

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW IN AN AFRICAN CONTEXT

- in dialogue with Chris Manus

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Abstract

This article is a reaction to the contribution by Chris Manus elsewhere in this issue. It departs from his remark that the elevation and status of African kings helps us to understand Mt 28:16-20. This is then placed in the context of contextualisation as a metaphoric activity, especially with a view to the public or cultural context of the text-reading process. An adequate hermeneutic will have to be a critical hermeneutic, recognizing that the theme of kingship is presented in an ironic mode in Matthew, because Jesus embodies the pattern of a king who is rejected, as ruler who is truly a servant. Although one has to acknowledge that any text is determined to a large degree by the discourse which selects and organizes features of the text, one also has to agree that the text, similarly, determines the discourse.

There can be no doubt about the fact that the gospel of Matthew communicates the message about Jesus in such a manner that it has been relevant to many and diverse situations throughout the centuries. The contribution by Manus testifies to that fact anew, as he underlines the relevance of the phenomenon of African sacred kingships with a view to understanding the gospel of Matthew, and especially the last pericope of the gospel, from this perspective.

When the pericope is approached from this perspective, many exegetical points in this section gain in significance. It is also interesting to see how Manus correlates his critical reading of the text with his contextual perspective and the way this leads to an emphasis on the mountain as a possible method for contemporary evangelization and communication in Africa, the value of 'divine kingship' for Christology and the correlation of the Matthean Christian community with a believing Small Christian Community.

A stimulating article like this inevitably challenges one to dialogue and to participate in the common task of contextualising the Word of God in our common and distinctive context(s) in Africa. The discussion could, therefore, take place on

different levels dealing with broader hermeneutical issues as such as contextualisation, as well as more detailed matters of Matthean interpretation. The remarks made here are then with a view to grapple in a combined effort with the text and the context we share. In the final analysis we too are challenged to testify to what the gospel of Matthew, with its uncompromising emphasis on the call to fulfil the exceeding righteousness, demands from us in our specific context in the South of Africa.

The author departs from the question (1991:32):

Can this insight into the elevation and status of African kings help us understand the Matthean text before us?

and in similar vein (1991:36):

As is discerned from the installed statuses of African kings, Jesus is king of the community, the divinely ordained king to whose office and authority all submission is due.

One's first reaction is that this is a wrong way to formulate the question as a point of departure. One should obviously first deal with the text of Matthew in all its ramifications as extensively as possible to be sure one understands the text, before attempting to contextualise the text. To utilize concepts and insights from a totally foreign context for interpreting the text, seems like putting the cart before the horse.

Nevertheless, it should not be necessary to elaborate on the important role of the reader in the reading process, as well as on the social dimension of knowledge and comprehension which inevitably influences the reading process. In two recent articles, Smit (1991a & 1991b) gives an illuminating discussion of contextualisation as a metaphoric activity. Whereas a metaphor can be defined as a word in counter-determining context, the contextualisation of a text is defined by him as a text in counter-determining context. This implies that the activity of contextualisation as a metaphoric interaction between text and reader

...functions as a contextual or situational filter which selects, emphasizes, suppresses and organizes features of the discourse of the reader, implying statements about it that normally apply to the text.

(Smit 1991b:25)

Concerning the text in the counter-determining context, Smit declares (1991b:25) that

... the text is retroactively determined by the discourse which selects, emphasizes, suppresses and organizes features of the text, implying statements about it that normally apply to the discourse or context.

The text is therefore interactively de-contextualised in terms of its original context and re-contextualised in a new discourse.

One cannot deny, therefore, the fact of reading Matthew in an African context where the reading of the text is decisively influenced and re-contextualized in the new discourse of the African Christian with his heritage of sacred kingship.

Next to the important role of the reader in the reading and interpretive process, is the role of what can be called the public or cultural context of the text-reading-process. This public context creates its own symbolic universe, a framework in which convictions, attitudes, values, hopes and fears are shaped, articulated and passed on. It forms a horizon of understanding which frames the context in which new belief-systems and social processes are formed and accepted by any given society and culture. African tradition and traditional religion have their own 'sacred kingships' (Manus), their 'sacred canopies' (Berber), their symbolic archetype (Real) which express the shared emotions, ideals and value-systems ingrained in African history.

Presenting the gospel in 'African dress' (Bosch) is not a case of a naive dress-rehearsal for the show, but must be part and parcel of the incarnation of the gospel in Africa. Manus argues correctly that this is of uttermost importance in the evangelising ministry of the church in Africa and in the dialogue with other religions. The relevant hermeneutic can never be anything else than a hermeneutic of dialogue in the broadest sense of the word. The relevancy of the church, and in the end of the gospel itself, is very closely connected to finding the right relationship between context and theology (Van der Merwe), between the understanding of the text and the understanding of society (cf Gadamer).

Having said that Christians share the stories, myths and symbolic events with the societies they live in, we must stress at the same time that they also share and celebrate the unique biblical story in their liturgy, in their diakonia and in their missionary outreach. They recite it also in their confessions and creeds as their 'abbreviated stories' (Arens). In doing so, they have to articulate their identity, their communality, their catholicity in such a way that it transcends all other traditional strands. A hermeneutic of dialogue is, therefore, always a hermeneutic of identification, of confession! It is only in the context of the church as the redeemed community, and of the expression of its understanding of the saving power of the gospel that we can read and reread the text correctly. Manus is, therefore, correct in presupposing that these stories may overlap; but it must be stated from the outset that they can and will also conflict and contradict one another in many ways. The Christian story proclaimed and celebrated in the public sphere has to compete with other stories, other dominant cultures, old and new in Africa, other 'moral worlds' (Meeks), other universes of discourse. They do not only share the 'Christ of culture' with other cultures, but also the 'Christ against culture' and the 'Christ transforming culture' (Niebuhr 1951, cf Mouw 1991). In being confronted with strange and often dividing loyalties, they will experience a tension between complete adaptation to the contextual symbolic universe and such a complete isolation from it which makes the proclamation of the gospel irrelevant. In spite of a real continuity, there is an inherent discontinuity between the text of Mt 28:19f and the 'texts' of Africa. There is only one continuity of the text through history: the way it was expanded by the Holy Spirit in the life of the church.

Taking up Niebuhr's transformation model we would like to plead for a hermeneutic of transformation as one of the modes of a relevant hermeneutic in dealing with the interpretation of Matthew in an African context. Without doubt the African context

and culture of traditional religion can supply the symbols, images, ideas, verbal symbols, myths, and the language patterns in which the central message of the living Christ must be translated. This always have to be an incarnational and a pneumatological process: the incarnated 'translation' being transformed itself by the work of the Holy Spirit, in order to have a transforming effect on the reader - and transformation is the goal of the Gospel of Matthew (cf 13:44-46; 5:20). And in order to transform the reader and his context power is required (cf Wuellner 1989:35). On this score the Holy Scripture is unanimous (cf Jn 3:1-20). Contextualisation and translation lack the power to transform by themselves - they are neither life-giving nor regenerative.

When the church proclaims the gospel of Jesus Christ it is the message of the Exalted King who has all the power in heaven and upon earth (Mt 28:20). Paul refers to this as the proclamation of the pleroma of Christ, the fullness of his Lordship over all things (Eph 1:21-23). This is the lifegiving and regenerative message to be proclaimed to all nations, all cultures, all religions - also that of Africa. This Lordship of the one King in heavenly places lies at the interface between text and context, between exegesis and contextualisation, this is the exact and kerugmatic point (Barth) of the interface where the 'metaphoric interaction' (Smit 1991a) must be kept alive; this is the interface where the two horizons, that of Matthew's King and the sacred kingships of Africa is to meet one another.

The message of this King is at the same time a well-known story (Manus) and a strange story, the story of the Holy One, of the Other One (the *ganz Andere* of Barth), the Other King. This implies that the traditional stories, so utterly important in African religion, culture and public ethos as the contextual frames of reference, will have to be 'reframed' in terms of the good news of Mt 28:18-20. This will require a critical hermeneutic: listening to the story of African kings and to the story of the Matthean King implies becoming critical of the powers, the deifications and false gods of Africa. Listening to both will require of us to develop a rhetorical critique of both the myths of a sacred church and that of a sacred public sphere. We are of the opinion that this rhetorical critique must be done *inter alia* from the basis of the text itself: to be precise, the text in its biblical context, that of the pericope, of the gospel of Matthew as a whole, and of the Bible as it has been read in the tradition of the church.

In the hermeneutic of dialogue it is of paramount importance to discern how this theme of Kingship can be traced through the whole of Matthew. This implies that one should not only concentrate on what can be termed Matthew's redactional activity, but that adequate attention should also be given to the literary structure and design of Matthew (Bauer 1988), as well as to its narrative rhetoric (Howell 1990).

In the beginning of Matthew, Jesus is already designated as the Son of David from the lineage of David the king (1:6), and it is made clear that although He is born from Mary and not fathered by Joseph. He is legitimately to be called Son of David because of his adoption by Joseph, son of David. He is then called 'King of the Jews' in 2:2,4 by the Magi. Yet it must be noted that the kingship of Jesus is actually presented in an ironic mode. Although the chief priests and the scribes know where

Israel's king is to be born, they do not act in an appropriate manner. In the following pericopae (2:13-18) it is narrated how the apparently powerless King from above is bitterly opposed by Herod the king, who seems to have all the power, in any case in the geographical context where Jesus as King is born. Then God foils the plot of King Herod. But the non-Jewish Magi do come and worship Him as King.

And because the Magi have come to offer Jesus their sincere worship (2:2,11), Matthew urges the reader to accept this title, too, as correctly applying to Jesus.

(Kingsbury 1988:48)

At a later stage Jesus appears as the humble King of peace (21:4f), although the crowds see in Him the fulfilment of the end-time expectations associated with David (21:9,15). At the trial of Jesus, Jesus is charged with assuming the title 'King of the Jews' (27:11,29,37,42). There can be no doubt that Kingship is an important theme in Matthew, as well as an appropriate view of Him. It is, therefore, ironic that the most explicit references to Jesus as King is to be found in the context of opposition and enmity where his kingship is rejected. But this is in accordance with an important interpretive principle in Matthew. In this gospel there can be no doubt that honour and status is not to be sought in symbols of power and prestige, but in situations of the lack of power, low rank and social insignificance, even dishonour (Malina & Neyrey 1990:116). The fact that Jesus' kingship is rejected, does not imply that his kingship is not real and true. The important thing is that in this way Jesus embodies the pattern of a king who is rejected by his own people, a ruler who is truly a servant, the first who becomes the last.

When disowned by his own people, Jesus is publicly but ironically acclaimed as their king. But Matthew's audience knows that Israel's king comes to his people meek and humble, even pursued by his enemies as David was, first by Saul and later by Absalom. It is, of course, God who ascribes this title, status and honour to Jesus (2:2), in leading Magi to him in fulfilment of the Scriptures, according to the old promise to David (1:22-23; 2:6; 21:5). Hence, when non-Jews acclaim Jesus as king in the Passion Narrative, albeit ironically and sarcastically, this label is intended by the evangelist to be taken literally and seriously.

(Malina & Neyrey 1990:118)

Besides the shame, dishonour and opposition, there is also a reversal of status in store for Jesus as King. According to Ps 110:1 God Himself will ascribe prominence to Israel's King, and vindicate him over his enemies. This is then fulfilled in Jesus, as can be seen from the use of Ps 110 in Mt 22:44, as well as in the combination of Ps 110:1 and Dn 7:14 in 26:64 at Jesus' trial. This reversal of status of Jesus is then realized in 28:16-20 where the lines of Ps 110:1, Ps 118:22 (cf Mt 21:42) as well as Dn 7:14 is drawn together when Jesus appears to his disciples as the Messiah in power, as the Son of man who is now exalted to be the Lord and King (cf France 1985:413).

But this emphasis on Jesus as King should also be seen in the broader perspective of Jesus' proclamation of the coming of the kingdom of God/heaven, as the Son of

man and the kingdom is also mentioned together in some contexts (cf 13:41; 16:28; 20:21). Although not acknowledged, opposed and dishonoured during his earthly life, Jesus nevertheless is the agent of the coming Kingdom, and by his parables and his own parabolic lifestyle he challenges the kingdom myths of his contemporaries. The remarkable fact is that only a few of the parables explicitly deal with the theme of a king and his rule. Yet all the parables dealing with the rich tapestry of life articulate and image the reality

... that creation is 'theonomous': that it is God's creation and God's hand is discernible in its working.

(Chilton & McDonald 1987:65)

So the reality of the Kingship of God and Jesus (as metaphor) can be imaged in many other ways than in the metaphor of kingship alone. It must also be emphasized that despite the continuity between the kingdom in Israel's and Jesus' symbolic world, the distinctiveness of the kingdom in Jesus' symbolic world should be acknowledged. This has obvious implications when dealing with the contextualization of the kingship of Jesus in Africa (or the United Kingdom!).

This can be illustrated from the transfiguration scene in 17:1-8. In his discussion of 28:18a, Manus draws attention to the interesting parallels between 17:6f and 28:16-20

... as portrayals of Christ's royal installation and enthronement understood in their best anthropological terms.

(Manus 1991:36).

But there are other links too, especially with the voice at the baptism (3:17). The significant addition in what God says here at the Transfiguration, is that He adds:

Listen to Him!

The need for this is apparent in the preceding pericopae where Jesus announces his imminent passion and death, and the lack of comprehension of the disciples and Peter is underlined again. That brings us to another point of contact in the context, that is the link with the mountain in 4:8 and the similar reaction of Jesus in 16:23 and 4:10. The regal authority and Lordship which was rejected on the mount of temptation because it was offered by the Satan,

... are bestowed on the Son by the Father on the *oros hupselon* of the Transfiguration because the Son remained faithful to his calling.

(Donaldson 1985:153)

The link between this pericope and 28:16-20 is also underlined by the mentioning of the kingdom and the Son of man in 16:28. It should, however, be noted that the difficulty of the disciples and Peter to accept the way of suffering of Jesus as designated King, is underlined time and again in the rest of the narrative (cf Howell 1990:146).

The reference to the mountain in Matthew is evidently of considerable theological importance (cf Donaldson 1985). Whether the motif of the mountain can be contextualized as directly as Manus seems to want to do in line with the African

reverence for sacred spaces and natural spots such as hills, river banks, mountains and the wilderness (Manus 1991:40), is a much more debatable question.

Another question which could be raised is whether Manus has given adequate attention to the Matthean community. He discerns in the text of Matthew the face of a believing Small Christian Community which can be useful

... towards a relevant NT theology of the Small Christian Community in our own context.

(Manus 1991:42).

As he then concludes that this Small Christian Community must be recognized as a pastoral priority and strategy for evangelization, one could ask whether the specific situation of the Matthean community has been adequately taken into consideration. Without now going into this question in all detail, one could draw attention to Overman's conclusion that Matthew's community was sectarian, taken up in a struggle with its parent group, formative Judaism, being more concerned with world-maintenance than being open to the world.

Matthew is interested in community formation, and not primarily world transformation.

(Overman 1990:154).

This does not discount that this community was also in the process of turning to the wider gentile world. But again, one should be careful in one's contextualising of the text of Matthew, that text and context should not be identified too quickly. Although one has to acknowledge that any text is determined to a large degree by the discourse which selects, emphasizes and organizes features of the text, one also has to agree that the text, similarly, determines the discourse (Smit 1991b:27). This means that in reading the story of Matthew and Jesus as king, one will have to listen carefully to Matthew's way of telling the story.

This is the story of the King of Mt 28:18f who was proclaimed as Lord of all in Acts and the letters of Paul (Eph & Col). This is the story, it is His story that must enter into dialogue with the stories of the 'sacred kings' of Africa. It is a story that must be translated and incarnated in the stories and symbols of Africa, in order to use them and in the process transform them as bearers, metaphors of a story that will and must transform traditional Africa. This can happen by opening up new, undreamt of possibilities for dreams and visions coming true (Ac 2:17ff): God's dreams for Africa coming true when Africa's true King is given all power and authority in Africa. This dream and this hope must unite and mobilize various strands of Christianity in Africa, that of Manus and ours.

When this dream comes true, God will be honoured as the King of Africa and the Lord of the African church - in which His *pleroma* will be manifested. It is our sincere wish that this hermeneutical dialogue with Manus will serve in bringing us a step closer to a dream coming true. In the end a true hermeneutic has to be a hermeneutic of the fascination, of poetic fantasy, of hope (Moltmann).

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