Inheriting the Earth: Towards a Geotechnology of Matthew’s Narrative
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Abstract: The claim of the Matthean Jesus that “the meek . . . will inherit the earth” (5:5) is unique to the Canonical Gospels and a claim that reflects Psalm 36:11 (LXX). This essay examines Matt 5:5 alongside this biblical intertext and within its wider Matthean context to assess its significance within Matthew’s overall narrative. While ultimately “inheritance of the earth” awaits “the renewal of all things” (19:27), the Risen Jesus with “all authority in heaven and on earth” (28:18) calls his disciples to a worldwide mission to “all the nations” (28:19-20) that constitutes proleptically an “inheritance of the earth.”

Keywords: inherit/inheritance, earth, world/worldwide, disciples, cosmic, mission

INTRODUCTION

To read the Gospel of Matthew as a narrative located in the real world and planted in the real soil of 1st-century Palestine is to encounter a striking geotechnology claim unique within the Canonical Gospels. Jesus opens his ministry with an inaugural address, the Sermon on the Mount (5:1-7:29), in which he establishes the character of “the kingdom of heaven” (5:3, 10, 19, 20; 7:21; 10:7; cf. 6:10, 33) that has “come near” (3:2; 4:17; 10:7) in his ministry of “teaching . . ., proclaiming . . ., and healing” (4:23; cf. 9:35; 11:1). Jesus begins this sermon, addressed to his disciples (5:1b-2) and overheard by the crowds (5:1a; 7:28-29), with a series of beatitudes (5:3-12), blessings pronounced on those whose character, actions, or personal circumstances align them with the salvific purposes of God, who will accordingly take action on their behalf.

Within this series of beatitudes is one (5:5) which surely leaves both Jesus’ disciples and Matthew’s first readers in amazement: “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” While they surely recognize this saying as an almost-verbatim citation from their Jewish scriptures (“But the meek will inherit the land,” Ps 36:11 (LXX; Ps 37:11, MT)), they know from historical awareness and daily experience that it is not “the meek” but rather Rome, with its massive empire and its brutal functionaries, who rules the “earth” that they inhabit.

For Jesus’ disciples Rome’s hegemony includes the violent history of Herod, the half-Jewish client king serving the Romans, who massacred all the young children in Bethlehem (2:1-23) to exterminate his single rival, “the child . . . born king of the Jews” (2:2). For Jesus’ disciples Rome’s hegemony also includes the actions and/or reputations of Herod’s sons: Archelaus, who rules Judea “in place of his father” and thereby strikes fear into simple peasants (2:22); and Herod the tetrarch, who rules Galilee and who has recently arrested John the Baptist (cf. 4:12) and will shortly execute him (14:1-12). Jesus’ disciples likewise know the persistent humiliations of everyday life under Roman occupation. There are “taxes” levied by the emperor (17: 25; 22:17, 19; cf. 17:24, 25) and paid to Jewish “tax collectors”

1. All biblical references refer to Matthew’s Gospel unless otherwise identified.
2. On the debate over whether these “blessings” should be viewed as “reversals” or as "rewards" see Mark Allan Powell, “Matthew’s Beatitudes: Reversals and Rewards of the Kingdom,” CBQ 58 (1996): 460-79.
3. All biblical citations in English, except for those from Psalm 36 (LXX), are taken from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise indicated. All English citations from Psalm 36 (LXX) are my own, designated DJW.
Equally galling is the physical labor exacted by Roman soldiers, who have authority to “force” or “compel” hapless Jews to carry military gear or other burdens for one mile (5:41; 27:32). Most ominous of all, there is the threat of execution for any who denounce the Roman authorities (14:1-12; 17:9-13) or otherwise challenge the empire (2:1-23; 27:1-2, 11-37).

For Matthew’s first readers, however, in late 1st-century Palestine (ca. 85 CE), the recent destruction of Jerusalem (70 CE) is central to Rome’s hegemony. Within living memory Roman forces have “burned their [holy] city” (22:7; cf. 4:5; 27:53) and demolished their temple so completely that “not one stone [is] left . . . upon another” (24:2), “all [is] thrown down” (24:2), and the “house” of the Jewish people is “left to [them] desolate” (24:38). Roman soldiers have likewise “destroyed” the populace of Jerusalem (22:7) and put their leaders to “a miserable death” (21:41). Such is the power, reach, and brutality of Roman empire for Matthew’s first readers.

There is thus no question within Matthew’s narrative about Rome’s hegemony in the 1st-century world. Accordingly, an urgent question emerges for Jesus’ disciples, Matthew’s first readers, and all subsequent readers: What does the Matthean Jesus mean with his claim that “the meek . . . will inherit the earth” (5:5)? And the sub-questions multiply. Who are these “meek”? What “earth” will they “inherit”? When and how will they gain this “inheritance”? What will this “inheritance” look like? And what do Jesus’ words portend for the future of Rome and all successive world empires?

The task of this essay is to examine the biblical intertext of Matthew 5:5, namely Psalm 36 (LXX) (Psalm 37, MT), and the immediate and wider Matthean contexts of this verse to discover narrative clues to Matthew’s understanding of this beatitude. Part one examines Psalm 36 (LXX) to assess the narrative rhetoric of this psalm as the theological basis for Jesus’ saying. Part two examines Matt 1:1-4:25, to identify the narrative backdrop to 5:5. Part three examines the framework and language of the beatitudes themselves (5:1-12) within their sermonic context (5:1-7.29), to identify structural and linguistic clues to the significance of 5:5. Part four examines 8:1-28:20 to follow Matthew’s thematic of “inheritance” to its conclusions and to assess Matthew’s narrative rhetoric vis-à-vis “inheriting the earth.”

I. INHERITANCE OF THE LAND IN PSALM 36 (LXX)

When the Matthean Jesus pronounces a blessing on “the meek” who will “inherit the earth” (5:5), he is, as his own listeners and Matthew’s first readers clearly recognize, citing a well-known Jewish Scripture. Matthew 5:5, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth,” reflects a near-verbatim citation of Psalm 36:11, LXX, “But the meek will inherit the land,” and a clear allusion to the wider text of Psalm 36 (LXX) with its five additional references to “dwelling in” (κατασκηνόω: 36:3) or “inheriting” (κληρονομέω: 36:9, 22, 29; κατακληρονομέω: 36:34) the “land” (τὴν γῆν: 36:3; γῆν: 36:9, 11, 22, 29, 34). Accordingly, the place to begin this study is with examination of Psalm 36 (LXX) and analysis of its narrative rhetoric.

Psalm 36 (LXX) derives from an “alphabetical acrostic” psalm in Hebrew. The thematic of this psalm focuses on the contrast between God’s faithful people and the evil ones. As Robert Alter notes, “This is emphatically a Wisdom psalm, expressing in a variety of more or less formulaic ways the idea that the wicked, however they may seem to prosper, will get their just deserts and the righteous will be duly rewarded.”

The Psalmist here depicts God’s faithful people with a wide range of correlated terms. They are those “who wait on the Lord” (36:9), the “meek” (36:11), the “poor and destitute” (36:14), the “upright in heart” (36:14), the “blameless” (36:18), those “who bless him [= the Lord]” (36:22), the “holy ones” (36:28), and the “peaceful [people]” (36:37). But most prominently they are the “righteous” one(s) (36:12, 16, 17, 21, 25, 29, 30, 32, 39) and his/their “seed” (36:25, 26).

Arrayed against God’s righteous ones are those who oppose God and God’s people. The psalmist depicts these antagonists in parallel but contrasting fashion to the righteous. These are the ones who “do evil” (36:1, 9, cf. 8), those who “practice lawlessness” (36:1) and the “unlawful” (36:28), those who “prosper in [their] way” (36:7), those who “carry out transgressions” (36:7) and the “transgressors” (36:38), the “enemies of

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4. Μακάριοι οἱ πραεῖς, ὅτι αὐτοὶ κληρονομήσουσιν τὴν γῆν.
5. Οἱ δὲ πραεῖς κληρονομήσουσιν γῆν.
7. Ibid.
8. But note that Psalm 37:22 (MT) speaks of the action of God and not of humans: “those blessed by the LORD” (NRSV, emphasis mine).
the Lord” (36:20), those who “curse him [= the Lord]” (36:22)⁹, and the “impious” (36:35) and their “seed” (36:28) or “remnants” (36:38). But most prominently they are the “sinner(s)” (36:10, 12, 14, 16, 17, 20, 21, 32, 34, 40).

The drama of this psalm lies in the hubris of the sinners and the threat which they pose to the righteous. As those who “prosper in [their] way” (36:7), the sinners have “great wealth” (36:16) compared to the “little” (36:16) of the righteous. Accordingly, they “glorify and exalt themselves” (36:20; cf. 36:35) and “raise themselves up like the cedars of Lebanon” (36:35). They are careless with others’ resources, “borrowing” from others, but “not paying back” what they owe (36:21). And their evil extends to even more threatening actions. They “watch the righteous” (36:12) with sinister intent and “gnash their teeth against them” (36:12). They “observe the righteous intently” (36:32) and “seek to kill them” (36:32). They “judge” the righteous (36:33). And they “draw the sword” (36:14a) and “bend their bow” (36:14b) to “throw down the poor and destitute” (36:14c) and to “kill the upright in heart by violence” (36:14d). Faced with such self-aggrandizing and violent antagonists, the righteous have understandable cause for alarm.

The psalmist, however, counsels the righteous away from all alarmist responses and calls them instead to a life of goodness, compassion, and steadfast trust in the Lord. Negatively phrased this is a call to “not be provoked to anger/ jealousy” (36:1, 7, 8) and “not be driven to zealous action” (36:1), but rather to “cease from anger” (36:8), to “refrain from wrath” (36:8), and to “turn away from evil” (36:27; cf. 36:8). Positively phrased the call is to “practice kindness” (36:3), “have compassion” (36:21), “give” or “loan” to the needy (36:21; 36:26), “do acts of mercy” (36:26), “be a blessing” to others (36:26), “do good” (36:27), “communicate wisdom” (36:30a), “speak justice” (36:30b), “maintain innocence” (36:37), and “observe uprightness” (36:37). Most crucial, however, to the lifestyle of the righteous is persistent God-directedness. The psalmist calls the righteous to “trust in the Lord” (36:3; 5, 40), “delight in the Lord” (36:4), “reveal [their] way to the Lord” (36:5), “submit [themselves] to the Lord” (36:7), “pray earnestly to the Lord” (36:7), live with “the law of [their] God in [their] heart[s]” (36:31), “wait for the Lord” (36:34; cf. 36:9), and “keep [the Lord’s] way” (36:34).

And while the sinners appear to present a life-threatening challenge to the righteous, equipped as they are with wealth at their disposal, evil in their hearts, and weapons in their hands, their actual power to effect their evil designs is far more ephemeral and far less potent than they or their counterparts imagine. They may threaten and intimidate, but the Lord gets the last laugh (36:13; cf. Ps 2:4): “But the Lord laughs at them, because the Lord foresees that their day is coming.” And the psalmist then spells out the disaster awaiting these sinners. Without naming specific causes the psalmist announces that they will “wither quickly like grass” (36:2a), “fall away quickly like green plants” (36:2b), “perish” (36:20a), and “disappear like smoke” (36:20b). The psalmist names his own fervent desire that “their sword might enter their own heart” (36:15a) and that “their bows might break in pieces” (36:15b). And in passive phraseology, which clearly points to divine initiative, the psalmist declares that “the arms [of these sinners] will be broken” (36:17), that they “will be driven out” (36:28), and that they “will be utterly destroyed” (36:9, 22, 28, 34, 38a, 38b). In the near future (“in a little while”, 36:10) the sinners will be gone. They will “no longer be in existence” (36:10a; cf. 36:36a) and “their place will not be found” (36:36b), even if one “searches” for it (36:10b; cf. 36:36b). Such is for the psalmist the sure but unthinkable fate of the sinners.

For the righteous, however, there is ultimate blessing, as God acts in power and compassion on their behalf. The Lord will “give [to the righteous] the desires of their heart” (36:4), “accomplish” that which they “reveal” and “entrust” to him (36:5), and “bring forth” their “justice” and “judgment” (36:6). The Lord will provide “an abundance of peace” (36:11) for the righteous and “keep them from shame in the time of evil” (cf. 36:19a), “fill them with food in the days of famine” (cf. 36:19b), and “never leave their children seeking bread” (cf. 36:25b). The Lord “supports the righteous” (36:17) vis-à-vis their adversaries and “supports their hands” (36:24) even when they fall. The Lord “knows the way of the blameless” (36:18), “keeps their footsteps straight” (36:23), and ensures that “their footsteps will not be moved” (36:31). Within the Psalmist’s lifetime the Lord “has not abandoned the righteous” (cf. 36:25), and the Lord “will never abandon them into the hands of the sinners” (36:33; cf. 36:28) nor “condemn them when they are judged” (36:33). Instead the Lord will provide “the faithful ones ‘forever’” (cf. 36:28), be “their defense in the time of tribulation” (cf. 36:39b), “help them” (36:40a), “deliver them” (36:40b), “rescue them from sinners” (36:40c), and “save them” (36:40d; cf. 36:39a). But God’s care for the righteous shows up most prominently in
references to “the land” (ἡ γῆ: 36:3, 9, 11, 22, 29, 34), which God’s people will “dwell in” (κατασκηνώ: 36:3) or “inherit” (κληρονομέω: 36:9, 11, 22, 29; κατακληρονομέω: 36:34). This tangible, earth-bound theme, “inheritance of the land,” runs like a vivid thread throughout the text of Psalm 36 (LXX) and brings into ever-recurring focus the manner in which God will “save” God’s people (36:39a) and resolve the conflict between the righteous and the sinners. This theme is tightly bound into the two-handed rhetoric of the psalm itself, since each reference to “inheritance of the land” stands in direct contrast to the fate of the sinners.11 Accordingly, “inheritance of the land” is the central motif by which the psalmist expresses his theology here.

The outlines of this land-formulated theology are clear. First and fundamentally, the “land” belongs to God and is therefore God’s to give as “inheritance.” Just as it is God who works “the salvation of the righteous” (36:39) throughout this psalm, so it is likewise God who grants the righteous “inheritance of the land” (36:34, emphasis mine): “Wait on the Lord and keep his way; and [the Lord] will exalt you to inherit the land [καὶ υψώσει σε τοῦ κατακληρονομῆσαι γῆν].” Further, “inheriting the land” is a matter of profound ethical import for the Hebrew community, since it is precisely God-focused actions and God-focused lives which result in this inheritance. It is those who “trust in the Lord” (36:3), “wait on the Lord” (36:9, 34), “bless [the Lord]”12 (36:22), and “keep [the Lord’s] way” (36:34) who will “dwell in” the land (κατασκηνώ: 36:3) or “inherit” it (κληρονομέω: 36:9, 11, 22, 29; κατακληρονομέω: 36:34). And while the references to “the meek” (36:11) and “the righteous” (36:29) do not mention God, the rhetorical context of the psalm clearly establishes that they live similarly God-focused lives.

By contrast the sinners are not only, both by definition and by rhetorical function, excluded from “inheritance of the land”; but in the psalmist’s ironic rhetoric these sinners will soon lose both their “place” (36:10, 36) and their very “existence” (cf. 36:10, 36) in the land which had once been theirs (36:10; cf. 36:36): “In a little while the sinners will no longer exist. You will seek their place, but you will not find it.” Instead once been theirs (36:10; cf. 36:36): “In a little while the sinners will no

There is need, however, for the righteous to exercise patience. God’s people will “dwell in” (“κατασκήνω”) and “inherit” (“κληρονομέω”) the land, but only after God acts. With the exception of 36:3, where the psalmist’s present-tense imperative (κατασκήνων) commands God’s faithful to “dwell [and keep on dwelling] in the land,” all language of “inheritance” lies in a future timeframe for action clearly lies in the future. In the present moment of the psalmist the sinners are still in their ascendancy. Otherwise the psalmist would have no need to decry them or offer courage to those whom they threaten. As the psalmist speaks, the sinners still make grandiose claims (cf. 36:20) and flex their military muscles (cf. 36:12, 14, 32), while God “laughs” at their pretensions and their threats (36:13; cf. Ps. 2:4). Now is the time to “wait for the Lord” (36:9, 34), to “trust in the Lord” (36:3, 5, 40) and to await God’s deliverance.

And deliverance will surely come. “In a little while” (36:10) and precisely as “the enemies of the Lord glorify and exalt themselves” (36:20), God will act. With the exception of 36:3, where the psalmist’s present-tense imperative (κατασκήνων) commands God’s faithful to “dwell [and keep on dwelling] in the land,” all language of “inheritance” lies in future tense verbs (κληρονομήσουσιν: 36:9, 11, 22, 29; υψόσει...τοῦ κατακληρονομησια: 36:34): God will exalt God’s faithful and they will inherit the land in a future time of God’s own decision.

When this happens, it will be a permanent gift to God’s people. As the psalmist reiterates, God’s people will inherit and dwell in the land “forever” (36:18, 27, 29) and there God will protect them “forever” (36:28). In this “forever” world of the future God’s faithful “will be shepherded [by God] on the bounty [of the land which they have inherited]” (36:3) and “will enjoy an abundance of peace” (36:11). Such is the ultimate outcome of God’s laughter. Such is the life-sustaining faith of the psalmist. And such is the theological backdrop to Jesus’ beatitude concerning “the meek” (Matt 5:5).

II. GEOGRAPHY AND THE NARRATIVE

RHETORIC OF MATTHEW 1:1-4:25

If Matthew’s Jesus evokes Psalm 36 (LXX) with his claim concerning “the meek” (5:5), Matthew’s wider narrative likewise reflects the rhetoric of Psalm 36 (LXX) with its sharp conflict between the righteous and the sinners, its focus on land as a prominent medium for God’s salvific actions, and its ironic narrative logic which turns apparent destinies on their heads by the will and through the power of God.13 Matthew introduces this narrative rhetoric in 1:1-4:25. And the fundamental irony underlying Matthew’s narrative, see my essay, “Power and Powerlessness; Matthew’s Use of Irony in the Portrayal of Political Leaders,” in Treasures New and Old: Contributions to Matthean Studies (ed. David R. Bauer and Mark Allan Powell; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), 179-96.

11. Thus, 36:1-2/3, 9a/9b, 10/11, 22a/22b, 28b/29, 34a/34b.
12. But see fn.8 above.
emphasis on two opposing character groups, the “righteous”\textsuperscript{14} and their “evil” counterparts,\textsuperscript{15} comes into focus early in the story. In 1:19 Matthew identifies Joseph as “a righteous man,” as he ponders his response to the apparent unfaithfulness of his fiancée Mary and seeks to shield her from public shame. And after the birth of Mary’s child, the one “born king of the Jews” (2:2), Matthew identifies Joseph’s evil counterpart as he depicts King Herod (2:1-23), whose singular goal is to “search for the child, to destroy him” (2:13; cf. 2:20). From this angle the drama of chapter two unfolds as King Herod and Joseph take respective and opposing actions vis-à-vis “the child” (2:8, 13, 14, 16, 20, 21).

From an alternative perspective chapter two unfolds as the story of “worship vs. worship.” Here “magi from the East” (2:1, DJW) appear in Jerusalem, announcing that they have “come to worship” the infant Jewish king (2:2). In response King Herod, whose paranoia is immense, whose cunning is great, and whose true intentions are murderous (2:3-8, 13, 16-17, 20), informs the magi of his own plans to “worship” the child and inveigles them into his sinister plot (2:8). The magi depart for Bethlehem (2:9a), just as Herod has instructed (2:8). And a dangerous drama unfolds between Herod, who knows his true intentions, and the unsuspecting magi, who do not.

In chapter three the conflict shifts to the wilderness of Judea (3:1) and the Jordan River (3:5, 6), where John the Baptist is engaged in a ministry of proclamation and baptism (3:1-12). When Jesus shows up for baptism, John is about to refuse him (3:14) until Jesus announces (3:15; emphasis mine), “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” But when Pharisees and Sadducees appear (3:7a), Jesus denounces them as a “brood of vipers (3:7b). And from here on the ministry of proclamation and baptism (3:1-12. When Jesus shows up for baptism, John is about to refuse him (3:14) until Jesus announces (3:15; emphasis mine), “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” But when Pharisees and Sadducees appear (3:7a), John denounces them as a “brood of vipers (3:7b). And from here on the ministry of proclamation and baptism (3:1-12). Matthew’s narrative rhetoric, like that of the psalmist, clearly focuses on the conflict between the righteous ones and the evil ones. But the parallels go still further. In Matthew’s narrative, as in Psalm 36 (LXX) “land” (γῆ), 2:6, 20, 21; 4:15) and matters of geography play a prominent role within the unfolding story. The geographical footprint of 1:1-4:25 ranges widely across the 1st-century world. Before Jesus proclaims that “the meek . . . will inherit the earth” (5:5), Matthew’s characters have already engaged in journeys of all types and distances across that “earth.” Within “the land of Israel” (γῆν Ἰσραήλ: 2:20, 21; cf. 2:6) there is extensive travel throughout both Galilee (3:13; 4:12-15, 18, 23, 25) and Judea (2:1, 5, 6a, 6b, 22, 3:1, 5; 4:25; cf. 2:2). Action unfolds in cities, towns, and villages: Jerusalem (2-1, 3, 3:5; 5:25; cf. “the holy city”: 4:6), Bethlehem of Judea (2:1, 5, 6, 8, 16), and Ramah (2:18)\textsuperscript{21} in the Judean south; Nazareth (2:23; 4:13) and Capernaum (4:13) in the Galilean north. Action likewise

14. θυσί σώματος, Matthew’s prominent term for designating “evil” individuals or groups or for depicting their thoughts or actions (5:37; 6:13, 19, 25; 23:24; 26:29). Matthew’s prominent term for “righteous” individuals or groups or for depicting their thoughts or actions (5:37; 6:13, 19, 25; 23:24; 26:29).

15. θυσί σώματος, Matthew’s prominent term for designating “evil” individuals or groups or for depicting their thoughts or actions (5:37; 6:13, 19, 25; 23:24; 26:29).

16. θυσί σώματος, Matthew’s prominent term for designating “evil” individuals or groups or for depicting their thoughts or actions (5:37; 6:13, 19, 25; 23:24; 26:29).

17. θυσί σώματος, Matthew’s prominent term for designating “evil” individuals or groups or for depicting their thoughts or actions (5:37; 6:13, 19, 25; 23:24; 26:29).

18. θυσί σώματος, Matthew’s prominent term for designating “evil” individuals or groups or for depicting their thoughts or actions (5:37; 6:13, 19, 25; 23:24; 26:29).

19. θυσί σώματος, Matthew’s prominent term for designating “evil” individuals or groups or for depicting their thoughts or actions (5:37; 6:13, 19, 25; 23:24; 26:29).

20. θυσί σώματος, Matthew’s prominent term for designating “evil” individuals or groups or for depicting their thoughts or actions (5:37; 6:13, 19, 25; 23:24; 26:29).

21. Ulrich Luz notes that the Ramah of Matthew’s citation (Jer 31:15) the “village north of Jerusalem” (Matthew 1-7: A Commentary [trans. Wilhelm C. Lane; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989], 143-44).
unfolds in the wilderness of Judea (3:1, 3; 4:1), at the Jordan River (3:6, 13; cf. 3:16) and “all the region along the Jordan” (3:5), by the Sea of Galilee (4:18; cf. 4:13, 15),22 and on a “very high mountain” (4:8). There are cross-border and long-distance journeys to and from far-flung corners of the world: Babylon (1:11, 12, 17a, 17b) and “the [Persian] East” (2:1, 2, 9; cf. 2:12), Egypt in the south (2:13, 14, 15, 19), Syria in the north (4:24), and the Decapolis and “beyond the Jordan” (4:15, 25) in the near distance. At its farthest extent Matthew 1:1-4:25 reaches to “all the kingdoms of the world” (4:8; cf. 4:9), Satan’s ultimate messianic offer to Jesus.

This wide-ranging geographical footprint provides a crucial clue to the understanding of Jesus’ beatitude concerning “the meek.” (5:5). On the one hand this geography marks the bitter oppression of God’s people, sometimes faithful and sometimes faithless, and their loss of land and home. For 1st-century Jews “Babylon” is the universally recognized cipher for the epochal disaster in which their Jewish ancestors were forced from their “homes” (οἱ οἶκοι) and their “land” (ἡ γῆ) of long-standing divine promise23 by a “deportation to Babylon” (τῆς μετοικεσίας Βαβυλῶνος; 1:11, 12, 17a, 17b) which turned into a lengthy exile. “Egypt,” the biblical cipher for 400 years of slavery and oppression for Hebrew “exiles” (πάροικοι) in a foreign land (Gen 15:13, LXX), points, within Matthew’s narrative, to a powerless peasant couple who must “flee to Egypt” (2:13) as political refugees in order to escape a death threat issued by the king against their infant child (2:13–15).24 And even when they return to their homeland under apparently safe conditions, since “those who were seeking the child’s life are dead” (2:20), they do so still as powerless peasants whose travel destination is shaped by ongoing fear of the political dynasty in power (2:22): “But when [Joseph] heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee.” Within Matthew’s narrative rhetoric, geographical references clearly function to highlight the oppression, fear, and powerlessness of God’s people, forced to live in exile from their homes and their land of promise.

But in Matthew’s ironic modus operandi, these same geographical references ultimately serve to highlight God’s providence and God’s plans for the salvation of God’s people. Babylon, in spite of its role within Jewish history as the national trauma par excellence, is now denoted by Matthew to a single “generation”—if a momentous one25—in a 42-generation list of fathers and sons marching down through Jewish history towards its climax in the birth of “Jesus . . . who is called the Messiah” (1:16; cf. 1:1, 17, 18), the one whose very name highlights his God–given role to “save [God’s] people from their sins” (1:21). Egypt, for its part, names not only the vulnerability and powerlessness of Joseph and his family but more importantly the place of refuge provided by God to protect Jesus “the child” (2:8, 9, 11, 13a, 13b, 14; cf. 2:20b),26 and, accordingly, the place out of which God will ultimately “call [God’s] son” in fulfillment of Jewish scripture (“Out of Egypt I have called my son” [2:15; cf. Hos 11:1, MT’]).27 Similarly, Galilee and Nazareth (2:22-23) reflect not simply forced alternatives to Judea and Bethlehem (2:1, 5, 6; cf. 2:8) but likewise the scripturally prophesied locations (2:23a; 4:14) which establish Jesus as a “Nazorean” (2:23)28 and “Galilee of the Gentiles” (4:15; cf. Isa 9:1) as the primary locus for Jesus’ upcoming messianic ministry.

The remaining geographical references within 1:1-4:25 focus crucially on the movement of individuals and crowds towards the emerging reign of God. Magi from the Persian distances travel to Jerusalem to worship the royal child whose “star [they] have seen in the East” (2:2). Huge crowds—the people of Jerusalem, all Judea . . . and all the region along the Jordan” (2:5)—follow John the Baptist to the Jordan and his baptismal ministry there (2:6). Jesus comes “from Galilee to the Jordan” (2:13, DJV) to seek baptism at John’s hands (3:14-15) and to receive his messianic appointment as God’s “Beloved Son” (3:16–17). And as Jesus travels “throughout all Galilee” (4:23, DJW), word about his ministry spreads “throughout all Syria” (4:24). Accordingly, “great crowds follow

22. Thus, “Capernaum by the sea” (4:13); “Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea” (4:15).
24. On Matthew’s narrative as the account of a “banished” (and ultimately “returning”) messiah, see Robert R. Beck, Banished Messiahs, Violence, and Nonviolence in Matthew’s Story of Jesus (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2010).
25. In 1:17 Matthew summarizes his genealogy by way of its most crucial “generations”: Abraham (1:17a; cf. 1:1, 2), David (1:17a/b; cf. 1:1, 6), the deportation to Babylon (1:17b/c; cf. 1:11, 12), and the Messiah (1:17c; cf. 1:1, 16).
26. Cf. Luz (Matthew, 146), who notes that “God’s plan and God’s hand stand over the destiny of Jesus. It is God’s guidance alone which saves the child.”
27. Hosea 11:1 (LXX) widens the original Hebrew reference to “my son” into a historically motivated reference to “his children.”
28. The “prophets” whom Matthew cites cannot be identified with clarity. But it appears most likely that Matthew here refers to Isa 11:1 (MT; cf. Isa 53:2, 10) and 1 Pet 3:18, both references of the “shoot” which “shall come from the stump of Jesse.” For a detailed discussion of the potential biblical sources for Matthew’s citation, see Craig S. Keener, The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2009), 114-15.
[Jesus] from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan” (4:25). As Matthew clearly suggests with his narrative rhetoric, the reign of God draws the world, both far distant and nearby, into its sphere of influence through a powerful divine magnetic force that wills the "salvation of God's people from their sins" (cf. 1:21b).

Significantly, however, there is a clear and crucial limit to the geographical extent of Jesus' ministry activities. In the climactic messianic temptation, Satan offers Jesus “all the kingdoms of the world and their [glory]” (4:8; DJW) in exchange for Jesus “worship” (4:9). And Jesus firmly refuses this satanic offer of instant global “inheritance” (4:10): “Away with you Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'” Jesus will carry out his messianic mission in the service of God alone and will receive nothing—whether bread, angelic protection, or all the kingdoms of the world—from the hands of Satan.

But perhaps the most crucial correspondence between Psalm 36 (LXX) and the opening of Matthew's narrative lies in the ironic modus operandi with which Matthewportrays the ultimate outcomes of the conflicts between the righteous and the evil. Not only are prominent geographical symbols of oppression (Babylon and Egypt) transformed into instances of God's salvific will and providential care for God's people. But, by the same token, evil ones, whether human or beyond human, who appear to have all power and all resources at their disposal exhibit in the end true impotence vis-à-vis the genuine power of God and the faithfulness of God's agents on earth.

Herod the king, who has savvy instincts (2:4, 7-8, 16), political clout (2:3-6, 7-9a), military resources (2:16), and a clear strategic plan (2:13, 16, 20), is nevertheless incapable of achieving the singular goal he sets for himself. Instead, at every crucial juncture an angel of the Lord (2:13, 19; cf. 2:12, 22)—an opponent of whom Herod ironically has no awareness—intervenes and calls righteous ones into action in order to save the life of the child whom Herod wishes to destroy (2:13; cf. 2:8, 16, 20, 22). And even when Herod instigates a vicious massacre (2:16b), he clearly does not know that he still fails to achieve his singular goal. Ultimately, in sharp Matthean irony, Herod lies dead at the end of the story (2:15, 19, 20; cf. 2:22), while the once-endangered refugee child is alive and well in Nazareth (2:23).

The account of Satan and his threefold effort to seduce Jesus (4:1-11) exhibits parallel but heightened irony. Satan, whose singular goal (3:3, 6, 9), is in the end forced to “leave” (4:11a) at Jesus' own word of command (4:10), while God's angels now “come” and “serve” Jesus rather than “ tempting” him (4:11b; cf. 4:3). Satan's power, cosmic as it may appear, is ultimately revealed to be impotent against the power of God and the faithfulness of God's agents on earth. And with this divine irony clearly in view Jesus' disciples and Matthew's readers now approach Jesus' claim that “the meek . . . will inherit the earth” (5:5).

### III. “INHERITING THE EARTH” WITHIN ITS SERMONIC CONTEXT

Matthew frames Jesus' inaugural address (5:1-7:29) with contextual markers (5:1-2; 7:28-29) that set the stage for Jesus' words and point to their significance. Crucial to this scene, first of all, are the “crowds” (5:1), who have “followed [Jesus] from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan” (4:25), as he travels “throughout all Galilee” (4:23, DJW) and as his reputation spreads “throughout all Syria” (4:24). It is on account of these crowds that Jesus “[goes] up the mountain” and “[sits] down” to teach (5:1a; cf. Luke 4:20). And when Jesus concludes his address (7:28a), the crowds are still there, clearly listening to Jesus and accordingly “astounded at his teaching” (7:28b).

But while the wide-ranging geographical impact of Jesus' ministry and the attendant “crowds” (4:25; 5:1) instigate Jesus' journey up the mountain, it is Jesus' “disciples” who approach him there (5:1b) and whom Jesus now “teaches” (5:2). These “disciples” are mission interns whom Jesus has called to “come after [him]” (4:19a, 21) and to become “fishers for people” (4:19b, DJW). In response they have “left” nets, boats, and family members behind in order to “follow” Jesus (4:20//22; cf. 19:27). And it is these committed “disciples” whom Jesus addresses directly (5:2), while the “crowd” appear to receive Jesus' teaching from the sidelines (5:1; 7:28-29). Accordingly, Jesus' words in 5:3-12, including the promise that “the meek . . . will inherit the earth” (5:5), are words addressed pointedly to those who have “left everything and followed [Jesus]” (19:27).

29. Here and throughout I use the word “cosmic” in intentional relation to its Greek root word, κόσμος, or “world.”

30. Cf. Matt 5:11, where Jesus pronounces a blessing in the 2nd person plural (κεκόμησαν ἐπ' ὑμᾶς) on “you” who encounter verbal attacks and persecution “on account of me,” clearly implying the commitment of a “disciple.”
But if people are crucial to this scene, so is “the mountain” itself (5:1). For 1st-century Jewish people this reference to Jesus “teaching” on “the mountain” clearly evokes Moses, Mount Sinai, and the revelation which Moses receives from God and relays in turn to the people waiting below. Accordingly, for Jesus now to teach on “the mountain” is for Jesus, “Beloved Son” of God (3:17) and Jewish Messiah (1:1, 16, 17, 18), to reprise the epocal and people-forming Mosaic event in a heightened and messianic mode and to reveal the words of God to the people of God in a new place and for a new day (cf. 5:17-20, 21-48).

But, as Warren Carter notes, there is another crucial allusion in Matthew’s topographical reference.” Satan has just taken Jesus to a “very high mountain” and offered him “all the kingdoms of the world” (cf. 5:22),40 “give” to the needy (5:42a),41 and offer loans to those who wish (5:3),34 “those who mourn” (5:4), and “the meek” (5:5). They are “the poor in spirit” (5:5:2-12) Jesus draws a composite portrait of faithful discipleship, a portrait clearly evoking both the vocabulary and the themes of Psalm 36 (LXX). Faithful disciples are the “poor in spirit” (5:7) and those who carry out “deeds of mercy” (6:2, 3, 4).36 They are “the pure in heart” (5:8),37 and “the peacemakers” (5:9),38 “the good” (5:45) and those who do “good works” (5:16).39 They refrain from “anger” (cf. 5:22), 40 “give” to the needy (5:42a),41 and offer loans to those who wish to “borrow” (5:42b).42 But above all they are “the righteous” (5:45),43 that is, “those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” (5:6), those who exhibit righteousness that “exceeds” the highest standards (cf. 5:20), and those who “strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (6:33). And these righteous ones, like their forbeares of Psalm 36 (LXX) suffer on this account. Jesus depicts them as “those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake” (5:10; cf. 5:11b, 44), those who are “reviled” (5:11a), and those who are “[slandered] falsely on my account” (5:11c, DJW).44

Jesus’ words about persecution clearly demonstrate that the righteous face sturdly opposition from their antagonists. Not only do these opponents “persecute” (5:10, 11b, 44b), “revile” (5:11a), and “utter all kinds of evil” (5:11c) against the righteous. They likewise appear as “accuser” (5:25a), “judge” (5:25b), and “[prison] guard” (5:25c). They are physically abusive (5:39), litigious (5:40), and militarily domineering (5:41). They are the “enemies” of the righteous (5:44a). Most prominently they are the “evil” (5:39, 45a) and the “unrighteous” (5:45b). And in the face of such antagonists faithful disciples of Jesus have every apparent reason, just like their forbears, to respond in fear.49

But Jesus, like the psalmist, turns appearances on their head. With his beatitudes (5:3-12) Jesus reframes the collective circumstances of his disciples—both their faithfulness and their fears—into a life of present “blessing” (5:3a, 4a, 5a, 6a, 7a, 8a, 9a, 10a, 11) and “rejoicing” (5:12a) in light of future “reward” (5:12b; cf. 5:4b, 5b, 6b, 7b, 8b, 9b). And this “blessed” present and “rewarded” future are both framed and defined by the dynamic and inbreaking reality of God’s reign, the “kingdom of heaven,” which already belongs, if only in incipient form, to these disciples (5:3b, 10b). Just as God once cared for the righteous of Psalm 36 (LXX) so God will care for these disciples.

42. Cf. the righteous one who “does mercy all day and lends” (Ps 36:26, LXX).
43. Cf. the righteous one(s) (Ps 36:12, 16, 17, 21, 25, 29, 30, 32, 39, LXX).
44. Cf. the psalmist’s references to the sinister and violent actions taken against the righteous (Ps 36:12a, 12b, 14a, 14b, 14c, 14d, 32a, 32b, 33, LXX).
45. Cf. the psalmist’s reference to the righteous who are “judged” (Ps 36:33, LXX).
46. Cf. “the enemies of the Lord” (Ps 36:20, LXX).
47. Cf. those who do evil” (Ps 36:1, 9, LXX).
48. Cf. the psalmist’s prominent references to “the sinner/sinners (Ps 36:10, 12, 14, 16, 17, 20, 21, 32, 34, 40, LXX).
49. Cf. 10:16-31, where Jesus challenges his disciples “not to fear” (10:26, 28, 31) those who “persecute” them (10:23).
now take strong and salvific action on behalf of Jesus' faithful ones, those who have “left” everything to “follow” him (4:20//22; 19:27). God will “comfort” them in their distress (cf. 5:4b), “fill” them with the righteousness that they crave as food and drink (cf. 5:6b), extend to them the “mercy” that they show to others (5:7b), gift them to “see” the unseeable God (5:8b; cf. Ex 33:20), and “name” them as God’s own “children” (cf. 5:9b). And there is one more gift: Those who have “left” everything behind and “followed” Jesus at his call (4:20//22; cf. 19:27) will in God's own time “inherit the earth” itself (κληρονομήσουσιν τὴν γῆν: 5:5b), the psalmist’s promise of “land” (36:11, LXX) now cosmically expanded into “earth” within Jesus’ messianic rhetoric.50

These salvific acts of God, phrased uniformly in future tense verbs, are clearly gifts of God’s future, that eschatological age in which the “kingdom of heaven” has not only “come near” (ἦλθέτω ἡ βασιλεία σου: 3:2; 4:17; 10:7) but is fully present (ἐλθέτω ἡ βασιλεία σου: 6:10a), that age when “[God’s] will [is] done on earth as it is in heaven” (ἡ γῆ γενηθήτω τὸ θέλημά σου: 6:10b). But, by the same token, these gifts of God are likewise gifts for the present world and the immediate future, framed as they are by Jesus’ parallel references to “the kingdom of heaven” which is already, in incipient form, present reality and gift of God for the righteous (κληρονομήσουσιν τὴν γῆν: 5:5, 10). 51 Jesus thus promises the restoration of the land . . . but not before the eschaton.”

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50. Cf. Luz (Matthew, 236), who notes, “The earth, not only the land of Israel, will belong to those who are kind, for the traditional promise of the land had long been transposed into the cosmic realm.” See also Carter (Matthew, 133), who reads Jesus’ words as a reference to “all of God’s creation,” as in 5:13, 5:18, and 6:10 as evidence. But note to the contrary Gary M. Burge, Jesus and the Land: The New Testament Challenge to “Holy Land” Theology [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2010], 35 and Mitri Raheb (Faith in the Face of Empire: The Bible through Palestinian Eyes [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2014], 97), who restrict Jesus’ reference to “Judea” and “Palestine” respectively.

51. Contra Ben Witherington III (Matthew [Macon, Ga.: Smyth & HcIwys, 2006], 121), who notes that “Jesus did believe in an eschatological restoration of the land . . . but not before the eschaton.”

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52. Cf. Luz (Matthew, 236, emphasis mine), who notes that “the promise of the earth makes clear that the kingdom of heaven also comprises a new ‘this world.’ Keener acknowledges that “for Matthew and early Christianity as a whole the future kingdom is in some sense present in Jesus,” but limits any concept of “inheritance” to “a spiritual down payment of these blessings in Christ in the present.” (Matthew, 167, emphasis mine).


54. Burge, Jesus, 35.

55. Ibid.
brutal and hegemonic empire of the day. But Jesus’ disciples themselves are now agents of cosmic impact on behalf of God’s reign. Their call is to “let [their] light shine before others” (5:16a), so that it “gives light to all in the [earthly] house” (5:15c) and so that their “good deeds” (5:16a) flavor the entire “earth” (5:13), enlighten the entire “world” (5:14) and inspire humankind to “glorify [the] Father in heaven” (5:16b), the one who alone is “Lord of heaven and earth” (11:25). Here then are cosmic promise and cosmic calling for those who follow Jesus as faithful disciples. Fulfillment of the promise and enactment of the calling still lie ahead within Matthew’s narrative.

IV. DISCIPLE-MAKING AND “INHERITING THE EARTH”

Within his inaugural address the Matthean Jesus has evoked the words of Psalm 36 (LXX) promising his disciples—among numerous other promises to God’s righteous ones (5:3-12)—that “the meek . . . will inherit the earth” (5:5) and calling them accordingly to “let [their] light shine before others” (5:16), since they themselves are “the light of the world” (5:14; cf. 5:13). To assess the significance of this promise and this calling and to search for their fulfillment within Matthew’s remaining narrative requires attention to ongoing narrative clues concerning the mission of Jesus’ disciples.

Fundamental here is the pointed correspondence which Matthew establishes between Jesus’ mission and that of his disciples.\(^ {56} \) Once Jesus has proclaimed God’s reign initially through word (5:1-7:29) and action (8:1-9:35), Jesus commissions his disciples for a ministry directly parallel to his own (9:35-11:1). Jesus gives his disciples the “authority” which empowers his own mission, namely, “to cast out [unclean spirits] and to [heal] every disease and every sickness” (10:1, DJW; cf. 4:23; 9:35). He calls his disciples to his own proclamation (“The kingdom of heaven has come near”: 10:7; cf. 4:17) and to the deeds of mercy which characterize his own ministry (“[heal] the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons”: 10:8, DJW; cf. 4:23/9:35; 9:18-26; 8:1-4; 8:28-38). And he establishes for his disciples the same geographical restrictions that limit his own ministry, Jesus, who has rejected Satan’s messianic offer of “all the kingdoms of the world and their glory” (4:8-10), knows his own calling to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (15:24); and it is to his calling which he passes on to his disciples: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (10:5b-6; cf. 15:24).

Accordingly, Jesus’ own ministry unfolds predominantly within the geographical footprint of the Jewish community in Galilee: Nazareth (13:54; cf. 21:11; 26:71); Capernaum (4:13; 8:5; 11:23; 17:24; cf. 9:1); Chorazin (11:21); Bethsaida (11:21); Genessaret (14:34); Magadan (15:39); the “deserted places” (14:13, 15; 15:33); the “sea” (8:24, 26, 27, 32; 13:1; 14:25, 26; 15:29), and the “mountain” (5:1; 8:1; 14:23; 15:29; 17:1. 9). And it is here that Jesus’ disciples likewise serve as mission interns both with Jesus (14:13-21; 15:29-39) and on his behalf (17:14-21).

But there are significant hints that Jesus’ ministry, and accordingly that of his disciples as well, will ultimately reach far beyond Galilee and “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (10:6; 15:24). When approached in his “own town” Capernaum (8:5; cf. 9:1) by a Roman centurion seeking healing for his paralyzed servant (8:5-6), Jesus not only heals the servant (cf. 8:13) but also commends the faith of the centurion in striking fashion (8:10-11a): “ Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven . . . .” Jesus exorcises two demoniacs within the clearly Gentile “country of the Gadarenes” (8:28), where the local livelihood is raising swine (8:28:34). Jesus commends the “people of Nineveh,” who “repented at the proclamation of Jonah (12:41), and “the queen of the South,” who “came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon” (12:42). Jesus parabolically identifies the “field” in which the Son of Man “sows the good seed” (13:37) as “the living stones” (13:48), and “the queen of the South,” who “came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon” (12:42). Jesus exorcises two demoniacs within the clearly Gentile “country of the Gadarenes” (8:28), where the local livelihood is raising swine (8:28:34). Jesus commends the “people of Nineveh,” who “repented at the proclamation of Jonah (12:41), and “the queen of the South,” who “came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon” (12:42). Jesus parabolically identifies the “field” in which the Son of Man “sows the good seed” (13:37) as “the world” in its entirety (oj kovsmo”: 13:38).\(^ {57} \) And it is precisely the Jesus who knows that his ministry is “only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (15:24) who finds himself so compelled by the noisy and persistent appeal of a “Canaanite” woman in the clearly Gentile “district of Tyre and Sidon” (15:21-27) that he commends her “faith” (15:28a), and “heals” her daughter (cf. 15:28b).

But authoritative proclamation and compassionate outreach to the people of Galilee and scattered Gentiles beyond are merely step one of Jesus’ mission, announced in 4:17 (emphasis mine): “From that time Jesus began to proclaim . . .”: 4:17; cf. 4:18-22, 23-25; 5:1-7:29; 8:1-9:35. Jesus’

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ministry of proclamation and healing comes at a profound cost. Suffering and death follow inevitably for Jesus, as a direct result of his words and actions. Matthew introduces this theme in 12:9-14, where Jesus heals a man in a synagogue on the Sabbath and the Pharisees respond by “[going] out and [conspiring] against him, how to destroy him” (12:14). And once Matthew’s narrative reaches its crucial mid-point (16:13-20), with Simon Peter’s dramatic messianic confession (16:16), Jesus immediately turns himself (and the geography of the narrative as well) towards Jerusalem (16:21; 20:17; 21:1, 10; 23:37) and the upcoming suffering and death that he will encounter there (16:21; 17:22-23; 20:17-19; 26:1-2): “From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering . . .” (16:21, emphasis mine).

Nor is this suffering and death a mere mistake on the part of humans. Jesus assures Simon Peter that his journey to Jerusalem and his death there are in line with the will of God (cf. τὰ τοῦ θεοῦ: 16:23). And the same God who has earlier confirmed Jesus’ messianic ministry of proclamation and healing in a vivid display of divine power and approval (3:16-17) now confirms Jesus’ divinely-willed (δεῖ: 16:21) journey to Jerusalem and his upcoming suffering and death with a new display of divine glory (17:1-8) at the top of a “high mountain” (17:1). Accordingly, in an unmistakable allusion to his own upcoming passion—an allusion which ironically brings language of “inheritance” back into Matthew’s narrative—Jesus tells his Jewish opponents, the chief priests, the elders of the people, and the Pharisees (21:23; cf. 21:45), the story of the vineyard owner who “sends his son” (21:37) to “collect his produce” (21:34) from the tenants of his vineyard. Instead the tenants immediately recognize the son as “heir” to his father’s vineyard (οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ κληρονόμος: 21:38a) and conspire to kill him in order to “get his inheritance” (σχορμένων τῆς κληρονομίας αὐτοῦ: 21:38b; cf. 21:39). And Jesus, whose triumphal messianic procession into Jerusalem proclaims him publicly as “Son of David (21:9, 14; cf. “king of Zion” [21:5//Zech 9:9]), ironicaly experiences his messianic coronation as he is tried (26:57-68; 27:11-26), mocked (27:27-31), and crucified on a Roman cross (27:32-50) precisely as “Messiah” (26:63, 68; 27:17, 22), “King of the Jews” (27:11, 29, 29, 37; cf. “King of Israel”: 27:42) and “Son of God (26:63; 27:40-43). Such is the earthly fate that overtakes Jesus, the “heir” to God’s earthly “vineyard” and God’s heavenly “kingdom.” Jesus’ “inheritance” comes at the ultimate cost.

And so will that of Jesus’ disciples (5:5; cf. 5:11). Just as his ministry Jesus speaks both directly and metaphorically of the future mission of his disciples. In parabolic words they will “go . . . to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (10:6) and “call those who have been invited to the wedding banquet [of the king’s son]” (22:3; cf. 22:2), a mission clearly focused on the Jewish people. But Jesus’ disciples will likewise one day bear “witness” to kings, governors, and the Gentiles (10:18, DJW). And ultimately “this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the [whole] world, as a [witness] to all the nations” (24:14a, DJW; cf. 26:13).

But this mission of Jesus’ disciples, whether Galilean or worldwide, will progress in the very midst of their suffering and death, just as Jesus’ own mission has done. Jesus’ disciples will be “hated by all,” both individuals and people groups alike (10:22; 24:9; cf. 24:10). They will be “persecuted/pursued” from town to town (10:23; 23:34), “handed over” to those in power (10:17, 19, 21; 24:9, 10), “flogged” in synagogues (10:17; 23:34), “dragged before governors and kings” (10:18), “tortured” (24:9), “mistrusted” (22:6), “put to death” (10:21), “killed” (10:28; 22:6; 23:34; 24:9) and “crucified” (23:34; cf. 10:38), all “on account of [Jesus’] name” (10:22; 24:9; cf. 5:11) and the urgent and ultimately worldwide mission on which Jesus has “sent” them as “sheep in the midst of wolves” (10:16; 22:3, 4; 23:34). If this is the disciples’ journey toward “inheriting the earth” (5:5; cf. 19:27-30), it is a fearsome journey, in the footsteps of Jesus the crucified, towards an “inheritance” not for the faint of heart.

But the end is not suffering and death, neither for Jesus nor for his disciples. Just as God rescues the righteous of Psalm 36 (LXX) so God now takes earth-shaking and epoch-changing action on behalf of God’s faithful. At the very moment of Jesus’ death, precisely when Jesus’ opponents clearly consider their victory over Jesus accomplished (cf. 27:42-43) and their “inheritance” gained (cf. 21:38), God turns the tables on them definitively. In an act of unmistakable divine irony, pointing prophetically towards the imminent resurrection of Jesus, God “tears the curtain of the temple in two, from top to bottom” (cf. 27:51a), “shakes the earth” (cf. 27:51b), “splits the rocks” (cf. 27:51c), “opens the tombs” of “many saints” (cf. 27:52a), and “raises their bodies” (cf. 27:52b). Through God’s initiative the earth itself offers a cosmic protest to the death of Jesus. And two days later God completes the divine two-step with a final “earth-shaking event” (cf. 28:2, DJW), as God “raises Jesus from the dead” (cf. 28:6, 7), and sends a divine messenger to reveal the empty tomb (28:2). Once again God gets the last laugh (cf. 28:17, LXX; cf. Ps 2:4).

In the final scene of Matthew’s narrative (28:16-20), located strategically once again on a mountain in Galilee (28:16; cf. 4:8-10; 5:1-2), Jesus makes the all-crucial announcement to his disciples towards which

58. See fn.23 above.
Matthew’s narrative rhetoric has been driving from its inception (28:18): “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” The Risen Jesus, “Beloved Son” of God (3:17; 17:5), who during his earthly ministry firmly refused Satan’s offer of “all the kingdoms of the world” (4:8–9), has now received from God his rightful and cosmic “inheritance” (21:38), far beyond what Satan has to offer. Accordingly, as John Riches notes, “Jesus is cosmocrator, even if his rule is recognized as yet only by the few who are his disciples and if his presence is assured only among them (18:20; 28:20).”

But there is one thing more. Jesus’ cosmic authority has a direct and immediate impact on his disciples as well. In the final and climactic words of Matthew’s narrative (28:19–20), Jesus once again calls his disciples into mission on behalf of the kingdom of heaven (cf. 10:5–15). But this time the mission is worldwide in scope, enabled by Jesus’ own cosmic authority (28:18; cf. 10:1), sustained by Jesus’ enduring presence (28:20; cf. 1:23; 18:20), and no longer limited by ethnic, religious, or geographical boundaries (28:19–20, DJW; cf. 10:5–6): “Go therefore and make disciples of all [the] nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Here, then, is the unbounded missionary mandate that will finally bring Jesus’ disciples and their “witness” before governors, kings, and the Gentiles (cf. 10:18) and will ensure that “this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the [whole] world, as a [witness] to all the nations” (24:14a, DJW; cf. 26:13). And here, in the incipient but ever-unfolding reality of God’s reign on earth, a reign that has already “come near” in Jesus (3:2; 4:17; 10:7), are the present form and emerging outlines of that “earthly inheritance” that Jesus has promised his faithful ones (5:5). Fuller and final “inheritance” lies ahead for Jesus’ disciples “at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory” (19:28): thrones from which they will “judge the twelve tribes of Israel,” families and fields exponentially multiplied, and eternal life itself. Then Jesus’ disciples will “inherit [κληρονομήσατε] the kingdom prepared for [them] from the foundation of the world” (25:34). All this is future promise.

But in the meantime and in the present moment the “earth” which Jesus’ disciples now begin to “inherit” in incipient form is the whole world (ὅλῳ τῷ κόσμῳ; 26:13; cf. ὅλη τῇ οἰκουμένῃ; 24:14) in which they “proclaim the good news” of God’s reign among humankind (10:7; cf. 24:14; 26:13) and “make disciples of all [the] nations” (28:19–20; DJW). To “inherit the earth” is, first of all and within the present age, to claim “the whole world” as the realm of God’s reign and to baptize and teach “all the nations” into the ranks of Jesus’ disciples.

Let Rome and all future world empires take good notice. They may flaunt their powers and intimidate God’s righteous ones as they will (2:1–23; 14:1–12; 27:1–2, 11–37; cf. Ps 36 [LXX]). But it is the followers of Jesus Cosmocrator who even now “inherit the earth” (5:5), as they “make disciples of all the nations” (28:19) on behalf of God’s cosmic and salvific reign among humankind (3:2; 4:17; 10:7). And this is “the good news of the kingdom” (24:14; 26:13).