jeremiah 31:15 serves precisely and solely within this narrative context to provide biblical grounding (2:17) for Herod’s massacre of the children of Bethlehem (2:16). Cf. Michael Knowles (*Jeremiah in Matthew’s Gospel: The Rejected Prophet Motif in Matthaean Redaction* [Sheffield: JSOT, 1993], 42–52) and Barnabas Lindars (*New Testament Apologetic* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961], no page identified), as cited in Sebastien Doane, “Rachel Weeping,” 9.

⁹⁶ Weaver, *Irony*, 252.

⁹⁷ Boxall (*Discovering Matthew*, 56) sees irony here as he notes, “We are told the name of the owner of the house visited by Jesus in Bethany (Simon the leper) but not of the woman who anointed Jesus’ head with ointment, *despite* [Jesus’] promise that *what she had done would be told ‘in honor of her.’*” (emphasis mine). But Witherington (*Matthew*, 475), to the contrary concludes that “[A]part from Jesus, the subject of this ‘bios,’ other people fall into the background and are not given personal attention. [This is] why on the one hand we are told that the woman’s deed will serve as a memorial to her wherever the Gospel is preached to the world, but on the other hand she is no more named than are the disciples who objected to her extravagance.” He accordingly explains Matthew’s mention of Simon the leper as Matthew’s way to “fix the biographical story in a precise locale, which is also typical of such narratives.” Dowsett (“Matthew,” 539), Gardner (*Matthew*, 369), and Luz (*Matthew 21–28*, 329, 334) mention the woman’s unnamed character, but offer no explanations.

apparently uninvited, woman interrupts Simon’s banquet,⁹⁸ as she “[comes] to Jesus with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment” (26:7a) and “[pours] it on his head” (26:7b).

Matthew does not grant this woman either voice or words to explain her action. From Douglas R. A. Hare’s perspective, “Matthew shows no interest in naming a motive. Presumably he, like his readers ancient and modern, regarded the anointing simply as an act of love.”⁹⁹ But in fact Matthew hints rhetorically at what could be the most basic significance of the woman’s act from her perspective. This is, to all appearances, the gift of a wealthy woman. The ointment that she pours on Jesus’ head is “very costly” (26:7a), something immediately obvious to Jesus’ disciples, who deride her act as “this waste” (26:8b) and object indignantly that this ointment “could have been sold for a large sum” (26:9a).¹⁰⁰ And as this apparently wealthy woman pours out this “very costly” ointment on the head of Jesus, she is clearly bestowing honor on one whom she loves deeply and values profoundly. In Witherington’s words, “What the woman did was a beautiful act of honoring Jesus and showing he was precious like the ointment and that one must seize the moments when they come to do something beautiful for Jesus.”¹⁰¹ Beyond this rhetorical hint, however, Matthew tells his readers nothing about the woman’s own reason for anointing Jesus’ head.

But in response to the disciples’ outrage (cf. 26:8a, DJW) Jesus immediately takes up the woman’s cause and supplies a context-relevant motive for her action: “Why are you bothering this woman? She has [carried out *a good deed* for] me.... When she poured this perfume on my body, *she did it to prepare me for burial*” (26:10b/c, 12, TNIV/DJW, emphasis mine).

⁹⁸ Cf. the Lukan version of this traditional story (Luke 7:36–50), where Jesus and his host, a “Pharisee” (7:36 x2, 37, 39) named “Simon” (7:40, 43, 44), engage in protracted dialogue concerning this interruption.

⁹⁹ Hare, *Matthew*, 293.

¹⁰⁰ From Carter’s perspective (*Margins*, 502), “Either she is a wealthy woman or has saved what little she has for this costly act.” It is most likely, however, that Matthew intends his readers to view this woman as wealthy. The subsequent discussion between Jesus and his disciples about “giving” the proceeds from the sale of the ointment “to the poor” (26:9b; cf. 26:11a) makes sense only if the woman herself is wealthy and thus not the intended recipient of the money from the sale.

¹⁰¹ Witherington, *Matthew*, 475. Cf. Gardner (*Matthew*, 369), who notes that this woman is one of those “outside the circle of the twelve, but who honor Jesus with gestures or words appropriate for disciples.” See also Luz (*Matthew 21–28*, 336), who notes that the woman “could have intended [her act] as a special honor for Jesus.”

And with Jesus' words, a broad new horizon of meaning opens up vis-à-vis the woman and her act of anointing. No longer has she done "simply an act of love"¹⁰² or merely "an act of honoring Jesus,"¹⁰³ significant as such acts might be. Now, as Jesus reveals to his disciples and, as it appears, to the woman herself,¹⁰⁴ the true significance of her act relates directly to the present moment, fraught with empire-related tension, at which this "good deed" occurs. Regardless of the woman's own understanding of her action, Jesus establishes that she has "done something that was necessary for his burial..., [namely] the anointing of a corpse."¹⁰⁵ Accordingly, at this moment, mere days away from Jesus' crucifixion at the hands of empire (26:1–2, 3–5), this unnamed and voiceless woman takes proleptic action, symbolic if unwitting, to anoint Jesus' body for burial in light of the imperial execution that he awaits.¹⁰⁶

This revelatory word of Jesus thus brings empire into clear focus. The woman's action now relates not merely to her love for Jesus nor to her desire to honor Jesus. Now her action points directly to Jesus' death, which will happen at the hands of empire (26:1–2, 3–5). This imperial crucifixion is one that Jesus has long predicted with clarity and persistence (cf. 16:21–23; 17:22–23; 20:17–19). Jesus' (male) disciples are outraged (cf. 16:22) and "greatly distressed" (17:23c) by Jesus' predictions. They respond to this imperial threat on Jesus' life first with vociferous words of denial (16:21–22) and finally with a wildly

¹⁰² Hare, *Matthew*, 293.

¹⁰³ Witherington, *Matthew*, 475.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Luz (*Matthew 21–28*, 338), who notes "that Jesus, who is aware of his own future, here gives the woman's act a *new* meaning of which she probably had not been thinking." See also Hare (*Matthew*, 293), who questions, "Does the woman intend to anoint [Jesus'] body for burial, as Jesus suggests? This . . . cannot be demonstrated from the text; it looks, rather, as if Jesus announces the significance of her act as something unknown to her."

¹⁰⁵ Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 338. Cf. Donald Senior (*The Gospel of Matthew*, Interpreting Biblical Texts [Nashville: Abingdon, 1997], 53), who notes, "This anonymous woman has performed a sacred obligation of Judaism, anointing the body of Jesus in preparation for his death and burial." Gardner (*Matthew*, 369) similarly observes, "The use of oils and spices to prepare a corpse for burial was a customary act of Jewish piety." NOT TO BE USED WITHOUT COPYRIGHT PERMISSION

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Saunders (*Preaching*, 265), who observes, "Matthew does not tell us what the woman understands or intends by her action, only what Jesus understands by it. . . . But the woman's action is nevertheless the right action for this moment, for it focuses attention on the meaning of events about to transpire and reminds the disciples what time they are living in."

swinging sword (26:47–51). But they ultimately have no power to hinder empire or prevent Jesus’ crucifixion.

The woman who interrupts Simon’s banquet has even fewer tools at her disposal and even less power than her male colleagues to impact empire. In Matthew’s narrative she has neither voice nor sword with which she can even attempt to hinder empire or prevent Jesus’ crucifixion. All she has, as Matthew depicts her, is an alabaster jar of expensive embalming ointment. And all she can do in this moment—in contrast to her male counterparts with their vociferous words and violent actions—is to silently carry out the women’s work¹⁰⁷ of anointing Jesus’ body for burial vis-à-vis the upcoming crucifixion and death that she has no means to prevent.

And this unnamed woman in Bethany is not the only woman powerless to impact empire and prevent the empire-enacted crucifixion of Jesus. Other women, “many” of them (26:55a), have “followed” Jesus from Galilee (27:55b) and “served” him along the way (27:55c), as Matthew now reveals to his readers.¹⁰⁸ But once they arrive in Jerusalem, these women have no more means than the unnamed woman of Bethany (26:6–13) to prevent what happens to Jesus at the hands of empire. As Jesus is arrested by Jewish collaborators with empire (26:47–56), tried before Jewish and Roman tribunals (26:57–68; 27:1–2, 11–23), condemned to death by the Roman governor (27:24–26), mocked by an entire cohort of Roman soldiers (27:27–31a/b) and finally crucified at Golgotha (27:31c–38), these women are nowhere to be seen or heard. In Matthew’s narrative they have no presence, no voice, and no weapons (cf. 26:51) to protect Jesus or to prevent his impending crucifixion at the hands of empire.

Only as Jesus finally hangs dying on a Roman cross do these women—including “Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee” (27:56)—first

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Levine (“Matthew,” 261), who designates the act of anointing for burial as “women’s traditional role.”

¹⁰⁸ But cf. 20:20, where “the mother of the sons of Zebedee” surfaces without further explanation in a context far away from her Galilean home (cf. 4:21–22), and precisely as Jesus is enroute to Jerusalem (16:21; 20:17–19; cf. 17:22). As Luz notes (*Matthew 8–20*, 542–43), “When we read the two texts [20:20–21; 27:56] together, they suggest that Matthew imagines that Zebedee’s wife was a follower of Jesus on the way to Jerusalem.”

emerge visibly as a group within Matthew's narrative.¹⁰⁹ And when they emerge, they are doing the only thing they can do in response to the actions of empire, namely, "looking on from a distance" (27:55a). As Luz notes, "[F]or women followers of Jesus it may have been dangerous to risk coming too close to him who was crucified as 'King of the Jews.'"¹¹⁰ And "from a distance" all these women can do, in Hare's words, is to be "passive observers of Jesus' dying."¹¹¹ As it clearly appears, empire has won the day and these women have lost. And their only recourse is to "look on [passively] from a distance."

The next time these women—here "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary"—emerge within Matthew's narrative, they are at Jesus' tomb (27:61). Joseph, "a rich man from Arimathea . . . who was also a disciple of Jesus" (26:57), has gone to Pilate, the Roman governor (27:58a), requested the body of Jesus (27:58b), and received his request (27:58c). He has then "[taken] the body" (27:59a), "wrapped it" for burial (27:59b), "laid it" in his own tomb (27:60a), "rolled a great stone" to the door of the tomb (27:60b), and "[gone] away" (27:60c).

In contrast to Joseph's diplomatic efforts with the powers of empire and his physical exertions with the body of Jesus and the "great stone," Matthew depicts the women simply as "sitting opposite the tomb" (27:61). They take no steps to assist Joseph or to participate in the burial of Jesus' body. These women, who were once powerless to prevent Jesus' empire-enacted crucifixion, can once again only sit and watch as an evidently sturdy and demonstrably well-placed male "disciple"—wealthy (27:57), landed (27:60), and with political access (27:58)—procures Jesus' body from the powers of empire and buries it. The women's powerless presence here, by contrast with that of Joseph, serves above all to confirm the facts that Jesus has died at the hands of empire and that his lifeless body, destroyed by empire, now lies entombed at this spot.

Two days later, "as the first day of the week [is] dawning" (28:1a), the women—once again "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary" (28:1b)—

¹⁰⁹ Scholars differ on the identity of "Mary the mother of James and Joseph" in 27:56. In line with Matthew 13:55c, Dowsett ("Matthew," 540) concludes that "Mary the mother of James and Joseph is probably Jesus' mother" (emphasis mine). Cf. Hare, *Matthew*, 324. Luz (*Matthew* 21–28, 574), to the contrary, concludes that this woman is "certainly not the mother of Jesus . . . ; otherwise she would have been called 'Jesus' mother'" (emphasis mine).

¹¹⁰ Luz *Matthew* 21–28, 572–73.

¹¹¹ Hare, *Matthew*, 324.

manifest no greater power vis-à-vis empire than they have before, as they come “to observe the tomb” (28:1b, DJW). From Matthew’s perspective, there is no work for them to do on this day (cf. Mark 16:1), since the unnamed woman in Bethany has already carried out the necessary task of anointing Jesus’ body (26:6–13).¹¹² The stated reason for their early morning journey is simply to “observe the tomb,” the place where they have watched Joseph lay the dead body of Jesus. So far as they are aware, empire has indeed won; and Jesus’ body lies lifeless inside that “tomb” and behind that “great stone” rolled to its door (27:59–61). Clear evidence of this reality for these women lies in the presence of a “guard” (27:65, 66; 28:11; cf. 28:4a) of Roman “soldiers” (28:12) posted at the tomb,¹¹³ in front of the “great stone,” now “sealed” shut (27:66) and thus “secured” from tampering (27:65, 66).

In response to the death of Jesus and the present signs of imperial power guarding his tomb, these women once again do the only thing they know to do, namely, “observe the tomb” that represents empire’s victory and their own loss. As Thomas G. Long notes, “What they expected to see, of course was Jesus’ grave, a monument to the sadness they felt in the soul, a confirmation of the cruel truth that the world finally beats mercy and righteousness to death.”¹¹⁴ Accordingly, if there is a task associated with this journey of the women “to [observe] the tomb,” it is clearly the task of mourning the dead.¹¹⁵

¹¹² As Luz notes (*Matthew* 21–28, 329), “[T]he unknown woman in Bethany does precisely what women at the tomb no longer need to do: she anoints the body of Jesus.”

¹¹³ Pilate’s instruction to the chief priests in 27:65a, “Ἔχετε κουστωδίαν, can be parsed grammatically either as a 2nd plural present indicative (“You have a [*Jewish*] guard” [NRSV text]) or as a 2nd plural present imperative (“Take a [*Roman*] guard” [NRSV note, DJW]). The present narrative context of Pilate’s words, however, demands the imperative force of the verb, thus implying a “guard” of *Roman soldiers*. Multiple clues establish this translation: (1) The chief priests would have no need to gain Pilate’s permission to set their own *Jewish* guard at such a tomb; (2) The term used for “guard,” κουστωδία, is a military term for a guard of *soldiers*; (3) The “guard” in question is later identified as comprised of “soldiers” (στρατιῶται) in 28:12; (4) The chief priests’ are concerned about whether *Pilate* will get word of the empty tomb (28:14) and thus, accordingly, the culpable negligence of his own soldiers.

¹¹⁴ Long, *Matthew*, 322.

¹¹⁵ Cf. Gardner (*Matthew*, 399), who notes that the women “[p]resumably... plan to resume their vigil of mourning.” They clearly do not come to “anoint” Jesus’ body with “spices” (cf. Mark 16:1), whether “because according to 26:12 it had already been done or because this idea was hopeless in view of the guards at the tomb” (Luz, *Matthew* 21–28, 594; cf. Gardner, *Matthew*, 399; Saunders, *Preaching*, 294). Contra Carter—who asserts (*Margins*, 539) that the women “have seen the accuracy of

And such is the “lower-level” portrait of ordinary women within Matthew’s narrative vis-à-vis the powers of empire. Face to face with such powers, these ordinary women have no means to alter or prevent the empire-instigated tragedies that overtake them. Instead, they can only live out lives of slavery (26:69–72); flee their homes and/or homelands under threatening circumstances with children in arms or in utero (2:13–15; 24:15–22); wail loudly for infants murdered by the military forces of empire (2:16–18); look on from a distance at public executions (27:55–56); lament the violent deaths of those whom they love (2 Sam 11:26–27a); Matt 2:16–18; carry out silent, pre-burial rituals to honor the dead (26:6–13); and observe the tombs of those whose bodies empire has destroyed (28:1).¹¹⁶ Within Matthew’s narrative life is often bitter and agonizing for non-imperial women who come face-to-face with empire.

“Do Not Be Afraid” (28:5a, 10a): Non-Imperial Women from the God’s-Eye Perspective

While Matthew’s non-imperial women frequently experience terror, brutality, profound grief, and massive injustice at the hands of empire, Matthew persistently and ironically subverts evident realities for these non-imperial women through his narrative rhetoric. This Matthean rhetorical pattern is visible from beginning to end of Matthew’s narrative in striking fashion, wherever non-imperial women find their lives impacted by empire.

For those at the bottom of the social ladder, namely, the “servant-girls” at Caiaphas’ palace, who live lives of female enslavement to the powers of empire, Matthew offers wry but undeniable vindication vis-à-vis their male imperial overlords. For their part, Caiaphas and the religious leadership (“the chief priests and the whole council”: 26:59),¹¹⁷ prominent Jewish collaborators with empire, are seeking “false testimony against Jesus” (26:59b) and calling “false witnesses” (26:60a), in order to bring about Jesus’ death (26:59b). But even as they

[Jesus’] prediction of death; now they await resurrection”—the force of Matthew’s narrative rhetoric (28:1–10) grounds itself on the assumption that the women are not merely “frightened” by the events that transpire (28:5b, 8a, 10b), just like the guards at the tomb (28:4a), but are likewise surprised by these events.

¹¹⁶ Cf. Weaver, *Irony*, 252.

¹¹⁷ Elsewhere Matthew describes this group as “the high priest” (26:57a) and “the scribes and the elders” (26:57b).

do so, Caiaphas' "servant-girls" witness truthfully concerning Peter and his close association with Jesus: "You also were with Jesus the Galilean" (26:69b); "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth" (26:71b). Where the powers of empire rely on falsehood to achieve their strategic political goals (26:57–68), powerless but observant "servant-girls" enslaved to empire¹¹⁸ boldly speak truth in the courtyards and on the porches of power (26:69–75).¹¹⁹

Accordingly, these two stories (26:57–68 and 27:69–75)—regularly and correctly interpreted as texts which demonstrate the ironic narrative contrast between *Jesus* and *Peter*¹²⁰—serve likewise to highlight the ironic contrast between the male powers of empire and empire's humblest female subjects vis-à-vis falsehood and truth.¹²¹ Thus, in Carter's words, "The [i.e., Matthew's] narrative again exhibits the power of the margins."¹²²

The wife of Uriah (1:6b) receives her rhetorical vindication from Matthew on the "upper level" of the narrative by the sheer virtue of her extraordinary mention—along with that of Tamar (1:3a), Rahab (1:5a), and Ruth (1:5b)—within Matthew's patrilineal genealogy, where men "are the fathers" of their sons in unbroken sequence from

¹¹⁸ Cf. Saunders (*Preaching*, 278), who notes, "Twice [Peter] is noticed by observant servant girls." Levine ("Matthew," 261), for her part, concludes, "The women of Jerusalem ... appear to have direct familiarity with Jesus and his followers."

¹¹⁹ Cf. Long's similar comments (*Matthew*, 308) framed in terms of the contrast between Jesus and Peter, "If the interrogation of Jesus before the Sanhedrin (Matt. 26:57–68) is the picture of an innocent man falsely accused, then this story [of Peter and the servant-girls] is the negative of that imprint. In Jesus' case two witnesses were scraped up to give false testimony. Here two witnesses, both servant-girls, tell the [sic] God's truth: Peter was with Jesus."

¹²⁰ Thus, for example, Long (*Matthew*, 308, as per footnote 119 above) and Witherington (*Matthew*, 500), who notes, "The Matthean account of Jesus' reaction and testimony is clearly meant to be contrasted with the witness, or lack thereof, by Peter [who], under pressure from a slave girl, denies Jesus."

¹²¹ Irony extends in all directions within this text, including between Peter and the servant-girls, a topic beyond the scope of the present study. As noted elsewhere (Weaver, *Irony*, 260): "The servant girls in Caiaphas' household (26:69, 71) exhibit no visible faith in "Jesus the Galilean/Nazarene." But their persistence in questioning Peter about his own association with Jesus serves ironically to highlight both their truthful proclamation that Peter belongs "with" Jesus (26:69, 71) and Peter's untruthful denials that he "knows" Jesus (26:70, 72)." And numerous commentators highlight the ironic reality that Peter denies Jesus before persons of lesser status or social power than himself: Thus Carter (*Margins*, 519), Hare (*Matthew*, 310), Keener (*Gospel*, 654), and Witherington (*Matthew*, 500).

¹²² Carter, *Margins*, 519.

Abraham (1:1, 2, 17) to Jacob, the father of Joseph (1:16a). While this patrilineal genealogy will hardly surprise Matthew's readers within their first-century patriarchal culture, Matthew's unanticipated introduction of four women into this genealogy as the female agents of the male "fathering" raises an immediate question as to Matthew's purpose for doing so.

Many scholars point to the "Gentile" character of this list of women¹²³ and suggest that Matthew's text "foreshadows the welcome of Gentiles into the church."¹²⁴ But while such an explanation serves effectively to depict the situations of Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth, it stands on shaky ground precisely with reference to "Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite" (2 Sam 11:3b; cf. Matt 1:6b), who is most naturally viewed within the 2 Samuel narrative as a Hebrew woman.¹²⁵

An alternative and far sturdier narrative explanation interprets Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba as women whose personal circumstances and vulnerable sexual reputations¹²⁶ point the readers forward narratively toward Mary, who stands at the climax of Matthew's

¹²³ Thus, for example, Keener (*Gospel*, 78–79), who notes that Matthew "names four women whose primary common link is their Gentile ancestry: Tamar of Canaan, Rahab of Jericho..., Ruth the Moabitess, and the ex-wife of Uriah the Hittite." See also Garland (*Reading Matthew*, 18), Gundry (*Matthew*, 15), Hare (*Matthew*, 6), Luz (*Matthew 1–7*, 110), and Witherington (*Matthew* 40). Senior (*Gospel*, 89), for his part, refers to these women simply as "outsiders," hinting indirectly at their Gentile status and pointing toward their "extraordinary and in some cases disconcerting circumstances."

¹²⁴ Levine, "Matthew," 253. But while Levine acknowledges the "Gentile" motif as "correct" as far as it goes, she ultimately views this motif as "insufficient" to explain Matthew's striking inclusion of women in his genealogy.

¹²⁵ Keener (*Gospel*, 79), who supports the "Gentile" motif, appeals to "Uriah the Hittite," Bathsheba's *husband*, to associate Bathsheba with the "Gentile" community. Similarly, Luz (*Matthew 1–7*, 110), who claims no information about Bathsheba's background, points suggestively to the Hittite identity of Uriah. W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann (*Matthew: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, The Anchor Bible [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971] view "at least three" of these women as Gentiles, while Levine ("Matthew," 253) straightforwardly identifies Bathsheba as a "Hebrew."

¹²⁶ The evidence for such an interpretation is clear within the respective biblical narratives. Tamar secretly "plays the whore" with Judah, her father-in-law, when he does not provide her with a functioning levirate marriage partner (Gen 38:24; cf. 38:1–23). Rahab is a "prostitute" by trade (Josh 2:1). Ruth "[lies] at [Boaz] feet" at the threshing floor in an act that "must not be known" to the people of Bethlehem (Ruth 3:14). And "the wife of Uriah" is requisitioned and effectively raped by David in a sexual encounter that threatens her marriage, her reputation, and potentially her life itself (2 Sam 11:2–5; cf. 11:27–12:6).

genealogy (1:16b).¹²⁷ Like the women preceding her, Mary is not only the woman “of whom” (1:16b; 1:3a, 5a, 5b, 6b) Jesus is born, but also and most crucially for this interpretation, the woman whose own vulnerable sexual reputation, like theirs, is clearly at stake in the story of her pregnancy (1:18–25).¹²⁸

Accordingly, from the narrative perspective of Matthew’s Gospel, these four women collectively, and “the wife of Uriah” in specific, each with their own troubled circumstances and vulnerable reputations, “set the stage for Mary, whose conception of Jesus also raise[s] questions of impropriety”¹²⁹ With this “stage-setting” role Matthew elevates “the wife of Uriah”—powerless as she is vis-à-vis the empire of her day and precisely due to that powerlessness—to rhetorical equality with Mary, the one “of whom Jesus [is] born” (1:16b). And “the wife of Uriah,” like Mary herself, thus becomes a critical link in Matthew’s messianic (*Christos*: 1:1, 16b, 17c, 18a) genealogy. David E. Garland, for his part, identifies the crucial significance of this linkage:

As the four women in the genealogy are vehicles of God’s messianic plan in spite of their irregular circumstances, so

¹²⁷ Cf. Weaver, *Irony*, 254.

¹²⁸ Thus Albright/Mann (*Matthew*, 6), Boxall (*Discovering Matthew*, 82), Garland (*Reading Matthew*, 19), Levine (“Matthew,” 253), Long (*Matthew*, 11), Lutz (*Matthew 1–7*, 109), Saunders (*Preaching*, 3), and Witherington (*Matthew*, 41). Scholars disagree, however, on how these women point toward Mary. On the one hand some scholars contrast these women with “the great matriarchs of Israel” (Garland, *Reading Matthew*, 17) such as Sarah, Rebekah, and Leah (Hare, *Matthew*, 6), viewing them instead as “questionable” people (Hare, *Matthew*, 6), women of “spotted histories” and “irregular circumstances” (Garland, *Reading Matthew*, 17, 19), “morally dubious” (Boxall, *Discovering Matthew*, 82, citing others), “scandalous” (Keener, *Gospel*, 79, citing others), and “sinners such as these—the unrighteous and the disreputable,” (Garland, *Reading Matthew*, 18, citing “many”). Other scholars depict these women as “helpless and oppressed” (Garland, *Reading Matthew*, 18) or as “hapless victims of exploitative men” (Dowsett, “Matthew,” 522; cf. Levine, “Matthew,” 253). Boxall (*Discovering Matthew*, 82) suggests that “[a] more subtle solution might be to regard them as *accused* of sexual indiscretion, and therefore relating them to Mary, suspected—wrongly in Matthew’s view—of adultery due to her virginal conception (1.18, 20).” Levine (“Matthew,” 253), for her part, proposes that “[t]he genealogy is best interpreted as presenting examples of ‘higher righteousness,’ a “lesson” which these women [and Uriah, for his part] effectively “teach” to those men in power over them.

¹²⁹ Saunders, *Preaching*, 3. Cf. Albright/Mann (*Matthew*, 5–6), who identify these women as “forerunners of Mary,” and Witherington (*Matthew*, 41), who notes that these women “provide precedents by which the Evangelist can defend within an honor and shame culture what God did in regard to Mary and the virginal conception.”

is Mary. The previous aberrations prepare one for the holy aberration of the virginal conception and point to the mysterious workings of God in salvation history.¹³⁰

And such is Matthew's "upper-level" portrait of "the wife of Uriah" and his rhetorical vindication of this powerless woman vis-à-vis the empire of her day. For Mary herself, the evidence is likewise compelling.

Matthew spares no irony in vindicating the woman "of whom Jesus [is] born" (1:16b; cf. 2:1) on the "upper level" of his narrative. Central to this irony is the truth that lies "hidden" right on the surface of Matthew's text. While Herod has massive imperial powers at his disposal vis-à-vis a silent, passive, and visibly powerless woman,¹³¹ it is in fact Mary who drives the entire narrative forward with her single and signal act, "namely, 'bearing' the son (: 1:21, 25) conceived in her womb by the Holy Spirit (1:18)."¹³² Mary's single act is in fact "the crucial 'God-event' in the story and consequently the single event around which all other actions revolve."¹³³ As Matthew makes clear with a fivefold repetition (2:11b, 13c//14, 20//21), Mary herself is spatially central to the unfolding narrative, gathering all the other actors and actions into a centripetal orbit around herself and her child, as "the child and his mother" repeatedly create a focal point of attention and action within the narrative.¹³⁴

Accordingly, all of Herod's *actions*, regardless how cunning, bold, or brutal, are in fact nothing more than *reactions* to the single act of Mary in "bearing" her child. Nor is this all. Not only does Matthew reduce the massive power of empire to a merely "reactive" role vis-à-

¹³⁰ Garland, *Reading Matthew*, 19. Dowsett ("Matthew," 522), for her part, concludes that Matthew "is celebrating the thread of God's grace in the Old Testament, a thread that is quite as much in evidence in the lives of women as in those of men. He is showing how God turns tragedy into triumph, even as he does with his Son." Cf. the visual imagery of Long (*Matthew*, 11), who says, "Taking the stories together [i.e., those of the four women and that of Mary], we begin to see that God does not write history only in straight lines, but also with dashes, swirls, and loops. Jesus' birth is yet another curved line of holy history, and Mary's name appears in the genealogy marking another spot where the sacred river flows in ways that human design could never have anticipated." USED WITHOUT COPYRIGHT PERMISSION

¹³¹ See the discussion above in section three of this study.

¹³² Weaver, *Irony*, 255.

¹³³ Weaver, *Irony*, 255.

¹³⁴ Cf. Luz (*Matthew 1–7*, 146), who notes with regard to 2:13–15, "The child and his mother are in the center."

vis the single act of Mary. Matthew likewise demonstrates the ultimately fruitless character of these imperial reactions to Mary's childbearing act at every turn of the narrative. Whenever imperial threat presents itself (or retreats), an "angel of the Lord" (2:13b, 19b) intervenes by way of "dream" (2:13b, 19b; cf. 2:12a, 22c) in order to ensure the safety of "the child and his mother" or to repatriate them (2:13c//14, 20//21; cf. 2:12b, 22d).

Accordingly, Herod, the demonstrably powerful face of empire in this narrative, shows himself to be ultimately powerless. Not only is he, without even knowing this, incapable of achieving his single and signal goal, namely to "destroy" the child (2:13d; cf. 2:20b). Just as crucially, Herod cannot save his own life and himself lies "dead" at the end of the narrative (2:15, 19a, 20b), while the target of his fury is alive and well in Nazareth of Galilee (2:21–23). By contrast, Mary, "a powerless 'mother' with an endangered 'child,' is in the ironic rhetoric of Matthew's narrative one whose plight, in tandem with that of her child, stirs heaven and earth into urgent and extraordinary action"¹³⁵ against the empire of the day. Such is Matthew's "upper-level" vindication of Mary within his narrative rhetoric.

For the women of Bethlehem, however, the mothers of the toddlers and infants whom Herod ruthlessly "send[s] and kill[s]" (2:16), vindication does not come with angelic messages and sudden nighttime journeys out of harm's way (2:13–15). For these mothers, who experience in real life the brutal massacre of their children at the hands of empire, vindication comes only beyond their lived experience and on the rhetorical level of Matthew's text. This happens in threefold fashion.

First, Matthew, with a crucial textual omission in 2:17, makes it clear that Herod's brutal act of slaughtering the children of Bethlehem stands completely apart from the will or intentions of God. Elsewhere throughout his narrative Matthew designates numerous events in the life of Jesus as ones that take place "*in order that [the scriptures] might be fulfilled*" (1:22; 2:15b, 23b; 4:14; 8:17a; 12:17; 13:35a; 21:4; 26:56a; emphasis mine). Here, however, Matthew omits the purpose clause "*in order that,*" noting only that through Herod's act scripture "*has been fulfilled*" (1:17; emphasis mine).¹³⁶ This crucial textual omission

¹³⁵ Weaver, *Irony*, 256.

¹³⁶ Cf. 27:9, where Matthew likewise omits a purpose clause in speaking of the silver coins which Judas returns to the chief priests and elders.

effectively separates Herod's action from divine intentionality and leaves Herod himself with the sole responsibility for his heinous act.¹³⁷

Matthew then makes striking intertextual allusions to Israel's history, which, each in their own way, vindicate the grieving mothers of Bethlehem. On the surface of the text Matthew highlights the importance of these grieving mothers, associating them by name with their storied Jewish foremother, Rachel (2:18; cf. Jer 31:15) and integrating them in this way into their storied, if tragic, Jewish history of Babylonian exile. In so doing, Matthew:

[I]ronically invests the grief of these powerless women with powerful significance, as they assume the role of their ancestral mother "Rachel" (2:18), fulfill the words of their ancestral prophet Jeremiah (2:17; cf. Jer 31:15), and re-enact the tragic history of their ancestors.¹³⁸

But the intertextual allusions here reach back even further into Jewish history and portray Herod—like Herodias elsewhere in Matthew's narrative (14:1–12)¹³⁹—as a prominent biblical villain vis-à-vis his counterparts, the grieving mothers of Bethlehem. As Eugene Eung-Chun Park notes:

The massacre of infants by Herod would have instantly evoked in the mind of the Jewish Christian audience of Matthew a collective memory of the intended massacre of the Hebrew infants by Pharaoh in Exod 1:15–22. The slaughter by Pharaoh would have been regarded by the Jewish people as the paradigmatic case of victimization of innocent lives by an absolute ruler of a great empire through misuse of power.... The upshot is that both for

¹³⁷ Cf. Pregeant (*Matthew*, 23), who notes, "Although the reader is supposed to accept the escape to Egypt and the settlement at Nazareth as fulfilling not only prophecy but also God's intentions, this is apparently not the case with Herod's murder of the male children in an attempt to exterminate his rival. The narrator apparently wants to say that this horrific act was anticipated by prophecy, *but not that God caused it to happen* (emphasis mine)." See also Boxall (*Discovering Matthew*, 88), Luz (*Matthew 1–7*, 147), and Saunders (*Preaching*, 16).

¹³⁸ Weaver, *Irony*, 256. Cf. Keener (*Gospel*, 111), who notes that "Matthew chooses an ancient lament from one of the most sorrowful times of his people's history."

¹³⁹ See the discussion of Herodias above in section two of this study.

the intended audience and for any real reader who has knowledge of the Hebrew scriptures, Herod is presented by Matthew as reenacting the role of the ruthless Pharaoh in abusing his absolute power to oppress innocent people.¹⁴⁰

And if Matthew here portrays Herod as the villainous “Pharaoh” of ancient Jewish history, it is likewise clear, by extension, that Matthew portrays the grieving mothers of Bethlehem as a stand-in for the entire Hebrew community in Egypt (cf. Ex 1:15–22), or, in other words, the nascent nation of Israel itself. And with this rhetorical move Matthew effectively elevates the grieving mothers of Bethlehem to a historical significance far beyond that of nameless village women. And, by the same token, Matthew effectively designates their character—by contrast to that of Herod, the biblical “Pharaoh” figure—as that of God’s faithful people standing over against the evil and recalcitrant powers of empire, who counter God’s designs.

Finally, Matthew’s account of the children of Bethlehem and their death at the hands of empire, points forward inexorably within Matthew’s own narrative to the death of Jesus himself, likewise at the hands of empire.¹⁴¹ The “child” of Matthew 2:13–23, the one whom heaven and earth once spared no efforts to rescue from a brutal death at the hands of Herod’s henchmen, ultimately faces the worst that empire can inflict, namely, death by crucifixion on a Roman cross (20:19a; 26:1–2 ; 27:22, 23, 26, 35). Jesus thus joins his erstwhile compatriots, the tiny children of Bethlehem, in suffering death at the hands of empire. And within Matthew’s story, Jesus’ death itself grants crucial narrative significance to these tiny children, whose own death happens precisely on Jesus’ account and both precedes and prefigures his own.¹⁴² Accordingly, and in tandem with their children, Matthew

¹⁴⁰ Park, “Rachel’s Cry,” 479.

¹⁴¹ Thus Doane (“Rachel Weeping,” 13), who notes that Jesus “died in the same way as the children of Bethlehem: murder at the hands of the politico-religious authorities of Jerusalem.”

¹⁴² Contra Luz (*Matthew* 1–7, 147), who notes that “Matthew does not raise the question of theodicy in view of the suffering of the innocent children. The evangelist is concerned with the struggle between God and the enemy of Jesus, Herod; the innocent children appear so to speak only on the reverse side of this conflict. *It does not disturb Matthew that God saves his Son at the expense of innocent children* (emphasis mine).”

effectively elevates the mothers of Bethlehem once again to a significance far beyond that of nameless village women. These mothers in fact serve as narrative pointers to Mary herself and, most crucially, to Mary's "generative" role within salvation history: "*She will bear a son and . . . he will save his people from their sins*" (1:21a/c, emphasis mine).

Nor is this the end of the matter. Here Jesus' story—and, by extension, that of the children of Bethlehem as well—takes a radical turn, as God raises Jesus from the dead, just as Jesus has long predicted (28:6b; cf. 16:21e; 17:23b; 20:19b). Here, with God's death-defying action against empire and on behalf of Jesus, lies Matthew's ultimate and ironic subversion of the imperial violence that has taken the lives of the tiny children of Bethlehem as well.¹⁴³ And here, by the same token, is the ultimate and ironic vindication for the mothers of Bethlehem, as Jesus' resurrection by the power of God portends the future resurrection of their children by God's power as well.¹⁴⁴ Such is Matthew's "upper-level" portrait of the grief-stricken mothers of Bethlehem.

For the pregnant and nursing mothers of Matthew's eschatological discourse (24:15–22), those whose situation is so dire that Jesus pronounces a woe on them (24:19), their vindication by God likewise does not appear visibly within their present refugee existence of unprecedented "suffering" (24:21). What is visible and tangible for these women in the present moment is "flight" (24:20; cf. 24:16) to the inhospitable "mountains" (24:16), whether in challenging winter weather (24:20) or on the sabbath day, set aside by God for God's people as a day of rest (24:20; cf. Ex 20:8–11//Deut 5:12–15).

But within the persistently ironic *modus operandi* of his narrative, Matthew establishes that these women, now facing the direst of circumstances, are, *precisely in their misery*, none other than members of "the elect" of God (24:22), whose status as such and whose suffering itself compels God into divine action to "shorten" (24:22c/d; cf. 24:22a) the days of cosmic distress and to "save" (24:22b) these "elect" women from their misery. And in the end, at "the [Parousia] of the Son of Man" (24:27b, DJW), when this eschatological figure comes "on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory" (24:30c; cf. 25:31a), these

¹⁴³ Cf. Doane ("Rachel Weeping," 13), who notes that "Jesus was executed by the imperial powers who had been pursuing him since birth. His resurrection subverted the power of the empire."

¹⁴⁴ Cf. Doane ("Rachel Weeping," 13), who notes, but from a past-tense perspective, that "since God raised Jesus from the dead, symbolically the children can also be seen as *having been raised with him* [emphasis mine]."

vulnerable and suffering mothers and mothers-to-be will receive a powerful and glorious vindication through unmistakable divine fiat. With a “loud trumpet call” (24:31b) that rings throughout the cosmos, the Son of Man will “send out his [divine messengers]” (24:31a; DJW) and “gather” these suffering women—among all the rest of God’s “elect”—“from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other” (24:31c).

Accordingly, neither the empires of the world nor the brutal wars fought between “nations” (24:7a) and “kingdoms” (24:7b) will ever have ultimate power against the vulnerable and suffering mothers and mothers-to-be among God’s “elect,” those on whom Jesus has just pronounced the direst of eschatological “woes” (24:19). Instead, the “great suffering” these women now face (24:21) will in fact be “shortened” by divine initiative (24:22a/22b), while they themselves will be “gathered” by divine emissaries (24:31b), to join the “powerful” and “glorious” Son of Man (24:30c; cf. 25:31a) and to find eternal blessing in his “power” and “great glory” (cf. 25:31a, 34b/c, 46b). And such is the ultimate and divine vindication of these “elect” women, once suffering the ravages and brutality of imperial warfare.

For the unnamed woman of Bethany (26:6–13)—who anoints Jesus’ head in a voiceless, wordless act of love and honor, *precisely as he faces death at the hands of empire*—vindication comes both in her present world and far into the future, well beyond her physical life. In the present world of Matthew’s narrative and in sharp contrast to Jesus’ disciples—who are “outraged” (26:8b, DJW) and consider the woman’s action as a “waste” (26:8c)—Jesus himself commends the woman for her action. And he designates her act as a “good deed” (26:10c), the sort of action to which Jesus pointedly calls his disciples themselves (5:16b; cf. 5:1b-2).¹⁴⁵

By contrast, Jesus shames his disciples publicly by verbally challenging their negative assessment of the woman’s act, arguably within her hearing: “Why do you trouble the woman?” (26:10b). And Jesus no doubt shocks his disciples likewise into total bewilderment by commending as “good” what they view as “wasteful,” above all *vis-à-vis*

NOT TO BE USED WITHOUT COPYRIGHT PERMISSION

¹⁴⁵ Thus Keener (*Gospel*, 617), who notes, “Although disciples are supposed to let their ‘good works’ shine (5:16), Jesus commends only this woman for a ‘good work’ (26:10).” Cf. Long (*Matthew*, 292): “Jesus means that her deed was a ‘good work,’ a proclamation of the kingdom, the kind of shining light that he speaks about in the Sermon on the Mount (see Matt. 5:14–16).”

Jesus' own recently stated and clearly noted concerns for the poor and needy (26:9; cf. 25:31–46).¹⁴⁶

Further, Jesus interprets the woman's "good deed" (26:10c) as one which "prepares [him] for burial" (26:12b) and, by the same token, associates the woman herself, by contrast, with the machinations of empire. Here Jesus honors the woman for this "symbolic prophetic" action on his behalf in advance of his death, an act that "previews what will happen to Jesus."¹⁴⁷ And, by implicit contrast to the woman, Jesus once again shames his disciples for their failure to recognize the true significance of her act, namely, "preparing" him for his upcoming burial, *a burial fraught with imperial significance since it follows Jesus' death at the hands of empire* (16:21; 17:22–23; 20:17–19; 26:1–2).

Accordingly, this woman alone—in contrast to Jesus' disciples and regardless of whether she acts knowingly or unknowingly—has taken the one action available to her and, by the same token, the one action crucial to the moment, vis-à-vis empire and its impending violence. She has, in her own traditional female fashion, "prepared" Jesus in advance for his empire-associated "burial."¹⁴⁸ Scholars differ on what she understands about this act. From Long's perspective, "She, alone at this point, *has grasped* what God is doing in the world and has acted accordingly, and her anointing of Jesus was a luminescent sermon-in-action, a proclamation of the saving power of Jesus' death (emphasis mine)."¹⁴⁹ And Carter, for his part, notes, "What [the woman] has done is *recognize the way of suffering and death as inevitable* for those who resist the empire's ideology, methods, and structures (emphasis mine)." From Witherington's perspective, however, "[T]he woman *in effect unwittingly* performs an act that amounts to a proleptic memorial to Jesus (emphasis mine)."¹⁵⁰

Either way, this unnamed woman, with no visible tokens of power within her grasp, counters the violence of empire in loving fashion, with her "alabaster jar of very costly ointment" (26:7a), over against the vociferous complaints of Jesus' disciples (26:8–9) and in stark

¹⁴⁶ But Jesus does not, in fact, denigrate or dismiss the disciples' stated concern for the poor. To the contrary, he extends this concern into an ever-ongoing future, making them "always" accountable for the needs of the poor (26:11a).

¹⁴⁷ Witherington, *Matthew*, 477.

¹⁴⁸ Cf. Luz, *Matthew* 21–28, 338; Hare, *Matthew*, 293.

¹⁴⁹ Long, *Matthew*, 292, who accordingly concludes that the woman "*already discerns* that it is by his death that Jesus is truly 'Messiah' (which means 'anointed' . . . (emphasis mine)."

¹⁵⁰ Witherington, *Matthew*, 477.

contrast to their own wildly swinging swords (26:47–51) and terrified denials (26:69–75) that lie just a few short hours away.¹⁵¹ Jesus, for his part, vindicates her actions, even as he shames his own disciples publicly in her presence. As a result, this woman—*who has neither voice nor words within Matthew’s narrative*—receives the highest of verbal commendations from Jesus for her “good deed” vis-à-vis the empire-enacted violence to come. And she finds both “unconditional approval” and “emphatic approval” from Jesus, precisely where Jesus’ own disciples find (or will find) only shame, rebuke, and bitter tears (26:10–12; cf. 26:52–54, 75).¹⁵²

But this is not all. Jesus likewise announces to his disciples (26:13), “Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.” Here Jesus makes a prediction unique within Matthew’s narrative, bestowing an honor which comes to no one else within Jesus’ entourage of followers. This woman—*whose ointment is the only means she has to respond to the empire which she cannot hinder and the imperial crucifixion which she cannot prevent*—will receive ongoing “remembrance” throughout the whole world and throughout all of time for her humble and powerless act of honoring Jesus as he faces death at the hands of empire.

What is more, her act will become a piece of the “good news” itself (26:13), namely, the “good news of the kingdom” which was, first and foremost, Jesus’ own Galilean agenda (4:23; 9:35; cf. 11:5) throughout his public ministry.¹⁵³ Then, by worldwide extension (24:14; 26:13; cf. 28:19a), “this good news [of the kingdom]” (24:14; 26:13; cf. 10:7), *including the story of the woman and her act of anointing*, becomes the ongoing agenda of Jesus’ disciples and all who come after them into a future far beyond the present life of this woman and all the way to “the end” (24:14).¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ See the discussion above concerning the disciples and their responses to the impending death of Jesus.

¹⁵² Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 334.

¹⁵³ Consult a concordance for Jesus’ extensive references to “kingdom of heaven” (or occasionally “kingdom of God”) throughout his public proclamation and his private teaching within Matthew’s narrative.

¹⁵⁴ Note here Luz’s crucial clarification concerning 26:13 (*Matthew 21–28*, 338), “However, ‘this’ gospel cannot refer to the proclamation of Jesus; it must mean a report about Jesus.” And in light of Jesus’ reference to “and what she did,” Luz concludes (*ibid.*), “*This* gospel could suggest that the reference is not to the church’s proclamation in general, but to a particular proclamation—namely ‘this’ one. What is meant? It is not inconceivable that it refers to the passion narrative. Thus for Matthew the story of the suffering of Jesus is part of the gospel.”

And even as Jesus, through dialogue with his disciples, honors this unnamed woman for her “good deed” and promises her ongoing and worldwide “remembrance” for her act, Matthew himself vindicates this woman through his broader narrative rhetoric. Not only does Matthew highlight the contrast between this unnamed woman and the disciples of Jesus *collectively* by means of his dialogue with them. He likewise locates this story narratively in a place which highlights the contrast between this unnamed woman and *one specific disciple*, Judas Iscariot, pointedly named (26:14) and strategically identified as “one of the twelve [disciples]” (26:14, 47; cf. 10:1, 2, 5; 11:1; 19:28; 20:17; 26:20).

Specifically, Matthew inserts the woman's story (26:6–13) narratively into the center of the political conspiracy concerning Jesus' death (26:3–5, 14–16).¹⁵⁵ This conspiracy, initiated by “the chief priests and elders of the people” (26:3), culminates precisely as Judas Iscariot, “one of the twelve” (26:14), offers his assistance in “handing [Jesus] over” to them (26:14–15a, DJW), receives thirty pieces of silver as his pay (26:15b), and sets to work at his task (26:16). The contrast which Matthew draws here serves, just like the words of Jesus to his disciples, to honor the woman and to place corresponding shame on Judas. As Hare notes:

The contrast [with Jesus' disciples] is even sharper between the woman, who cannot qualify as a member of the Twelve, because of her gender, and Judas, whose treachery is underscored by the note “one of the Twelve” (v. 14). She lavishes her money on a gift for her Master; he bargains away his teacher for a paltry thirty pieces of silver.¹⁵⁶

But perhaps the single most evocative element of Matthew's narrative rhetoric here, vis-à-vis the woman who anoints Jesus' head, lies in the act of anointing itself and the wider cultural significance of this act. From Matthew's telling of the story, the woman may or may not understand the full significance of what she does to Jesus. And, for his

¹⁵⁵ Luz, (*Matthew 21–28*, 329), who observes this structural feature of Matthew's narrative, seems curiously unfocused on its significance, even as he highlights the “contrast” which Matthew thus creates: “Between these two scenes appears, *with no connection to its context*, the story of the anointing by the woman of Bethany (26:6–13). It has the effect of slowing the action and at the same time *serves as a contrast*... *The woman appears as a contrast to the disciples, who will abandon Jesus* (emphasis mine).”

¹⁵⁶ Hare, *Matthew*, 294. Cf. Keener, *Gospel*, 168.

part, Jesus associates her action strictly with his burial (26:12b). But Matthew, through his narrative rhetoric, invites—or at very least allows—the reader to consider that this unnamed woman in fact, *and ironically*, assumes the most significant of male roles within the Jewish religious world, namely that of the prophet or priest *who coronates a king by anointing his head with oil*.¹⁵⁷ As Carter notes, “[The woman’s] anointing of Jesus shows him to be God’s king (cf. 2:2; 27:11, 29, 37, 42), who represents God’s empire, which is being established and anticipated in his ministry (4:17; 12:28; 24:27–31).”¹⁵⁸

And even as scholars do not agree uniformly on the “royal” significance of the woman’s act,¹⁵⁹ Saunders concludes, “This is a lavish and multivalent **symbolic action**, which should not be reduced to any single meaning....The anointing of Jesus signifies both who he is and what he will accomplish through his death.”¹⁶⁰ And Long, for his part, acclaims this woman as “in her own way, the pioneer preacher” vis-à-vis whom “all the preachers of the gospel who follow her will celebrate her memory by telling her story.”¹⁶¹ Such is the ultimate and ironic gift of the unnamed woman of Bethany, voiceless and wordless as she may be. And such is Matthew’s ultimate and ironic vindication of this woman and her act in anointing Jesus.

As for the women at the crucifixion (27:55–56), the burial scene

¹⁵⁷ Thus Witherington (*Matthew*, 477), who notes, “The Gospel writer may see this act by the woman as an example of a woman playing a prophetic or priestly role, for prophets or priests performed royal anointings.” Cf. Levine’s conclusion (“Matthew,” 261) that “the woman is cast here in the untraditional position of priest and/or prophet.”

¹⁵⁸ Carter, *Margins*, 502. Cf. Long (*Matthew*, 292), who identifies anointing in the Old Testament as “a sign of holiness (see Gen. 28:16–18), of the priesthood (see Exod. 29:7), and of royalty (1 Sam. 16:12–13; 1 Kings 1:39)” and suggests accordingly “that Jesus’ death is a holy death, a priestly death, and the death of the world’s true king.”

¹⁵⁹ See the more tentative assessments of the woman’s act as a royal coronation reflected by Gardner (*Matthew*, 369) and Senior (*Gospel*, 53). And note the sharply negative assessment offered by Luz (*Matthew 21–28*), who observes (336) that Matthew does not use the vocabulary of “anointing” (ἀλείφω) but rather the vocabulary of “pouring out” (καταχέω) and notes (337) that “too much speaks against this view: the banquet scene, the word μύρον, the alabaster bottle that contained it, the reaction of the disciples, who in that case would have completely missed the point. As attractive as the idea itself might be, at the very least the present narrative in no way suggests that the unknown woman anointed Jesus as the messianic king.”

¹⁶⁰ Saunders, *Preaching*, 265.

¹⁶¹ Long, *Matthew*, 292.

(27:57–61), and the empty tomb (28:1–11a), Matthew reserves for them arguably the most obvious and the most ironic of vindications, on multiple levels of his story, vis-à-vis the powers of empire. To begin with, Matthew identifies the women, when they first show up on the scene, as those who have “followed” Jesus all the way from Galilee and are “serving” him as they do so (27:55). And with this twofold designation, Matthew has, whether unwittingly or intentionally, associated these women with crucial acts which constitute (or *should* constitute) “discipleship” for his male entourage of twelve (ἀκολουθέω: 4:20, 22; 8:22, 23; 9:9b/c; 10:38; 16:24; 19:21, 27, 28; 26:58; cf. 8:19; διακονέω: 20:28 of Jesus himself; cf. 25:44 of the “goats” on the left hand, who fail to do this).¹⁶² Accordingly, Carter designates these women as “clearly disciples” for their “following” and their “serving.”¹⁶³ And for these acts characteristic of discipleship, Matthew honors these women and vindicates their “following” and their “serving,” even as he portrays them as powerless vis-à-vis the Roman empire and the Roman military forces who have just crucified Jesus. As Keener notes:

In that culture women were relegated to a marginal role in discipleship at best and not permitted to be disciples of rabbis...; but these women had followed Jesus as disciples in whatever ways they could... even ways that would have appeared scandalous in that culture.... Their “ministry” to Jesus’ needs (27:55) probably largely followed the roles assigned their gender and social rank in their culture (8:15), but this narrative evaluates and bestows honor on the basis of their courage and faithfulness rather than their social prominence.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² Note Peter’s mother-in-law as well (8:14–15), who likewise “serves” Jesus (8:15c) earlier in Matthew’s narrative.

¹⁶³ Carter, *Margins*, 538. As Carter here notes, “They have **followed** Jesus, the verb which from the outset (see 4:20) signifies attachment and obedience to Jesus in response to his disruptive call. Moreover, they are said to imitate his central orientation (20:25–28). They **serve** him over a sustained period of time and distance in travel (**from Galilee**).” Cf. Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 574; Witherington, *Matthew*, 524.

¹⁶⁴ Keener, *Gospel*, 689. Cf. Carter (*Margins*, 538), who goes even further than Keener in his description of the “service” which these women offer to Jesus: “Their service is not only a matter of providing food and/or hospitality, though that may well be an important dimension (cf. Peter’s mother-in-law in 8:15)... The term is all-embracing for Jesus’ ministry. Likewise for the women. Whatever he does by way of this service, they do also: proclamation, works of power, suffering, and so on (cf. 10:7–8, 24–25; 11:2–5).”

Accordingly, Matthew depicts these socially, politically, and militarily powerless women—who “follow” Jesus to Jerusalem and “serve” him along the way—as non-classified disciples, who in fact stand as counterparts to Jesus’ chosen twelve, precisely as these two groups, in contrasting fashion, face and respond to the brutal powers of empire employed against Jesus. As such non-classified female followers of Jesus, they put Jesus’ cohort of twelve male disciples to shame in crucial and ironic fashion. And they serve, by contrast, as a positive “model” not only for Jesus’ twelve male disciples, but in fact for all disciples to come, whether male or female.¹⁶⁵

Most obvious on the narrative level, these women are physically present with Jesus and emotionally supportive to Jesus, precisely when and where their male counterparts are not.¹⁶⁶ Jesus’ disciples—individually or as a group—have already “handed [Jesus] over” (παράδιδωμι: 26:47–50; cf. 10:4b; 17:22b; 20:18b; 26:15a, 21, 23, 24, 25; 27:3a, 4, DJW), been “scandalized” by Jesus (σκανδαλίζομαι: 26:31a, 33a/b, DJW), “denied” their relationship to Jesus (26:34, 35a, 70, 72, 75; cf. 74), “deserted” Jesus (26:56b), “and “fled” from the scene altogether (26:56b) by the time the women show up at the cross (27:55–56) and the tomb (27:61; 28:1).

As Boxall observes, “Only at the climax of the story, with Jesus’ male disciples having deserted him, do the faithful women come out of the shadows.”¹⁶⁷ And Luz, for his part, draws real-world conclusions, whether first-century or present day, from Matthew’s contrasting portrayals of Jesus’ male disciples and the women at the cross and the tomb: “For many readers for whom the failure of the disciples during Jesus’ passion—people with whom they actually should have been able to identify—was painful, the mention of the women will have been good news.”¹⁶⁸

Accordingly, Matthew portrays these non-classified female disciples as those who respond appropriately—in distinct contrast to their

¹⁶⁵ Thus Keener (*Gospel*, 700), who notes, “But . . . as female examples could provoke both women and men, the women in Matthew’s narrative function as a model for disciples, male or female.” Cf. Boxall, *Discovering Matthew*, 169.

¹⁶⁶ Cf. Boxall, *Discovering Matthew*, 159; Carter, *Margins*, 538; Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 337, 572.

¹⁶⁷ Boxall, *Discovering Matthew*, 57. Cf. Luz (*Matthew 21–28*, 337), who notes that the “contrast between the disciples and the women . . . is that [the women] stand by Jesus precisely in his suffering.” And Witherington (*Matthew*, 524), for his part, concludes “that the three named women present the alternative to the three named men, the inner circle, for they are faithful to the last.”

¹⁶⁸ Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 572.

male counterparts—vis-à-vis empire and its trademark violence, here enacted in and through the crucifixion of Jesus. While they, no more than Jesus' male cohort of twelve, can halt or even hinder the deadly violence of empire, they nevertheless demonstrate their faithfulness to Jesus—and, by the same token, their defiance of empire—precisely through their presence and their persistence, however powerless, at the cross and the tomb.¹⁶⁹

But this is only the beginning of Matthew's rhetorical vindication of these women who have "followed" Jesus from Galilee and "served" him along the way. When these women show up on the first day of the week "to observe the tomb" (28:1b, DJW), Matthew sets them up narratively not merely against Jesus' Jewish cohort of twelve male disciples (cf. 28:7, 10), who—even as privileged males within their own Jewish patriarchal society—are subject, just like Jewish women, to imperial occupation and domination. Instead, Matthew likewise sets these women up as the direct narrative counterparts to the very forces of empire itself, namely, the Roman soldiers (28:12; cf. 27:65, 66; 28:4, 11) standing guard at the tomb of Jesus, the latest victim of their imperial violence. And the narrative contrasts here could hardly be sharper or more ironic.

First, Matthew highlights the "fear" factor within this account and the contrasting experiences of the Roman soldiers and the women in this regard. On the one hand, all of the human characters within the story—male or female, Roman or Jewish—are terrified by the unanticipated arrival (28:2a), the non-earthly appearance (28:3a), and the heavenly clothing (28:3b) of the "angel of the Lord," who "descends" onto the scene "from heaven" (28:2b) in a "great earthshaking event" (28:2a, DJW). "Fear" is palpable for both the soldiers (28:4a) and the women (28:5b). But their respective responses to this fear stand in stark contrast to each other.

For their part, the Roman soldiers are profoundly "shaken" (28:4a, DJW) by the appearance of this divine emissary (28:3a) and the "great earthshaking event" that accompanies his arrival at the tomb. And in their fear, these Roman soldiers—themselves the very tip of the Roman spear which

¹⁶⁹ Contra Luz (*Matthew* 21–28, 575), who concludes that the "brief reference" to the women at the cross "does not particularly emphasize" their presence vis-à-vis the absence of the male disciples, the very mention of the women *ipso facto* reminds Matthew's readers that Jesus' male followers are, by contrast, long gone (26:56b; 27:5b) and nowhere to be seen.

has conquered the world, created an empire, and now crucified Jesus—“become like dead men” (28:4b), losing all consciousness and, within Matthew’s persistently ironic rhetoric, resembling the very corpse that they once imagined that they were guarding.¹⁷⁰ And Luz notes:

For the guards...the external convulsion of the earthquake (σεισμός) is continued in their internal convulsion (ἐσεισθησαν). They fall to the ground and become “as dead men.” Thus for them the appearance of the angel becomes a death experience. Although they have seen the angel, they are aware of nothing of what is actually happening—of the message of the resurrection of Jesus.¹⁷¹

For the women, to the contrary, the appearance of the “angel of the Lord” and the “great earthshaking event” at the tomb become a life-giving experience on multiple fronts.¹⁷² To begin with, these women—in sharp contrast to the Roman soldiers—keep their eyes and their ears open in spite of their fear, so that they not only see the divine emissary and witness the “great earthshaking event”—as do the Roman soldiers (28:2–3; cf. 28:4)¹⁷³—but also hear the angel’s words that address them directly and respond to their fear: “Do not be afraid” (28:5b).¹⁷⁴ Accordingly, these otherwise powerless and terrified Jewish women, face to face with God’s own messenger, stand on their feet, alive, alert, and relieved of paralyzing fear,¹⁷⁵ even as their otherwise

¹⁷⁰ Cf. Long (*Matthew*, 322), who observes that “Matthew cannot resist a small joke at [the guards’] expense.... They are on cemetery detail, of course, to guard a dead man who was supposed to stay that way, but when their charge turns out to have become suddenly very much alive, it is they who become candidates for the grave.”

¹⁷¹ Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 596.

¹⁷² Note Luz’s observation (*Matthew 21–28*, 596), “Thus the resurrection of Jesus, although itself invisible and indescribable, leads people to experiences of God that are ambivalent in their effects. For the guards they are deadly; for the women they become, through the angel’s word, a source of joy.”

¹⁷³ Cf. Luz (*Matthew 21–28*, 589), who notes: “With the sealed tomb and with the intervention of the angel of which not only the women but also the unbelieving guards are witnesses, the resurrection comes close to being an unambiguous, unquestionable fact that no believer can deny—only a liar who knows better.”

¹⁷⁴ Cf. Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 596.

¹⁷⁵ Note Luz’s observation on 28:8a (*Matthew 21–28*, 598): “The angel has not been able to overcome their fear completely. Their fear is mixed with joy, however, and this joy is great.”

powerful counterparts, the Roman soldiers, lie prostrate on the ground in a fear-induced dead faint.¹⁷⁶

But not only are the women themselves alive, as they witness this divine emissary and listen to his words. Even more significantly, Jesus is alive. The angel first demonstrates this reality by “rolling back the stone” (28:2c) and “sitting on it” (28:2d), a pointed act of divine defiance, which first removes and then co-opts the elaborate “security” measures (27:64, 65, 66) set in place by the Jewish authorities (27:62) and reveals that the tomb is empty (cf. 28:6c). The angel then proclaims Jesus’ resurrection, verbally and triumphantly, to the women (28:5b–6): “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay.” Accordingly, the “seismic” event that deals a death-like blow to the Roman soldiers proclaims Resurrection life for Jesus, who “has been raised” from death by the power of God¹⁷⁷ and in the very face of the empire that crucified him.

The implications of this scene are both monumental and profoundly ironic, both for the women and for the powers of empire, embodied by the Roman soldiers now lying on the ground “like dead men.” Empire has definitively met its match and, as the “angel of the Lord” first demonstrates and then proclaims, has publicly and dramatically lost its battle with the power of God. In Carter’s blunt words, “God out-empires the empire.”¹⁷⁸ And, within Matthew’s persistently ironic storytelling, it is none other than the women at the tomb—powerless as they are not merely vis-à-vis ordinary men in their own patriarchal world but far more so vis-à-vis the military forces of empire itself—who both see and hear the “angel of the Lord” and witness, as Carter puts it, “God’s victory over Rome.”¹⁷⁹

But there is yet more vindication for these powerless women, all of it ironic, both at the now-empty tomb and on the road beyond. The first of these ironies brings the focus back again to the eleven remaining

¹⁷⁶ Cf. Carter’s words (*Margins*, 545), “In this place of resurrection, it is not Jesus but the empire’s guards who are **like dead men**. God’s power renders the empire and its fighting machine lifeless.”

¹⁷⁷ The angel’s passive verb, “has been raised,” is arguably the most potent of all divine passives within the New Testament, since it points to God as the undisputed actor in the foundational “good news” which both underlies and gives rise to the New Testament writings as a collective whole.

¹⁷⁸ Carter, *Margins*, 545.

¹⁷⁹ Carter, *Margins*, 545.

disciples of Jesus (cf. 27:5b). Because these disciples are notably absent from the tomb (28:1; cf. 26:56b, 75c), they do not witness the “angel of the Lord” and the “great earthshaking event.” So, they know nothing of the resurrection of Jesus. Accordingly, contrary to Jesus’ own prophetic predictions before his death (cf. 24:14; 26:13), these disciples have neither “good news” to “proclaim” nor the energy or impetus for “worldwide” outreach. They have only the exhaustion of their “flight” from the forces of empire (26:56b) and the “bitter tears” from their terrified perfidy in the courtyards of power (26:75c).

From Matthew’s storytelling perspective, this is an intolerable situation, one that, if left untended, will lead to an unthinkable narrative conclusion. The entire trajectory of Matthew’s narrative demands the reappearance of Jesus’ disciples (cf. 4:18–19; 22:1–10; 24:14; 26:13). These are the ones whom Jesus has “called” to “follow” him (4:21; 9:9; cf. 4:19–20) and to take up his own mission on behalf of the kingdom of heaven (10:1, 7; cf. 4:23//9:35//11:1) in a world that will ultimately reach far beyond the Jewish populace of Galilee (24:14; 26:13). And these disciples, who once “left everything” and followed [Jesus]” on the road to Jerusalem (19:27), have now “deserted” Jesus and “fled” in the face of empire and its brutal violence (26:56b). They have yet to learn that Jesus “has been raised” by God (28:6b), in an act which reverses the death sentences passed by the empire and its collaborators (27:26c; cf. 26:66b; 27:1) and breaks down the empire’s own “security” measures put in place at Jesus’ tomb.

And the only ones who can communicate this message to Jesus’ eleven dispirited disciples are the women. They alone know the full story. They have “observed” (27:55, DJW) Jesus’ crucifixion and death. They “were there, sitting opposite the tomb” (27:61), when Joseph of Arimathea buried Jesus’ body (27:57–60). They have now seen the “angel of the Lord” and witnessed the “great earthshaking event” that has happened at the tomb (28:1, DJW; cf. 28:2–3). They have heard the words of the angel proclaiming Jesus’ resurrection (28:5–6). They will shortly see the Risen Jesus himself (28:9–10). And through all of this, they have not flinched or fled in the face of empire; instead, they have stood their ground at the tomb, eyes and ears wide open, and have seen the forces of empire collapse “like dead men” (28:4b) vis-à-vis the power of God.

So, these women are the only ones who know fully and accurately what has happened at the tomb. As Witherington observes, “The importance of these women can hardly be overestimated, as they turned out

to be the prime witnesses of what was to become the heart of the Christian creed—the death, burial, empty tomb, and resurrection of Jesus.”¹⁸⁰ And so it is that the “angel of the Lord” commissions these women with an all-crucial task. Once they have seen the empty tomb (28:6c), they must “go quickly and tell his disciples” (28:7a) that Jesus “has been raised from the dead” (28:7b; cf. 28:6b) and that he “is going ahead of [them] to Galilee” (28:7c). And as they leave the tomb in haste to convey the angel’s message to the disciples (28:8), they meet the Risen Jesus himself (28: 9a). Jesus “greet[s]” the women (28:9b), receives their “worship” (28:9d; cf. 28:9c). and then commissions them, just as the angel has done, to “go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee” (28:10c) and “there they will see me” (28:10d).

Accordingly, these women, and not their male counterparts, are, within Matthew’s narrative, the first missionaries within the earliest community of Jesus’ followers.¹⁸¹ In Long’s words, “These two women are now the human link between the great event of God and the community of faith. They are the first ones sent by God with the good news ‘He is risen!’; they are the first apostles of the risen Christ.”¹⁸² And Matthew attributes them this honor, because they have responded faithfully in the face of empire precisely where their male colleagues have not done so.

But there is still more irony here, and more vindication for the women. Not only are these women Jesus’ first missionaries, proclaiming his resurrection to his chosen twelve, the male disciples. They are also the first of Jesus’ followers to “worship” the Risen Jesus.¹⁸³ When Jesus “meets” and “greet[s]” them (28:9a/b). they respond by “coming to him” (28:9c), “taking hold of his feet” (28:9d, and “worshiping him” (28:9e). These are crucial acts of “veneration”¹⁸⁴ that clearly reflect the honor

¹⁸⁰ Witherington, *Matthew*, 524. Cf. Carter, *Margins*, 539; Hare, *Matthew*, 324–25, 326, 331.

¹⁸¹ Contra Luz (*Matthew 21–28*)—who concludes (597) that the women’s mission is “only a limited mission to the disciples” and (607) that “the appearance of Jesus to the two women is hardly important in itself; it serves to prepare for the concluding scene in 28:16–20”—the women’s mission is in fact “indispensable to the narrative” (thus Pregeant, *Matthew*, 199), since without the women’s message to the male disciples, there can be no mountaintop scene in 28:16–17 and no worldwide commission for Jesus’ disciples (28:18–20).

¹⁸² Long, *Matthew*, 323.

¹⁸³ Cf. Keener, *Gospel 702–3*; Pregeant, *Matthew* 193, 199; Witherington, *Matthew*, 528.

¹⁸⁴ As Luz notes (*Matthew 21–28*, 607), “Holding the feet is, as obvious from the context, an act of veneration.... ‘Paying homage/worshiping’ is the behavior that is fitting and proper toward the risen Christ.”

accorded to royalty.¹⁸⁵ As Witherington notes, “[Worship] is the normal gesture when one expresses submission and homage to a king. King Jesus then is treated as royalty here.”¹⁸⁶

And with this act of worship, the women thus enact with their bodies their allegiance to the Risen Jesus in the very face of empire and its failed sentence of death (27:26c; cf. 26:66b; 27:1) and over against the allegiance claimed by “the emperor” himself (cf. 22:15–22). The women, as the first worshipers of the Risen Jesus, have therefore set forth a bold and politically potent model for Jesus’ eleven male disciples¹⁸⁷ and for all disciples to come, whether male or female: Worship belongs to the Risen Jesus (whom God has “raised from the dead” [28:6b, 7b; cf. 16:21; 17:23; 20:19]) and not to the emperor (whose imperial forces lie on the ground, temporarily collapsed “like dead men” [28:4b]).

But there is one final irony that Matthew leaves with his readers regarding the women at the tomb and beyond, an irony that lives on into the present day of Matthew’s readers (“to this day”: 28:15c). The story of the women and the guards is ultimately and most importantly a story of “message vs. message” and “truth vs. falsehood.”¹⁸⁸ Accordingly, these messages oppose each other, crucially and diametrically. For the women, it is the message that Jesus “has been raised from the dead” (28:7b) which they must, and in fact do, convey effectively to Jesus’ eleven disciples (28:11a; cf. 28:16). For the imperial guards—who report back to the chief priests and “tell [them] everything that [has] happened” (28:11c)—the message is that “[Jesus] disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep” (28:13).

The rhetorical contrast between these messages is unmistakable.¹⁸⁹ The falsehood of the message given to the guards finds strong confirmation not only in the message itself but also in the manner of its delivery

¹⁸⁵ Cf. 2:1–12, where the “wise men from the East” (2:1) come to Jerusalem to find “the child who has been born the king of the Jews” (2:2a) and to “worship him” (2:2b; cf. 2:8d, 11c). See Keener, *Gospel*, 702–3.

¹⁸⁶ Witherington, *Matthew*, 528.

¹⁸⁷ Cf. 28:16–17, where the eleven disciples “see” Jesus on the mountain and “worship” him, even as they “doubt.”

¹⁸⁸ Cf. Levine, “Matthew,” 262. On this mode of storytelling, see 2:1–23, which is, in similar rhetorical fashion, an account of “king vs. king,” namely “King Herod” (2:1b) and “the child who has been born king of the Jews” (2:2a).

¹⁸⁹ As Keener notes (*Gospel*, 699), “Matthew lays these two reports, the true and the false, side by side, forcing his audience to declare their choice.”

to the guards. On the one hand, the guards would never have known that the disciples came and stole Jesus' body, if in fact they were sleeping at the time. And on the other hand, there would be no need for the chief priests and the elders to hatch an elaborate plot and to bribe the soldiers richly ("[devise] a plan to give a large sum of money to the soldiers" (28:12), if they were simply instructing the soldiers to tell the truth. The falsehood given to the soldiers is, in fact, so dangerous for them to report that the Jewish authorities promise to "satisfy the governor" (28:14b) and to keep the guards themselves "free from worry" (28:14c, DJW), if the story of their inexcusable negligence on the job ever reaches the governor himself (28:14a).

In short, Matthew offers his readers every reason to believe that the message given to the guards is a false message. And the guards themselves are likewise clearly aware of this falsehood and the life-threatening danger associated with its propagation. Nevertheless, the guards take the bribe (28:15a) and comply with the command (28:15b). As Long observes, the guards "leave the tomb...to become embroiled in a mission of lies."¹⁹⁰

And their lies—spoken by male figures of imperial authority in an androcentric and hierarchical world—are clearly effective.¹⁹¹ Matthew reports—stepping outside the temporal confines of his narrative to do so—that this false story is still circulating within the Jewish community of his own day (28:15c), some fifty years or more beyond the story that he recounts. Accordingly, the message of the guards—namely, the big lie created by imperial collaborators and disseminated initially by the forces of empire itself—still represents a potent and dangerous reality within Matthew's own world. Imperial lies have power.

But within Matthew's narrative, God's power is far greater than that of empire. And the big lie—created and disseminated by imperial collaborators and the forces of empire itself, all of them male (28:11–15)—does not have the last word. In fact, Jesus "has been raised from the dead" (28:7b), just as the angel of the Lord has proclaimed to the women at the tomb (28:7b) and just as the Risen Jesus himself confirms, as he appears first to the women (28:8–10) and then to Jesus' male disciples (28:16–20).

NOT TO BE USED WITHOUT COPYRIGHT PERMISSION
OF ASBURY THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

¹⁹⁰ Long, *Matthew*, 324.

¹⁹¹ As Keener notes (*Gospel*, 699), "[T]he guards' report that the disciples had stolen the body (28:11–15) might command much greater respect [than the message of the women]."

So, in this story of “message vs. message” and “truth vs. falsehood,” it is the women’s voice, even though unheard within Matthew’s narrative, which conveys the ultimate truth of Matthew’s Gospel, the news of Jesus’ resurrection (28:7b; cf. 28:10, 16–17). By the same token, it is the women’s voice which crucially undercuts the false message of the Roman guards in Jerusalem. Finally, it is the women’s voice which proclaims the ultimate failure of empire itself to achieve its signal imperial goals and to destroy its visible imperial threats. As Witherington notes, “The world order is being overturned, from the highest political power to the deepest cultural patterns, and it begins within the new community” and, in specific, among “these women, the ‘last’ become ‘first,’ who [are] entrusted with the resurrection message”¹⁹² and who thereby proclaim in effect the ultimate downfall of empire and its cosmic power over humankind. And such is Matthew’s vindication of the women present at Jesus’ cross and Jesus’ tomb.

Conclusion—Women and Empire: Assessing Matthew’s Narrative Rhetoric

To observe Matthew’s portraits of the women in his narrative who are identifiably associated with empire is to discover yet another thread of the fundamental irony which weaves its way through Matthew’s narrative.¹⁹³ This irony is visible, on the one hand, in Matthew’s depictions of the women *of* empire, women closely associated with the Roman-affiliated kings and governors of Matthew’s narrative and women who wield their own imperial power both by means of and vis-à-vis their male compatriots. This irony is likewise visible in Matthew’s depictions of the women *subject to* empire, powerless women whose lives, families, and networks of relationships are threatened, endangered, and at times even destroyed by the powers of empire. And Matthew’s narrative rhetoric vis-à-vis women and empire surprises his readers on all fronts.

Arguably the most visible irony concerning women and their relationship to empire within Matthew’s narrative—composed as it is within a fundamentally patriarchal world and by a Jewish scholar/“scribe” (13:52) who reflects just such a patriarchal world view—is the prominent presence of women within scenes focused on

¹⁹² Witherington, *Matthew*, 524.

¹⁹³ Thus, for example, Weaver, *Irony*; Inhee C. Berg, *Irony in the Matthean Passion Narrative* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014).

the use of imperial power. Women are prominent within the scenes of Jesus' birth and the associated threat to the life of Jesus by the powers of empire. Women are prominent within the story of John the Baptist, a prophet who publicly challenges empire, and his ultimate demise at the command of imperial power. A singular and voiceless woman is prominent within a scene where Jesus points forward toward his upcoming death (at the hands of empire [20:17–19; cf. 16:21; 17:22–23]). And women are not merely present but ultimately prominent in the scenes of Jesus' trial, crucifixion, burial, and resurrection.¹⁹⁴ As Pregeant notes, without naming irony as a crucial factor, “Women have played unexpectedly important roles at several points in the narrative.... [T]hese passages constitute a significant undercurrent that resists the patriarchal framework of the narrative and cries out for recognition.”¹⁹⁵

Further, women are not merely physically present within the crucial imperial scenes of Matthew's narrative. Instead, these women themselves negotiate empire in active ways, whether for good or for ill, and put their own imprint on the imperial world within which they live. For the women of empire, the picture is clear on multiple fronts.

First, imperial women, even within the male-dominated world of Matthew's first-century narrative, have genuine power to wield vis-à-vis the geopolitics of the day. Even as they function via channels to engage their respective powers of empire, they themselves are crucial actors in the geopolitical world. Their actions have awesome potential vis-à-vis human lives. And their female power is sometimes greater than the male powers of empire itself.

Further, imperial women have ethical decisions to make vis-à-vis their use of power. They can take actions in line with human instincts and personal vendettas. Or they can take actions that accord with divine righteousness and those who live as righteous people. They can take initiatives designed to save human life or destroy it. They can do evil, or they can do good.

In addition, extenuating circumstances clearly do not relieve imperial women of responsibility for the words they speak or the actions

¹⁹⁴ Cf. the reflections of Levine (“Matthew,” 262), who does not, however, focus on the motif of “empire”: “Just as women mediate both a man's entry into this world by giving birth and, in many traditions, his exit by participating in funerary rites, women frame the life of Jesus: they are present in his genealogy and the story of his birth, and they are the primary witnesses to his death and resurrection.”

¹⁹⁵ Pregeant, *Matthew*, 199–200.

they take. Neither age nor resulting vulnerability excuses even a daughter and a young girl for her words and her actions and their real-world consequences.

Ultimately, imperial women, just as the male powers of empire, from whom they derive their own female authority and of whom they make their demands, are accountable for their actions by the divine court of last appeal, that “court” associated with the values of the kingdom of heaven as set forth in Matthew’s narrative, “righteousness” central among them. And within Matthew’s quintessentially ironic *modus operandi*, the verdicts of this divine “court” turn the apparent realities of success and failure in the real-world upside down. Those imperial women who succeed with their evil efforts receive strong condemnation in the court of last appeal, while those who fail at their righteous efforts receive major approbation and may even be counted among Jesus’ non-classified female disciples.

For those powerless women of Matthew’s narrative who are identifiably *subject to* empire, the picture is equally clear. While they cannot protect themselves or others from the enormous and death-dealing violence of the forces of empire, Matthew persistently vindicates these women in multifold and deeply ironic fashion vis-à-vis their imperial overlords.

Matthew points backward within biblical history to associate these women with significant and positive biblical figures of the past—the faithful Hebrew community in Egypt and Rachel, known as the mother of the Jewish people—even as he portrays their imperial overlords of the present (Herod) as well-known biblical villains of the past (Pharaoh). And Matthew points forward within his narrative to associate these women with Mary, the mother of Jesus, and to link these women and their children to Jesus himself, even as he alludes to imperial evil of the past (Pharaoh and David) and vividly depicts the imperial evil of the present (Herod).

Matthew portrays these non-imperial women as those whose plight vis-à-vis empire moves God and/or God’s agents to take urgent action on their behalf and to “cut short” their time of “great suffering” (24:15–22). Matthew’s Jesus honors these women, over against his male disciples, as those who do “good deeds” in a moment fraught with imperial tension (26:10c), those who “prepare [Jesus] for burial” following his execution by the powers of empire (26:12), and those who will receive “worldwide” recognition for their faithful deeds vis-à-vis empire (cf. 26:13). Just as crucially, Matthew depicts these

powerless women as those who speak undeniable and life-giving truth to their hearers vis-à-vis the intentional falsehoods and long-perpetuated lies propagated by the powers of empire.

In the end Matthew's portrayal of these powerless, non-imperial women subverts the powers of empire altogether in a profoundly ironic rhetorical gesture, as the women at the tomb discover the resurrection of Jesus on their feet and with full sight and hearing, even as the Roman guards at Jesus' tomb lie prostrate in a dead faint. And such is Matthew's vindication of the powerless, non-imperial women of his narrative who engage with the powers of empire.

Ultimately, as Matthew demonstrates persistently and vividly through his narrative rhetoric, women play a crucial role in engaging the (male) powers of empire, whether the women *of* empire themselves or the women *subject to* empire. But arguably the most profound irony vis-à-vis women and empire, within Matthew's male-oriented and patriarchally grounded narrative, is that powerless women—those who have no means to protect themselves or those they love from the massive brutality of imperial violence—are the very people within Matthew's narrative whose words and actions effectively mock, shame, and ultimately subvert the overwhelming male power of empire arrayed against them. Within the divine irony of Matthew's narrative, the "last" have truly become "first" (21:16a//19:30b) and the "first" have become "last" (19:30a//21:16b).¹⁹⁶ And this, as Matthew's narrative rhetoric boldly proclaims, is the "God's-eye" view of empire. Let all Matthew's readers understand.



NOT TO BE USED WITHOUT COPYRIGHT PERMISSION
OF ASBURY THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

¹⁹⁶ Cf. Witherington, *Matthew*, 524.