

PURCHASING THE REWARDS OF ETERNAL LIFE: The Logic of Resurrection and Ransom in Matthew's Gospel¹

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O God, whose only-begotten Son, by his life, death, and resurrection, has purchased for us the rewards of eternal life ...

Traditional concluding prayer of the Rosary

Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad because your wage is great in the heavens.

Matthew 5:11–12²

Introduction

The traditional English translation of the Lord's Prayer used in the liturgy diverges from the Greek of Matthew 6:9–13 in a number of respects, the most striking of which is the omission of the Greek prayer's petition for the cancellation of debts: "Forgive us our debts (*ta opheilēmata*) as we also forgive our debtors (*tois opheiletais*)."³ The restatement of the petition in verses 14–15 ("For if you forgive people their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you") shows that "debt" is used here to refer to sin. This may be Matthew's most well-known example of sin as debt, but it is hardly an isolated occurrence. For instance, Matthew repeatedly describes divine recompense as a settling of accounts and describes the fate of unforgiven sinners as debt-bondage.⁴ In the parable of the unforgiving servant (18:23–35), God is compared to a king who will forgive even the most astronomical debts of his servants. Yet the parable also warns that those who refuse to forgive the debts of their fellow servants will be thrown in prison until they "repay all that is

1 This essay is adapted from portions of my book, *Wages of Cross-Bearing and Debt of Sin: The Economy of Heaven in Matthew's Gospel*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche 196 (Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2013).

2 All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

3 Debt cancellation is preserved in the Vulgate: *dimitte nobis debita nostra, sicut et nos dimittimus debitoribus nostris*.

4 For settling of accounts see 16:27 (compare to Mark 8:38 and Luke 9:26); 18:23–35; 19:16–20:16; 25:14–30. The phrase "to settle accounts" (*synairein logon*) appears in Matt. 18:23–24 and 25:19, but nowhere else in the LXX or NT. It is common in Greek documentary papyri. See, for example, *P.Bad.* II 42.6–7; *BGU III* 775.18.

owed" (18:34). Similarly, Matthew 5:21–26 warns that those who are found with unresolved sin against a "brother" will be thrown into prison until they repay the last penny (5:25–26). In Matthew 7:2 Jesus echoes the language of loan contracts when he warns that the measure (*metron*) that a person uses for recording the sins of others will be used to measure that person's sins.⁵

Why would Matthew have such an affinity for debt-language? The recent work of Gary Anderson has shown that financial language provided the conceptual framework for speaking of good and bad deeds in the later strata of the Hebrew Bible as well as in early Judaism and Christianity.⁶ In Aramaic, Anderson notes, "the word for a debt that one owes a lender, *hōbā*, is the standard term for denoting sin. This term comes into Second Temple Hebrew and has the same double meaning."⁷

Closely related to the idea of sin as debt was the belief that good deeds, especially almsgiving, earned wages or merits with God. Though the idea of wages from God is well-attested in early Judaism and Christianity, it is particularly prominent in the First Gospel.⁸ New Testament scholars have not been unaware that Matthew has much to say about treasure in heaven and the like, but they have tended to treat this material as a theological embarrassment to be minimized or ignored.⁹ One of the most prominent themes of the First Gospel has, therefore, been left largely unexplored.

One of the most interesting features of Matthew's economic language is the way that Jesus is repeatedly portrayed as doing the very things he taught would earn treasure in heaven. Those who endure insults and persecution have "great wages in the heavens" (5:11–12); Jesus endures insults and persecution (20:19; 26:67–68; 27:27–44). Those who pray privately will receive a wage from their Father in the heavens (6:1, 5–6); Jesus withdraws to pray alone (14:23; 26:36). Those who do not store up their treasure on earth are able to store up treasure in heaven (6:19–21; 19:21) and those who leave their property behind will receive "a hundred times as much" (19:29); Jesus has no place to lay his head (8:20). Those who bear crosses, who lose their lives, will find their lives in the coming eschatological repayment of deeds (16:24–27); Jesus bears his cross and is raised from the dead. In return for

5 For example, see *P.Amh.* II 46. See also Eubank, *Wages of Cross-Bearing*, 53–67 for more on sin as debt in Matthew.

6 See Gary Anderson, *Sin: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

7 Anderson, *Sin*, 27.

8 To be more precise, it is a particularly prominent theme in the Synoptic Gospels, and especially in Matthew. Much of Matthew's economic language is found in parables which only appear in Matthew and in Matthean "pluses" in pericopae with parallels in Mark and/or Luke.

9 See, for example, Günther Bornkamm, "Der Lohngedanke im Neuen Testament" [Wage-thought in the New Testament], in *Studien zu Antike und Urchristentum: Gesammelte Aufsätze*, 2 vols. (Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1963), 2.69–92. Kant's contention that reward is antithetical to virtue has played an important role in making Jesus' teaching on reward a neuralgic issue for New Testament scholars. See Eubank, *Wages of Cross-Bearing*, 4–11.

forsaking everything and following Jesus the apostles will receive twelve thrones alongside the throne of the Son of Man (19:27–28); Jesus himself is enthroned as Son of Man from the time when he gives his life (26:64; 28:18).

The purpose of this article is to delve deeper into Matthew's portrayal of Jesus as an earner of treasure in heaven by analyzing three key passages which occur after the pivotal moment when Jesus begins predicting his death and resurrection (16:13–28; 19:16–29; 20:17–28). Particular attention will be given to the ransom saying in 20:28. I shall argue that careful attention to Matthew's economic language and use of the Old Testament illuminates the logic of Jesus' resurrection and enthronement and explains how Jesus saves his people from their sins (Matt. 1:21).

Cross-bearers Will Be Repaid with Eternal Life (16:13–28)

Matthew has a particular concern to describe the parousia as the time when debts are collected and deeds are repaid. There are hints of a coming settling of accounts in earlier passages such as the Sermon on the Mount, but it is not until Jesus begins predicting his passion that this concern takes center stage.¹⁰ After Peter confesses Jesus as "the Christ, the Son of the living God" (16:16), Jesus begins to explain to the disciples what this means: "From then Jesus began showing his disciples that it was necessary for him to go to Jerusalem and to suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed and on the third day be raised" (16:21).¹¹ This prediction is repugnant to Peter: "And taking him aside Peter began to rebuke him saying 'Far be it from you Lord! This will certainly not happen to you!' But turning, Jesus said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a trap to me because you are not thinking the things of God (*ta tou theou*) but the things of people (*ta tōn anthrōpōn*)'" (16:21–23).¹² Peter's seemingly reasonable objection is condemned by Jesus as human rather than divine thinking.

In the teaching that follows in 16:24–28, Jesus commences a bit of remediation for the disciples in "the things of God." He begins by explaining that the path of death and resurrection is not his alone but theirs as well: "Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'If anyone wants to come behind me, let him deny himself and take

10 See Nathan Eubank, "Storing up Treasure with God in the Heavens: Celestial Investments in Matthew 6:1–21," forthcoming in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*.

11 At first glance Matt. 16:21–28 would seem to have a tenuous relationship to the preceding material. The words "from then on he began ..." make the break between Peter's confession (16:13–20) and the first passion and resurrection prediction (16:21–28) stronger than in the Markan parallel (8:27–31). Moreover, verse 21 marks the beginning of Jesus' decisive turn to Jerusalem and the cross. Nevertheless, verses 21–28 continue both the topic (Jesus' identity) and the central players (Jesus and Peter) of the preceding section. Ulrich Luz notes that 16:21–28 is a chiasmic reversal of 16:13–20; see Ulrich Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* [The Gospel according to Matthew], 4 vols.; Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 1/1–4 (Düsseldorf: Benziger, 1990–2002), 2.486.

12 Note "the things of God" (*ta tou theou*) that one must "repay" (*apodote*) in 22:21.

up his cross and follow me” (16:24). He then goes on to unfold the logic of these strange words:

For whoever wants to save his life (*psychē*) will lose it, and whoever loses his life (*psychē*) for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a person if he gains the whole world but forfeits his life (*psychē*)? Or what will a person give in exchange for his life (*psychēs*)? For the Son of Man is about to come in the glory of his Father with his angels, and then he will repay to each according to his deeds. (16:25–27)

Verses 24–26 are nearly identical to the Markan parallel (8:34–37). Matthew, however, goes on to provide a detail in v. 27 that is not found in Mark or Luke: “For the Son of Man is about to come in the glory of his Father with his angels, and then *he will repay to each according to his deeds*.” Only in Matthew’s Gospel is cross-bearing necessary because of the coming “repayment.”¹³

To understand Jesus’ explanation of the necessity of cross-bearing it is also important to note the wordplay on the two different meanings of *psyche*: (1) present earthly life, and (2) eternal life.¹⁴ Jesus’ disciples must follow him in losing their earthly lives to be repaid with eternal life. Verse 26 explains why one should take the bold step of following Jesus in his cross-bearing: “For what will it profit a person if he gains the whole world but loses his [eternal] life?” It is folly to cling to “the world,” including one’s present life, because the more precious possession is one’s *psychē* in the world to come. The next line develops this further: “Or what will a person give in exchange for his [eternal] life?” (16:26). The implied answer to this rhetorical question is, of course, “nothing.” No matter how much earthly wealth one amasses it can never purchase eternal life. As Psalm 49:7–9 puts it, “Truly, no ransom avails for one’s life, there is no price one can give to God for it. For the ransom of life is costly, and can never suffice that one should live on forever and never see the grave” (NRSV).¹⁵ In the day of judgment no one can present

13 Though the parallel passages in Mark and Luke do not describe the recompense of cross-bearing as “payment,” the idea that eternal life would be “repaid” to the righteous is fairly well-attested in early Jewish and Christian texts. For instance, 2 Macc. 12:45 refers to resurrection as the “splendid favor that is stored up for those who sleep in godliness.” Wisd. 2:22 describes the afterlife of the godly as the “wages of holiness.” *Pss. Sol.* 9:5 says that “the one who does righteousness treasures up life for himself with the Lord.” 1 Tim. 6:19 says that those who give alms store up a foundation that allows them to take hold of true life.

14 This is an example of the rhetorical device known as *antanaclasis*. For another example of *antanaclasis* in the synoptic tradition see T. J. Lang, “You will desire to see and you will not see [it]: Reading Luke 17.22 as Antanaclasis,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 33 (2011): 281–302.

15 Davies and Allison link Matt. 16:26 to Ps. 49. See W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, 3 vols., International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988–1997), 2.674.

God with earthly treasures and purchase eternal life.¹⁶ Thus, while cross-bearing may seem ridiculous to those “thinking the things of people,” it is in fact the more prudent course of action. No one can store up enough earthly treasure to purchase eternal life. It makes more sense to follow Jesus in giving one’s present life in order to be repaid with eternal life in the resurrection.

One other detail in this passage needs to be noted. When Jesus says that anyone who would follow him must give his life and so receive it in the coming repayment, he is explaining not only the logic of Christian faithfulness and resurrection but also his own mission. There is a tight, organic unity between Jesus’ first passion and resurrection prediction in 16:21–23, and the explanation that follows in verses 24–28.¹⁷ The latter section is an explanation of the path that Jesus and all who follow him must take, over against Peter’s “human” thinking: total self-abandonment is necessary because stockpiles of earthly possessions will be useless in the eschatological repayment of deeds. An important implication of the unity of verses 21–28 is that it is not only the eschatological repayment of Jesus’ followers under discussion but the repayment of Jesus himself as well—indeed, it is Jesus’ claim that he will die and be raised that initiates the discussion.

It is the message of Jesus’ coming death and resurrection to which Peter objects and which Jesus defends. Thus, it is not only followers of Jesus who will be repaid for their cross-bearing with eternal life but also Jesus, as the passive infinitive *egerthēnai* (“to be raised”) indicates.¹⁸ As noted above, Matthew repeatedly portrays Jesus doing the very things that Jesus says earn heavenly treasure. In other words, the life to which the Matthean Jesus calls his disciples is the life that he himself lives. An important and neglected implication of verses 21–28 taken as a whole is that Jesus’ resurrection is the repayment he will receive from his Father for obediently submitting to rejection and death (26:39, 42).

The Thrones of the Son of Man and the Apostles (19:16–29)

The close link between Jesus’ fate and the fate of the disciples continues to unfold in the account of the rich young man. After telling the disciples about his coming death and resurrection for the first time in 16:21, he repeats the prediction in Galilee in 17:22. Then they go to Judea where they encounter the rich young man (19:16–22). Jesus then predicts his death and resurrection for the third time (20:17–19), and they ascend to Jerusalem.

The passage begins with the man’s quest for “eternal life”: “Teacher, what good must I do to have eternal life?” (19:16). Jesus responds by first telling him to obey the commandments and then by calling him to “go sell your possessions

16 See Luke 12:13–21; 17:33.

17 Luz, *Matthäus*, 2.486–87.

18 This point is obscured by the scholarly habit of referring to Jesus’ passion and resurrection predictions as “passion predictions.”

and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in the heavens, then come, follow me." This call to renunciation recalls Jesus' earlier words to the disciples: "If anyone wants to come behind me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (16:24). Self-denial, for the rich man, means giving away all his possessions. Like 16:21–27, this passage describes the self-denial that is necessary to follow Jesus and earn the heavenly treasure required to enter the kingdom. Moreover, like the Markan parallel, the passage appears after the first two passion and resurrection predictions and immediately before the third. The placement of the story suggests it is a specific example of how a would-be follower of Jesus may take up his cross.¹⁹

The discussion that ensues after the young man goes away offers further illumination of the links between cross-bearing, heavenly treasure, and eternal life. When Jesus declares the impossibility of a rich person entering the kingdom, Peter asks, "Behold, we have left everything (*hēmeis aphēkamen*) and followed you. What then will there be for us?" (19:27). Jesus replies,

Truly I say to you that you who have followed me, in the new age, when the Son of Man sits on his throne of glory, you yourselves also will sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And whoever left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields on account of my name will receive a hundred times as much and will possess eternal life. (Matt. 19:28–29)"

Jesus' response underscores again what he had said in 16:13–28: those who follow Jesus will be recompensed like Jesus. A new element emerges in this passage, however; Jesus says that in the new age the apostles will share not only in his resurrection but also in his rule as Son of Man. For the moment Jesus does not address the disciples' ongoing failure to grasp that following him means bearing crosses. Instead, he responds quite straightforwardly to Peter, promising the apostles thrones alongside the Son of Man.

What does this mention of the enthronement of the Son of Man evoke at this point in the narrative? Most agree that Daniel 7 has had some influence on this passage, though opinions differ as to whether this is a clear allusion or a faint echo.²⁰ Daniel 7 depicts four beasts that represent Gentile kings making war against "the holy ones" (Dan. 7:25; OG [Old Greek] 7:8). Then Daniel goes on

19 Commenting on the Markan parallel, Gary Anderson (*Sin*, 167–168) notes that the juxtaposition of this encounter with the passion predictions is not without significance: "The giving up of all one's wealth was construed to be one way of losing one's life on behalf of the gospel. Just as the inner core of the disciples found the crucifixion to be shocking, so the young man finds the giving up of all his wealth to be a sacrifice beyond calculation."

20 For example, Hagner (*Matthew 14–28*, Word Biblical Commentary 33b [Dallas: Word Books, 1995] 565) says that this saying "alludes to Dan. 7:9." Robert Gundry (*Matthew: A Commentary on his Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*, 2d ed. [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans,

to describe “thrones” and one like a son of man coming (*ērchetō*) on the clouds of heaven to the Ancient of Days and receiving authority (*edothē autō exousia*) over all people (Dan. 7:9–17).

Many have argued that in Daniel the one like a son of man is a symbol for all Israel rather than a messianic figure, noting that the kingdom given to him is subsequently given to “the holy ones of the Most High.”²¹ At least as early as the first century, however, Jews and Christians read this passage as an enthronement of the Messiah.²² Daniel 7 is an important messianic text in Matthew, conspicuously recurring at a number of key points in the narrative, including three unmistakable occurrences after 19:28, namely, 24:30, 25:31, and 26:63–64. The recurrence of allusions and quotations from Daniel 7 in passages referring to Jesus’ coming triumph increases the likelihood that other, less obvious allusions are significant, such as the risen Jesus’ claim in 28:18 that “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me (*edothē moi pasa exousia en ouranō kai epi tēs gēs*),” or the reference in 16:27 to the Son of Man “coming” (*erchesthai*) in glory to render judgment on all people.²³ James D. G. Dunn notes:

Within the Gospel tradition, the influence of Dan 7:9–14 is most noticeable in regard to Matthew. ... [T]hree of Matthew’s allusions to Daniel 7 are distinctive to Matthew [10:23; 25:31; 28:18], Matthew strengthens the Daniel 7 allusion in another four verses [16:27–28; 19:28; 24:30], and two verses show awareness of the way the Similitudes of Enoch developed Daniel’s son of man vision [19:28; 25:31].²⁴

1994], 393) is less confident: “Jesus seems to have drawn his promise from Dan 7:9–27.” Other commentators simply make no mention of Daniel 7 here.

21 See Joel Marcus’s appendix on “the Son of Man” in Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 27a (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 528–532, especially 528. Others have suggested that the holy ones are angels. See John J. Collins, *Daniel: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 304–318.

22 See Donald Juel, *Messianic Exegesis: Christological Interpretation of the Old Testament in Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 162–164; Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 528–532.

23 The argument from recurring or clustering was articulated first by Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 30. The concise formulation in *The Conversion of the Imagination: Paul as Interpreter of Israel’s Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), is helpful: “When we find repeated Pauline quotations of a particular OT passage, additional possible allusions to the same passage become more compelling” (37).

24 James D. G. Dunn, “The Danielic Son of Man in the New Testament,” in *The Book of Daniel: Composition and Reception*, 2 vols.; eds. John J. Collins and Peter W. Flint (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2001), 2.538. Juel (*Messianic Exegesis*, 158–161) considers Matthew 16:27–28; 19:28; 24:27–44; 25:31; and 26:64 all “indisputable” allusions to Daniel 7. He considers 10:23, 24:44, and 28:18 “likely” allusions.

Dunn's redactional argument complements the argument from recurrence; Matthew depicts Jesus' triumph in language drawn from Daniel 7's narrative of a triumphant "Son of Man" to whom authority and kingship are given.

The probable Danielic background of Jesus' words in 19:28–29 illuminates Jesus' claim that the twelve will receive thrones when the Son of Man sits on his throne of glory. The plural "thrones" in Daniel 7:9 has engendered a great deal of speculation about who exactly would sit on them.²⁵ For Matthew, the thrones are for Jesus, who will sit at the right hand of his Father (26:64; compare Ps. 110:1), and for the twelve apostles who will receive them as recompense for following Jesus. In addition to this, anyone who leaves possessions behind will receive a hundred times as much and eternal life. Matthew underscores once again the unity between the path that Jesus takes and what he requires from his followers. In 16:21–28, Jesus explains that, just as he must die and be raised to life, all who would follow him must lose their lives and so regain them when the Son of Man returns to repay everyone for their deeds. The discussion following the departure of the rich young man brings further clarity to this picture; those who leave everything behind and follow Jesus will be repaid with a share in his rule as Son of Man.

The tone of 19:27–29 is almost triumphalistic. Despite the unwarranted conjecture of numerous scholars, there is no hint that Peter's question is in any way unseemly.²⁶ Jesus' response is disarmingly straightforward; Peter and the other apostles will take thrones alongside of the Son of Man, and everyone who leaves their possessions behind will receive a hundred times as much.

The contrast with 16:21–28 is striking; that passage also spoke of the recompense that followers of Jesus would receive, but the accent was on the necessity to follow Jesus in giving one's life in order to receive it back, a message that disturbs the apostles (see also 17:22–23) and incites conflict between Jesus and Peter. In 19:16–29, however, there is no explicit mention of the cross—though Jesus defined "following" as cross-bearing in 10:38 and 16:24—and Peter seems blithely unaware that following the Son of Man and sharing his enthronement means giving one's life.

This passage leaves one loose thread that will become important in Matthew 20:17–28. While the emphasis of 19:16–29 is on the danger of wealth and the generous repayment awaiting those who renounce their possessions, verse 26 dangles a hint that some provision will be made for those who, like the rich young man, do not store up treasure in heaven because "all things are possible with God." This point is further developed in the following parable, which indicates that God will

25 On the interpretation of the "thrones" in the NT and rabbinic literature see Craig A. Evans, "Daniel in the New Testament: Visions of God's Kingdom," in *The Book of Daniel: Composition and Reception*, 2 vols.; eds. John J. Collins and Peter W. Flint (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2001), 2.516–519.

26 For example, see France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 741.

indeed pay his workers as he promised, but that he is also inclined to pay those who have done less work far more than they deserve.²⁷ At this point in the narrative this generosity is hinted at, but not explained in detail, though Matthew has already indicated that Jesus has come to save his people from the debt of their sin.²⁸ The logic of this salvation finally emerges with full clarity in 20:17–28.

Thrones Are the Recompense of Cross-bearers (20:17–28)

The discourse following the rich young man's departure concludes with the parable of the workers in the vineyard. It is followed by the third, final, and most detailed passion and resurrection prediction (20:17–19), which marks Jesus' decisive and final move toward Jerusalem.²⁹ Immediately afterward Jesus is accosted by the mother of the sons of Zebedee, who has apparently heard about the thrones the Twelve are to receive in the coming kingdom and wants the best ones to be given to her sons. While Mark 10:17–45 features a similar discussion of cross-bearing and repayment, Matthew's inclusion of Jesus' promise in 19:27—that the Twelve will sit on thrones—foreshadows the coming dispute about who will have the best places alongside Jesus in 20:20–28, thereby tightening the narrative unity and increasing the Danielic overtones.

Since 16:21 Jesus has explained to the disciples that he and everyone who would follow him must give their lives in order to be repaid with eternal life. Yet, it appears that James and John are fixated on one aspect of this teaching, namely, that they are to have the thrones mentioned in Daniel 7. Jesus' response cuts straight to the heart of the matter: "You [plural] do not know what you are asking."³⁰ If James and John had understood what Jesus taught them, they would have realized that enthronement with the Son of Man is the repayment for following him in his cross-bearing.³¹ Jesus then clarifies the nature of James' and John's misapprehension: "Are

27 See Nathan Eubank, "What Does Matthew Say about Divine Recompense? On the Misuse of the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (20:1–16)" forthcoming in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*.

28 See the discussion of Matt. 1:1–3:12 in Eubank, *Wages of Cross-Bearing*, 109–132.

29 Apart from 20:17–19, all of 19:16–20:28 is united by the theme of God's repayment for following Jesus. For this reason, W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann consider this final passion and resurrection prediction a foreign insertion that breaks the flow of thought (see W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann, *Matthew: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 26 [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971], 239). Yet, from the first prediction in 16:21 onward, Matthew shows that it is those who follow Jesus in cross-bearing who have treasure in heaven and eternal life. Thus, Albright and Mann ironically repeat the failure of the disciples to see that heavenly thrones are attained by way of the cross.

30 Unlike the Markan parallel (10:35), Matthew portrays the mother of the sons of Zebedee asking for the best thrones on behalf of her sons (20:20). Jesus' responds in the plural, thereby including the sons in his rebuke.

31 This point is further underscored by the language of sitting at Jesus' right and left, which is the same as the description of the revolutionaries crucified at Jesus' right and left in 27:38. Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 486;

you able to drink the cup which I myself am about to drink?" In the prophets and post-biblical Jewish and Christian literature, "cup" could refer to God's judgment or more generally to a person's fate or death.³² Raymond Brown pointed out that James and John are probably not being invited to drink the cup of God's wrath for sin but are rather challenged to drink the cup of suffering that Jesus will drink.³³ Jesus thus intimates that they are, in effect, asking to be crucified with him.³⁴ The thrones are to be repayment for cross-bearing.

The request incites discord among the disciples, who become angry with James and John (20:24). Jesus continues his catechesis, this time contrasting the Son of Man with the Gentile kings:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles rule them, and great ones (*hoi megaloi*) exercise dominion over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom-price (*lytron*) for many. (20:25–28)

In correcting the disciples, Jesus draws on Daniel 7 in order to make a crucial distinction: one cannot join the Son of Man in his glory by emulating the Gentile kings he opposes.³⁵ If the Twelve would occupy twelve thrones along with the Son of Man then they must give their lives as he does rather than ruling as do the Gentiles.³⁶ Here the link between wage-earning behavior and Jesus' own actions is

Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 3.88. Also, unlike Mark, Matthew says that the mother of the sons of Zebedee witnessed the crucifixion (27:56).

32 For example, see *Testament of Abraham* 1:3; 16:11–12; *Targum Neofiti* on Gen. 40:23 and Deut. 32:1; *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 14:2. Luz, *Matthäus*, 3.161–162.

33 Raymond Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, 2 vols.; Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 1.169–170.

34 See 26:39.

35 Brant Pitre's (*Jesus, the Tribulation, and the End of the Exile*, [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005], 390) comments on the Danielic imagery in the Markan parallel apply: "The images of the disciples 'sitting' (presumably on 'thrones', see Dan. 7:10, 26; Mark 10:37) with a 'son of man' (Dan. 7:14; Mark 10:45) who has been given 'glory' (Dan. 7:14; Mark 10:37)—all of these presume the Danielic vision of the 'people of the saints of the Most High' being given the eternal 'kingdom' (Dan. 7:27, cf. 18, 22) ... [E]ven Jesus' image of 'the great' (*hoi megaloi*) Gentile kings 'lording it over' [*katakryrieuō*] their subjects (Mark 10:42) may also be drawing on the Danielic images of the 'great beasts'—who are, of course, *Gentile kings* (Dan. 7:3)—and those Gentiles rulers who will 'lord it over many' during the end times (Dan. 11:39 LXX Theod.)."

36 Since Kenneth W. Clark's study ("The Meaning of [*kata*]kyrieuein" in *Studies in New Testament Language and Text: Essays in Honor of George D. Kilpatrick on the Occasion of his sixty-fifth Birthday*, *Novum Testamentum Supplements* 44, ed. J. K. Elliot [Leiden: Brill, 1976], 100–105) most have agreed that *katakryrieuō* lacked the negative force of the English idiom "to lord it over." The contrast in this passage, then, is not between abuse of power and right lordship, but on ruling

finally made explicit; the path to ruling with the Son of Man is one of following his example. Even the wage that Jesus earns is not for himself, at least not primarily, but is the ransom-price for others.

A brief summary is in order: in Matthew 16:13–28 Jesus announces that he is going to be killed and raised from the dead and that his followers must do likewise because cross-bearers will be “repaid” with eternal life, a treasure that no earthly possession could purchase.³⁷ In 19:16–29 further nuance is provided: those who renounce their possessions to follow Jesus will be repaid not only with eternal life but also with a share in the coming reign of the Son of Man, including thrones for the apostles. Then, in 20:17–28 the sons of Zebedee attempt to seize the best thrones for themselves. Jesus counters this request by intimating that they are asking to be crucified with him and telling all the apostles yet again that that they must give their lives if they are to rule with the Son of Man. In a nutshell: *these three passages indicate that Jesus and his followers must give their lives in order to be repaid with the eternal reign spoken of in Daniel 7*. Or, as Jesus puts it at the conclusion of the Beatitudes, “Blessed are those who are persecuted on account of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of the heavens. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and say all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your wage is great in the heavens” (Matt. 5:10–12).³⁸

A new element emerges in 20:28. The repayment that Jesus earns by giving his life is described as a ransom-price for many. In other words, the “repayment” or “treasure” that Jesus’ cross-bearing earns is not only for himself but for others as well. Before unpacking the significance of this for understanding how Jesus saves his people from their sins, it is necessary to take a closer look at the meaning of the ransom saying itself.

The Price of Release for Many

There is a vast amount of scholarly literature on Matthew 20:28 (the parallel is in Mark 10:45), much of which is not directly relevant here because it focuses on the pre-Markan origins of the saying and the question of whether or not the saying was originally drawn from Isaiah 53.³⁹ Davies and Allison list a number of intriguing parallels between the saying and the Hebrew text of Isaiah,⁴⁰ but, as has often

as do the Gentiles and Jesus, who gives his life. In other words, the critique of Gentile rulers is more profound than a condemnation of corruption; any that do not follow Jesus in giving in their lives cannot lead.

37 See also 5:2–12; 6:1–24; 13:44–46.

38 See the similar argument of Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, pt. 3, q. 48, art. 1, response.

39 See, for example, Scot McKnight, “The Authenticity of the Ransom Sayings,” in *Jesus and His Death: Historiography, the Historical Jesus, and Atonement Theory* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2005). For more extensive bibliographic information see Eubank, *Wages of Cross-Bearing*, 148, n. 35.

40 Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 3.95–97.

been noted since C. K. Barrett and Morna Hooker made their classic cases against dependence on Isaiah 53, there are few verbal links between the saying and Isaiah 53 LXX.⁴¹ It seems likely that Isaiah's description of vicarious suffering had some influence on the saying, though neither Matthew nor Mark appears to have been interested in drawing attention to this link.

More importantly, however, the debate over Isaianic influence has distracted scholars from a number of important clues to the meaning of the saying in its Matthean context. Regardless of whether the saying alludes more or less faintly to Isaiah, Jesus' gift of his life as a ransom-price is in deep continuity with Matthew's description of the plight of those Jesus came to save and with the recompense of righteous cross-bearing.

Discussion of the ransom saying has been distracted not only by a preoccupation with Isaiah (and a corresponding neglect of its relationship to the Matthean narrative as a whole) but also by a tendency to equate *lytron* (usually translated "ransom") with several of its cognates, especially *lytroō*. Since David Hill's 1967 study, *Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings*, many scholars have claimed that the word *lytron* does not necessarily involve an actual exchange or payment.⁴² Rather, it is claimed that in the Septuagint *lytron* and its cognates were used to refer to "deliverance" or "salvation" without any hint of a ransom-price being paid. For instance, while commenting on Matthew 20:28, Eugene Boring writes:

Matthew adopts Mark's picture of Jesus' life as a "ransom," but does not elaborate it into a doctrine of the atonement (as Mark does not). The fact that Jesus' death effects forgiveness of sins and entering into a new covenant life with God (26:28) is important to Matthew, but he is not concerned to speculate on *how* this is "explained." "Ransom" (*lytron*) in the LXX had already lost its specific idea of release by paying off the captor and had come to mean simply "rescue," "deliver" as an act of God's power (e.g., Exod. 6:6; Deut. 7:8).⁴³

41 See C. K. Barrett, "The Background of Mark 10:45," in *New Testament Essays*, ed. A. J. B. Higgins (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1959), 1–18; Morna Hooker, *Jesus and the Servant: The Influence of the Servant Concept of Deutero-Isaiah in the New Testament* (London: S.P.C.K., 1959).

42 See David Hill, *Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings: Studies in the Semantics of Soteriological Terms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967). Hill concludes: "the *lytron*-words" should be interpreted "in terms of 'deliverance' or 'emancipation,' except when the context expresses or implies a payment made to gain freedom" (81). See also Stanislas Lyonnet and Léopold Sabourin, *Sin, Redemption, and Sacrifice: A Biblical and Patristic Study* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1970), 79–103.

43 Eugene Boring, "The Gospel of Matthew," *The New Interpreter's Bible* 8 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 399 (my emphasis).

More recently, Charles Talbert has argued that “There is nothing in the term [*lytron*] that demands an elaborate soteriological theory. It simply means that Jesus is acting on others’ behalf in his ministry.”⁴⁴ Like Boring, Talbert appeals to the LXX to substantiate his claim:

In Jer. 15:20–21 LXX, Yahweh says to Jeremiah, “I am with you to save you and to deliver you ... and I will ransom [*lytrōsomai*] you.” In the parallelism, save, deliver, and ransom are synonyms. In Jer. 27:34 LXX (50:34 Eng.), when Yahweh says he is the one who ransoms [*ho lytroumenos*] Israel, it is in the context of his defeat of Israel’s enemies (deliverance). In Jer. 38:11 LXX (31:11 Eng.), when the Lord has ransomed [*elytrōsato*] Jacob, it means that Yahweh has delivered him out of the hands of stronger foes (return from exile). Ransom is, then, synonymous with salvation and deliverance.⁴⁵

There is an initial plausibility to Boring’s and Talbert’s argument. In addition to denoting the payment of the price of release (for example, Lev. 25:48), the verb *lytroō* is indeed also used in the LXX with no apparent reference to the payment of any price.

Surprisingly, however, neither Boring nor Talbert cites a single verse that actually includes the noun *lytron*, the word Matthew uses.⁴⁶ There is good reason for this odd omission: the noun *lytron* is never used in the LXX, Josephus, Philo—or, according to BDAG⁴⁷ and Liddell and Scott, anywhere else—to mean simply “rescue” or “deliver” as Boring and Talbert claim. It always refers to some price or exchange.

In the LXX the noun *lytron* denotes the price paid to redeem the life of the negligent owner of a deadly ox (Exod. 21:30), the price paid to avert a plague (Exod. 30:12), the price to redeem a slave (Lev. 19:20; 25:51–52; Isa. 45:13), the price paid to regain land (Lev. 25:24–26), the price to recover the tithe from the land (Lev. 27:31), the payment, paid either with money or with the lives of the Levites, to redeem the lives of the first-born of Israel (Num. 3:12, 46, 48–49, 51; 18:15), the price paid to redeem the life of a murderer (Num. 35:31–32), the price paid to

44 Charles Talbert, *Matthew*, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 241. See also France, *Matthew*, 761.

45 Talbert, *Matthew*, 761.

46 For example, the verb *lytroō* is used in Exod. 6:6 (LXX), cited by Boring, where God says “I will deliver you from slavery and will redeem (*lytrōsomai*) you with a raised arm and great judgment.” Similarly, Deut. 7:8 says “the Lord brought you out with a strong hand and raised arm and redeemed (*elytrōsato*) you from a house of slavery.”

47 William F. Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (3rd ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

appease a cuckolded husband (Prov. 6:35), and the money that a rich person may be forced to pay if threatened (Prov. 13:8). Other relevant literature reveals more of the same.⁴⁸ In short, *lytron* always refers to some sort of payment or exchange.⁴⁹ The claim made by Talbert, Boring, Hill and others—that no payment is in view in Matthew 20:28—is utterly without warrant.⁵⁰

It is not difficult to ascertain why *lytroō* came to be used in contexts where there is no payment in view, while *lytron* always retained the clear sense of some payment. If *lytroō* originally meant to pay a price for deliverance it would not be hard for its range to expand to include deliverance in the generic sense. The cognates *lytrōsis* and *apolytrōsis* are abstract and could expand on the same lines. *Lytron*, however, denoted the price itself and was therefore less susceptible to being used to refer to redemption without an actual payment or exchange. For this reason, and in light of the ambiguity of the English word “ransom,” which, like *lytroō*, can denote redemption with or without payment, it would seem best to translate *lytron* as “price of release” (as LSJ suggests) or as “ransom-price.”

Having addressed the question of Isaianic influence and the misconceptions about the semantic range of *lytron*, we are now in a position to discuss the significance of Jesus’ ransom saying in Matthew 20:28 against the backdrop of the larger narrative. The ransom saying evokes two major motifs in the Gospel: (1) the deliverance from captivity, and (2) the earning of heavenly treasure.

Deliverance from Captivity

As already noted, the word *lytron* was commonly used to refer to the price paid to free a captive, whether prisoners of war, slaves, or debtors.⁵¹ For instance, Josephus says that Ptolemy gained the release of the Jewish slaves in Egypt by paying *lytra* to the soldiers who had captured them.⁵² As noted above, the LXX also frequently uses *lytron* to refer to the money paid to redeem slaves (Lev. 19:20; 25:51–52; Isa.

48 For example, Josephus uses *lytron* to refer to the price paid to free captives (*The Jewish Antiquities*, 12:28, 33, 46; 14:371; 15:156; *Jewish War* 1.274, 1.384, 419), the price paid to recover a brother’s dead body (*Jewish Antiquities*, 1.325), and a costly item given to save other costly items: *lytron anti pantōn* (*Ant.* 14:107).

49 Max Wilcox (“On the Ransom-Saying in Mark 10:45c, Matt. 20:28c,” in *Geschichte-Tradition-Reflexion: Festschrift für Martin Hengel zum 70. Geburtstag*, eds. Hubert Cancik et al.; 3 vols. [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996], 173–86) rightly takes the concreteness of *lytron* seriously, but then reads the saying to mean that Jesus gives himself as the ransom-price that helps his followers avoid being captured, a proposal with no merit as far as the First Gospel is concerned.

50 Hill’s lengthy study adduces only one example, Prov. 13:8, of the noun *lytron* being used without any hint of payment or exchange (Hill, *Greek Words*, 61). Yet, even this verse refers to the money a rich person may be forced to pay if threatened.

51 See Lidell-Scott-Jones, *Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. *lytron*; K. Kertelge, “Lytron,” *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, 2:364–66.

52 *Jewish Antiquities*, 12:28, 33, 46. See also *Jewish Antiquities*, 14:371; 15:156; *Jewish War*, 1.274, 1.384, 419.

45:13), as well as the payment to redeem the lives of the first-born of Israel (Num. 3:12, 46, 48–49, 51; 18:15).

The link between the payment of a *lytron* and the end of captivity is strengthened by the many biblical texts that describe God ransoming Israel from captivity using the verb *lytroō*.⁵³ For instance, in Exodus 6:6 God tells Moses to tell the Israelites, “I will ransom (*lytrōsomai*) you with uplifted arm.” In Micah 6:4 God recalls the Exodus: “For I brought you from the land of Egypt and ransomed (*elytrōsamēn*) you from the house of slavery.”⁵⁴

Unsurprisingly, prophecies of the end of later exiles use this same language. In the promise of restoration in Isaiah 43:1 God says, “Fear not, for I have ransomed (*elytrōsamēn*) you.” Jeremiah 31:11 (38:11 LXX) says that “the Lord has ransomed (*elytrōsato*) Jacob and has delivered him from stronger hands.” Similarly, Micah 4:10 promises that “the Lord your God will ransom (*lytrōsetai*) you from the hand of your enemies.” Other examples could be cited.⁵⁵ Combined with Matthew’s description of Jesus as the one spoken of by the prophets who would save his people from exile, it is likely that Jesus’ claim to give the ransom-price for the many evokes the Septuagintal “ransoming” of the people, a biblical echo that is reinforced by the language of “the many,” a term commonly used to refer to exiles.⁵⁶

One might object that to shed light on Matthew 20:28 by appealing to the common Septuagintal use of *lytroō* is to commit the same blunder as Boring and others, namely, confusing the verb *lytroō* with the noun *lytron*. On the contrary, the suggestion here is that Jesus’ gift of his life as the price of release (*lytron*) for the many echoes the numerous biblical references to God “ransoming” (*lytroō*) his people. The switch from noun to verb could weaken the strength of the echo, but not eliminate it. Boring and others note that *lytroō* is sometimes used without any sense of payment or exchange and then assume that *lytron* was used in the same way. As we have seen, this assumption is mistaken.

The ransom-price for many would seem to presuppose that “the many” are enduring some sort of captivity from which they need to be ransomed. Yet, scholars have generally agreed that this apparent presupposition is never fleshed out in the course of Matthew’s narrative. That is, the suggestion that Jesus gives his life as the price of release suggests that “the many” endure some sort of captivity, but Matthew never develops or explains this suggestion. Davies and Allison state the problem clearly: “almost every question we might ask remains unanswered. What is the condition of ‘the many’? Why do they need to be ransomed?”⁵⁷ In

53 Pitre, *Jesus, the Tribulation, and the End of the Exile*, 404–417.

54 See also Ps. 78:42–55; Isa. 51:10–11.

55 Zech. 3:1; 10:8; Isa. 44:21–23; 51:11; 62:12; Jer. 50:33–34; Lam. 5:8; Hos. 13:14; Zeph. 3:15.

56 See Isa. 52:14–15; 53:11–12; Dan. 12:1–3; 1Q28 VIII, 12–14; IX, 18–20. See also Pitre, *Jesus, the Tribulation, and the End of the Exile*, 413–414.

57 Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 3.100

the absence of any explanation the ransom saying would seem to be “only an unexplained affirmation.”⁵⁸

Matthew, however, repeatedly describes the plight of those Jesus came to save in terms of captivity. Sin is debt, and the punishment for unresolved sin is debt-bondage. The prologue of the Gospel (1:1–3:12) describes Jesus’ people as in exile, and promises that Jesus will save them from their sins (1:21).⁵⁹ In 5:21–26 Jesus uses the image of debt-bondage, teaching that even the smallest sins against a brother will be repaid in Gehenna down to the last penny. In the Lord’s Prayer Jesus teaches his followers to pray “forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors” (6:12). This claim is given vivid expression in the parable of the unforgiving servant, which says that debtors (that is, those with unforgiven sin) who do not cancel the debts of others will be thrown into prison and will not get out until they repay all that they owe (18:34). *In sum: captivity for the debt of sin is the plight of both Jesus’ “people” who are in exile and of individual sinners.*

To return to Davies and Allison’s question, then: what is the condition of “the many”? It is debt-bondage and exile because of their sins. To whom is the price of release paid? For Matthew, it is paid to God, the “creditor” whom Jesus’ disciples ask to forgive their debts, and who will settle accounts with his servants (6:12; 16:27; 18:23–24; 25:19). This does not exclude the fact that, for Matthew, Jesus rescues his people from the power of the devil (for example, 4:1–11; 8:28–34; 12:22–28) and from wicked human authorities (for example, 2:1–23; 20:25–28; 21:12–21:46). To the perennial question of whether Jesus gives a ransom-price to God or the devil, however, Matthew gives an unequivocal answer: the *lytron* is paid to God. In sum: attention to the role of Matthew 20:28 in the narrative as a whole reveals that Jesus gives his life as the price of release for the many in debt-bondage.⁶⁰

The Price of Release as Heavenly Treasure

Another major question raised by the ransom-saying is how Jesus generates the price of release for the many. Since *lytron* denotes some sort of payment to release captives, what does this payment consist of and how does Jesus earn it?

Jesus earns the price of release by doing the very things he told his followers they must do to earn heavenly treasure: by taking up his cross and giving his life. After the first passion and resurrection prediction in 16:21, Jesus tells the disciples

58 Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 3.100. See also Luz, *Matthäus*, 3.166; John T. Carroll and Joel B. Green, “His Blood on Us and On Our Children: The Death of Jesus in the Gospel according to Matthew” in *The Death of Jesus in Early Christianity*, eds. John T. Carroll and Joel B. Green (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1995), 44; John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 826.

59 The prologue contains numerous hints that “exile” comes to an end when the debt of sin is repaid. See Eubank, *Wages of Cross-Bearing*, 108–132.

60 See the similar argument in Aquinas, *Summa*, pt. 3, q. 48, art. 4.

that they must take up their cross to find their lives (16:24–25). As noted above, Matthew provides a rationale for this claim: the Son of Man is about to repay everyone according to their deeds. In other words, the exhortation following the first passion and resurrection prediction is based on the promise that those who follow Jesus in his cross-bearing will be repaid at the Parousia.

As Jesus makes his way to Jerusalem this claim surfaces again: those who deny themselves and follow Jesus will receive a hundred times as much in return, and the apostles will receive thrones alongside the Son of Man (19:27–28). Immediately after this there erupts the dispute over who will receive the thrones closest to Jesus. In correcting the disciples Jesus points them again to his own mission: the Son of Man who triumphs over the Gentile kings did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as the price of release for the many. These words recall the message that Jesus has been repeating again and again: those who give up their lives will be repaid in the eschaton. Though the pre-history of the ransom saying remains mysterious, the logic of these words in Matthew's narrative is clear. *Jesus will earn the ransom-price for those trapped by the debt of sin by giving his life, just as he calls all who would follow him to earn heavenly treasure by giving their lives.*⁶¹

To first-century Jews familiar with Daniel's description of the Son of Man being "given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him" (7:14), Jesus' claim that the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve by giving his life would have been jarring, almost as if Jesus was deliberately contrasting his own identity with the figure in Daniel 7. Yet, as already noted, Matthew repeatedly describes Jesus' coming triumph as the triumph of the figure in Daniel 7, so it would seem that in applying this text to Jesus, Matthew does not deny that "all authority in heaven and on earth" is given to him (28:18). How does the Son of Man as servant relate to the Son of Man as the wielder of all authority? This is an implicit (not to mention *intriguing*) question running throughout 16:21–28, 19:16–29, and 20:17–28. How is it possible that Jesus, the Christ, who is also the Son of Man of Daniel 7, will reign if he is going to be crucified when he goes to Jerusalem?

Jesus answers this question several times while always keeping the similar destiny of his followers in view. In 16:21–28 he says that those who give their lives will be repaid with eternal life. Earthly possessions do not add up to eschatological victory. The treasure that matters is the treasure gained by cross-bearing. Then, in 19:16–20 Jesus says that those who renounce their possessions to follow him will

61 Thus, even if *lytron* could be used to mean "deliverance" or "redemption" with no exchange in view as Boring and others wrongly assert, the Matthean context would bring the importance of paying an actual price into to the foreground. Gustav A. Deissman noted that the ubiquity of the term *lytron* in reference to the manumission of slaves would have made it a particularly vivid image in early Christian circles. See Gustav A. Deissman, *Light from the Ancient East: The New Testament Illustrated by Recently Discovered Texts of the Graeco-Roman World*, trans. Lionel R. M. Strachan (New York: George H. Doran, 1927), 327–330.

receive a hundred times as much and eternal life, and the twelve apostles will receive twelve thrones alongside the Son of Man. Furthermore, it is implicit that the Son of Man receives his throne from God in return for his renunciation. Finally, in 20:17–28 Jesus explains again that the Son of Man, unlike the Gentile kings he opposes, conquers by giving his life. Or, if one combines this saying with the pericopae leading up to it, Jesus gives his life and is repaid with a glorious throne, eternal life, and with heavenly treasure that redounds not only to his own benefit but to those in arrears because of sin. Thus, the economy of divine recompense running throughout Matthew illuminates how the serving Son of Man becomes the triumphant Son of Man.⁶²

Matthew's repeated emphasis on debt-bondage and the divine repayment of cross-bearing also sheds light on the meaning of the preposition *anti* in the phrase *lytron anti pollōn* (ransom-price for many). There are a number of possible ways to understand the price of release being given *anti* here, the most popular probably being that of "substitution," that is, Jesus dies "in place of" the many.⁶³ Matthew uses *anti* this way in 2:22 ("Archelaus reigned over Judea in place of [*anti*] his father Herod") and in 5:38 ("You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for [*anti*] an eye, and a tooth for [*anti*] a tooth'"). Yet *anti* could also be used with a slightly different nuance that may be more appropriate for the context in Matthew 20: that of "payment for." For example, in 17:27 Jesus tells Peter to take the shekel he finds in the mouth of a fish and "give it to them for me and for you" (*dos autois anti emou kai sou*). The shekel is given to pay the debt that Jesus and Peter are thought to owe.

As we have seen, within Matthew "the many" are in debt-bondage, and the ransom-price is paid to set them free. Thus, *anti* in Matthew 20:28 chiefly indicates "payment for."⁶⁴ At the same time, however, it would be overzealous to exclude the sense of substitution entirely. The idea of payment or exchange is but a hair's breadth away from substitution, and the various possible meanings of words are not hermetically sealed off from each other in everyday speech. Nevertheless, Matthew's emphasis is decidedly on payment; "the many" are in bondage because of the debt of sin, and cross-bearing earns the *lytron*, the price of their release. For Matthew it is not the mere fact of Jesus' death that earns the ransom-price. There is little if any hint in Matthew that the crucifixion atones by absorbing God's wrath, or that the effects of sin required that God crush someone and so Jesus received this punishment instead of the many. Rather, it is Jesus' active, obedient giving of his life that earns a surplus of heavenly treasure.⁶⁵

62 See also the argument of Aquinas, *Summa*, pt. 3, q. 48, art. 1 as well as q. 49, art. 6.

63 See, for example, Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 583; Keener, *Matthew*, 488. See BDAG s.v. *anti* II.

64 BDAG s.v. *anti* III; LSJ s.v. *anti* III.3.

65 The words of David Bentley Hart ("A Gift Exceeding Every Debt: An Eastern Orthodox Appreciation of Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*," *Pro Ecclesia* 7 [1998]: 333–349), written in defense of Anselm, apply with almost equal suitability to Matthew: "It must not be overlooked that for Anselm it is not Christ's suffering as such that is redemptive (the suffering merely repeats sin's

Two Objections?

I have suggested that the description of Jesus' gift of his life as the "ransom-price" be taken to mean that Jesus' obedient cross-bearing earns wages with God that repay the debt of sin of the many, thereby saving them. There are two potential objections to this conclusion that need to be addressed.

The first is that this reading is simply too clever. It is unlikely, one might protest, that Matthew would have set forth any "elaborate soteriological theory," to use Talbert's phrase.⁶⁶ There are three things to say in response to this.

First, the argument is not that Matthew provides an elaborate theory. The narrative does not evince systematic reflection on the plight of humanity before God. Matthew's "soteriology"—if such a word is appropriate—leaves a number of significant questions unanswered. But Matthew's description of Jesus' saving activity is coherent.⁶⁷ That is, it is based on a few core assumptions that manifest themselves quite predictably throughout the narrative. People find themselves in bondage due to the debt of sin. Jesus was born to save them. He teaches them to earn treasure in heaven and avoid debt-bondage, and in 20:28 he says that the gift of his life—an action that Matthew repeatedly describes as wage-earning—is the price to set the many free. This is *how* Jesus saves his people from their sins. Again, questions remain: how do debtors receive this ransom-price? How does this vicarious payment relate to Matthew's many claims that earning heavenly treasure is necessary to enter the kingdom? Matthew provides no clear answers to these and other questions. Again, this is no elaborate soteriological theory. It is only this: the people are God's debtors and they find themselves in debt-bondage. Jesus takes up his cross to earn their ransom-price while also teaching them to do likewise.

The second response to the charge that this reading is too clever is this: though I have followed primarily a narrative approach rather than a redaction-centered one, the occasional redaction-critical glance can be quite instructive. Most of the key passages informing the argument are found only in Matthew. The focus on end of exile, the repayment of wages, and the promise that Jesus will "save his people from their sins" (1:21) in the birth narrative is uniquely Matthean, and Jesus' claim that he and John the Baptist will "fill up all righteousness" is redactional.⁶⁸ Much of the material on earning treasure in heaven in the Sermon on the Mount is only found in Matthew. Matthew alone describes the fate of unresolved sinners as

endlessly repeated and essential gesture), but rather his innocence; he recapitulates humanity by passing through all the violences of sin and death, rendering to God the obedience that is his due, and so transforms the event of his death into an occasion of infinite blessings for those to whom death is condign" (348).

66 Talbert, *Matthew*, 241.

67 I use the word "coherent" in contradistinction to "systematic," following E. P. Sanders ("Did Paul's Theology Develop?" in *The Word Leaps the Gap: Essays in Scripture and Theology in Honor of Richard B. Hays*, eds. J. Ross Wagner et al. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008], 325–350).

68 See Eubank (*Wages of Cross-Bearing*, 121–131) for an explanation of this translation.

debt-bondage two times (5:26; 18:23–35).⁶⁹ Only the Matthean Jesus teaches his followers to pray for debt cancellation (6:12). Matthew's discussion of the wages of missionaries and those who receive them (10:40–42) is much more extensive than in Mark and Luke. Only Matthew includes the parable of the hidden treasure (13:44), the parable of the pearl (13:45–46), the parable of the unforgiving servant (18:23–35), the parable of the workers in the vineyard (20:1–16), and the sheep and the goats pericope (25:31–46), all of which describe salvation in economic terms.

The discussions revolving around the passion and resurrection predictions and the journey to Jerusalem are quite similar to the Markan parallel, but it is Matthew alone who explains that cross-bearing is necessary because the Son of Man is about to repay cruciform lives with resurrection (16:27). Matthew alone expands the teaching on treasure in heaven in 19:27–28 to make it clear that the apostles, like Jesus, will be repaid with Danielic thrones.⁷⁰ This Matthean addition ties that passage together with the dispute over the best thrones in 20:17–28. It is impossible to deny, therefore, that Matthew has a special interest in sin as debt, cruciform deeds as earning wages, and in the redemption from sin that Jesus accomplished. The ransom-saying is of course not unique, being found in Mark and possessing a number of parallels in other early Christian literature.⁷¹ But only the most flat-footed redaction critic could claim that Matthew drowsily copied the Markan text in 20:28 when the saying fits so perfectly with scores of uniquely Matthean details leading up to it. Is it not more plausible that this uniquely Matthean material comprises the Evangelist's interpretation of the traditional Christian belief that Christ gave himself up as a ransom-price?

A third and final response to the charge that this reading is too clever is this: New Testament scholars resist attributing elaborate soteriological theories to early Christian texts because they are rightly wary of reading later theological concerns back into early Christianity. Yet, the soteriological schema described here is not drawn from the categories of later Christian theology but from Matthew's late first-century Jewish-Christian milieu. Like many other Jewish texts, Matthew assumes that sin incurs a debt and that righteous deeds earn treasure in heaven. Moreover, like many other Jewish texts, Matthew assumes that one's heavenly account is not simply a matter between the individual and God but that it is possible to benefit from the heavenly treasure earned by others. Matthew shares these common Jewish beliefs about sin, debt, and redemption but refracts them through the

69 Compare to Luke 12:59.

70 See the very different treatment of a similar saying in Luke 22:28–30.

71 For example, 1 Cor. 6:19b–20; 7:21–23; 1 Tim. 2:6; Titus 2:14; 1 Pet. 1:17–19; Rev. 5:9.

decisive event of Jesus' death and resurrection.⁷² Far from importing later Christian theology, then, this proposal situates the Gospel squarely in its historical context.

Now for the second potential objection: one might argue—and some have—that 20:28 cannot possess any great soteriological significance because it occurs in the context of exhortation.⁷³ It is a word of exhortation, some would claim, rather than speculation on how Jesus saves his people. There are two things to be said in response.

First, Matthew's moral vision is relentlessly christological. This can be seen in the myriad of connections between what Jesus himself does and what he tells his followers to do. In the series of exhortations leading up to Jesus' entry into Jerusalem Jesus repeatedly demands that his disciples follow him in losing their lives and then being repaid. Like the Christ hymn in Philippians 2:6–11, Matthew admonishes followers of Jesus to do what he did. Neither Matthew nor the letter to the Philippians reflects on Christ's kenosis and following glorification as would a systematic theologian—beginning from first principles and treating the Christ event and the Christian life in separate chapters—but this should not be confused with a lack of interest in Christ's work itself.⁷⁴ Far from undercutting its soteriological significance, the hortative context of 20:28 presents Jesus' saving work as both vicarious and as the template for the self-giving required of Jesus' followers. In Matthew, Jesus "saves" by showing his followers how to earn wages with God, but also by doing it for them.

Second, this objection assumes that the work of vicarious atonement is not something that Jesus' followers are able to participate in. As Talbert puts it, the ransom-saying "simply means that Jesus is acting on others' behalf in his ministry... If 20:28 gives Jesus's example for disciples to follow, it cannot include more than disciples can follow."⁷⁵ Talbert's idea may be correct in some theological systems, especially those that emphasize the complete inability of humankind to participate in their own salvation, but one should not assume this is the case in early Christian texts.

To take one particularly vivid example, in Colossians 1:24 Paul says "now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I fill up what is lacking in

72 See the observation of Pope Benedict XVI in the encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*: "The real novelty of the New Testament lies not so much in new ideas as in the figure of Christ himself" (12).

73 See, for example, Talbert, *Matthew*, 241.

74 Keener (*Matthew*, 488), states: "As in Philippians 2:1–11, however, the evangelists treat their audiences to this summary of Jesus' mission not to rehearse soteriology but to provide an active model for Christian living." The assumption that exhortation betrays a lack of interest in Jesus' work is unwarranted. See also J. Christopher Edwards, "Pre-Nicene Receptions of Mark 10:45// Matt. 20:28 with Phil. 2:6–8," *Journal of Theological Studies* 61 (2010): 194–199.

75 Talbert, *Matthew*, 241.

Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church."⁷⁶ Here Paul suffers vicariously on behalf of the church, seeing his trials as somehow contributing to the benefits wrought by Christ's trials. Similarly, given that Matthean ethics are cruciform in nature, that is, the disciples are told to do what Jesus does, it is at least implicit that the apostles are to follow Jesus in storing up treasure in heaven not just for themselves but for others. Instead of rejecting the soteriological significance of 20:28 because it occurs in the context of exhortation, it makes more sense to see Jesus' words as a call to the apostles to join him in earning heavenly treasure not only for themselves but for others. They are to follow him in giving their lives and then receiving "a hundred times as much" in return, heavenly treasures that overflow to the benefit of the many, just as Paul filled up what was lacking for the sake of the church, and just as the merits of the patriarchs accrued to the benefit of Israel.⁷⁷

Conclusion

Jesus' final admonition to the disciples before entering Jerusalem unites Matthew's depiction of Jesus as savior with the depiction of Jesus as exemplar and teacher. Before 20:28 Matthew stresses, on the one hand, what we might call salvation by imitation of Jesus, by taking up one's cross like him in order to be repaid with eternal life and a share in the rule of the Son of Man. On the other hand, there are numerous indications that, through Jesus, God would do for the people what they could not do for themselves: most notably, the prophecy that Jesus would save his people from their sins (1:21), his claim to fill up all righteousness (3:15), the hints that God is able to save those who have done little worthy of heavenly treasure (19:26; 19:30–20:16), and Jesus' claim that his blood is the blood of the covenant for the forgiveness of sins.⁷⁸

76 In his commentary on Colossians (n. 61), Thomas Aquinas notes that this verse could be misunderstood to mean that the passion of Christ was not sufficient for redemption. He cites 1 John 2:2 to refute this view before offering his solution: the merits of Christ are infinite, but God has ordained that every member of Christ's body should display some merits, not because of any lack on Christ's part, but so that all the saints would be conformed to Christ who suffered for the sake of the Church.

77 On the merits of the patriarchs in rabbinic theology see Solomon Schechter, *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology* (New York: Macmillan, 1909; repr., New York, Schocken Books, 1961), 171–189. On the transferability of merits in the OT as well as rabbinic literature see Gary A. Anderson, *Charity: The Place of the Poor in the Biblical Tradition* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press: forthcoming). For another NT example see Menahem Kister, "Romans 5:12–21 against the Background of Torah-Theology and Hebrew Usage," *Harvard Theological Review* 100:4 (2007): 391–424.

78 For a discussion of how these themes play out in the passion narrative see Eubank, *Wages of Cross-Bearing*, 169–198.

In 20:28 these two motifs, which wind their separate ways through the Gospel, finally converge and illuminate each other. Jesus' righteous deed is here described not just as an example—though it is that too—but as a vicarious payment of the price of release to liberate the many trapped by the debt of sin. Sinners are in debt to God and find themselves in debt-bondage. Jesus earns the ransom-price for them by doing the very thing he taught his followers to do to earn heavenly treasure: he gives his life.

One might ask, then, why anyone would need to store up treasure in heaven to acquire eternal life when Jesus has done it for them. If Jesus has earned the ransom-price there would seem to be no "last penny" for us to repay, no need to cancel the debts of others so that God would cancel our own debts, all debts having been made equally irrelevant. Does Jesus' payment on behalf of others render moot all of Jesus' own teaching about heavenly wages and debts?

This question is too complex to answer in full here, but I conclude by offering one observation.⁷⁹ As in other early Jewish texts, the divine economy in Matthew does not work by the logic of strict necessity. For instance, those who receive itinerant missionaries into their homes will be repaid at the Parousia as if they themselves had left everything behind (10:40–42), and those who do leave everything behind are repaid "a hundred times as much" (19:29). The divine economy is less like a zero-sum game and more like a family in which the parents enjoy enabling their children to be full participants in the family's day-to-day tasks.

This can be seen even more clearly in Matthew's description of Jesus' self-giving, which—far from precluding the wage earning of the disciples—is the ground and example of their own cross-bearing. Thus, it is not a matter of God's needing to generate the heavenly currency to release the many from debt-bondage; instead, it is a matter of pulling the disciples into the ambit of Jesus' own self-giving, multiplying heavenly treasure for themselves and for others. In light of this, it would be very strange indeed if the Matthean Jesus had not told his followers how to have their debts canceled and how to store up treasure in heaven; they are to become *teleios* (perfect) as their Father is *teleios*, and the heavenly treasure that Jesus earns for them is not so much the end of this process as it is the beginning.⁸⁰

79 For a more in-depth response to this question see Eubank, *Wages of Cross-Bearing*, 202–206.

80 Matt. 5:48; 19:21.