Ensooned in Maimonides’ *Commentary of the Mishnah Tractate Sanhedrin* between comments concerning the fundamental tenets of the Jewish faith and his well-known thirteen fundamental principles is a brief section on the days of the messiah. Somewhat surprisingly, Maimonides (AD 1135–1204) cites Isa. 42.4a to validate the proposition that following an extended reign the messiah will die. A translation reads as follows:

> And the Messiah will die, and his son will reign in his stead and then his grandson. God has already predicted his death in the verse, 
> ‘He shall not fail nor be crushed, till he have set the right in the earth.’

Maimonides’ usage provides but one, albeit late, example of Jewish messianic exegesis of Isa. 42.1–4. That he would appeal to this text in support of his understanding of the days of the messiah is not unexpected given its long history of usage within Jewish messianic thought. What is rather unusual, however, is that he would cite Isa. 42.4a to validate the messiah’s death.

Engaging in a messianic exegesis of his own nearly a millennium before, the author of the Gospel of Matthew also cites Isa. 42.1–4; however, in Matthew’s version of the text in 12.18–21, the reference to weakness and perhaps even death found in Isa. 42.4a is absent. This line of text has been excised from Matthew’s version of Isa. 42.4a (Matt. 12.20b) and an unknown piece of text inserted in its place (see the passages below). Despite Maimonides’ and Matthew’s common interest in the messiah, their

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1 Maimonides has understood ‘till’ in a temporal sense, thus subordinating the messiah’s death, when he would ‘fail’ and ‘be crushed’, to the establishment of ‘the right in the earth’.


3 Evidence of a pre-Christian messianic reading does exist. The Targums seem to contain early material that reads the passage messianically. See the discussions in chapters 3 and 5.
handlings of Isaiah’s text contrast markedly. Separated by a considerable span of time and evincing no reliable evidence of direct traditional links, these treatments give rise to the surprising judgment that the Jewish interpretation focuses upon the messiah’s frailty while the early Christian interpretation, as presented in Matthew’s text, seemingly disregards this emphasis. This omission from Matthew is rather curious given the widely held view that a ‘suffering servant’ motif is implicit in Matthew’s usage in 12.18–21 and undergirds a thoroughly motif of weakness and lowliness that is traditionally considered fundamental to Matthew’s portrait of Jesus. Such a presentation of these thematic elements appears to overstate Matthew’s intended emphasis.

Herein lies the problem: if Matthew’s text-form does not support the traditional presentation of a meek and lowly Jesus, then Matthew’s portrait of Jesus may be more complex than is otherwise thought. Such a proposition, however, raises a host of issues concerning Matthew’s presentation of Jesus and the role of the OT quotations in framing that portrait. In particular, his use of the formula quotations, of which Isa. 42.1–4 in 12.18–21 is but one. Although the process of determining the function of Isa. 42.1–4 and its influence upon Matthew’s portrait of Jesus, the Christ, within Matthew’s narrative may be beset with obstacles, a careful investigation of this topic has the potential to make a substantial contribution to our understanding of his richly textured and high christology. When the two passages are placed beside each other, the differences become more pronounced.

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Isaiah 42.1–4

1Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.

Matthew 12.18–21

18Here is my servant, whom I have chosen,
my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased.
I will put my Spirit upon him,
and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.

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4 In Matthew’s version, Isa. 42.4a is not the only verse to undergo modification and be stripped of an allusion to weakness. God’s sustenance of the servant also is excised from the text of Isa. 42.1a. See chapter 5.


6 Both passages are taken from the NRSV translation.
2 He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street;
3 a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice.
4 He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

19 He will not wrangle or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets.
20 He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smouldering wick until he brings justice to victory.
21 And in his name the Gentiles will hope.

Thesis

Views on the importance of Isa. 42.1–4 to Matthew as a whole range from the grand assessment, that the entire book of Matthew may swing on it, to the more modest which categorizes it as an example of simplistic ‘prediction-fulfilment’, or proof-texting, to validate merely a single event in the life of Jesus of Nazareth.7 Recent scholarship has tended to focus upon its role in Matthew’s depiction of Jesus the messiah. G. Barth’s statement is illustrative of this tendency: ‘By means of the quotation in 12.18–21 Matthew has especially underlined the humility and lowliness of Jesus … in which he proves himself the servant of God of Isa. 42.’8 Although Barth has touched upon a significant aspect of Matthew’s usage of the citation, his position has not received universal assent. J. Neyrey counters that such a portrait of Jesus does not necessarily square with the one the reader meets in the pericope immediately following the citation, for in 12.22ff. an apologetic component is present in Matthew’s account of Jesus’ conflict with the Pharisees that is somehow foreign to Barth’s

characterization. W. Rothfuchs points to the correlation between the majesty and power manifest in Jesus’ miracles and the servant texts with which the miracles are associated (Matt. 8.17 and 12.18–21). R. Schnackenburg, in an attempt to maintain *Hoheit und Niedrigkeit im Bild Jesu*, argues that one must preserve a connection between the present lowliness of the servant and his future victory. The wide variety of opinions concerning this text might lead a person to agree with C. Torrey’s assessment, ‘This [Matt. 12.18–21] is one of the best examples of Matthew’s way of quoting scripture. It has not been correctly explained hitherto, nor has its significance been perceived.’

If Isa. 42.1–4 were a straightforward affirmation of the humble servant, one might expect that this text would have played a more prominent role in the church’s liturgy, art or music. Yet J. Sawyer, in his recent work *The Fifth Gospel*, which catalogues the uses of passages from Isaiah throughout church history, observes that the text rarely, if ever, appears. It seems that the usage of this ‘servant’ text represents an early development in Christian thought that has unfortunately been either forgotten or little explored. While this quotation, and the ideas associated with it, may have suffered poor visibility in the succeeding eras of Christian history, I will argue that the image of the servant presented through Matthew’s anomalous text-form is central to his overall portrayal of Jesus and, ultimately, to his profound christology.

The aim of this book, then, is to explore Matthew’s use of Isa. 42.1–4. It is hoped that such an endeavour will divulge a more comprehensive understanding of its role in the Gospel, the results of which may then be extrapolated to explain the role of other OT usages as well. It will be argued that in 12.18–21 Matthew employs a redactionally nuanced quotation of Isa. 42.1–4, a quotation already in use in Jewish and early Christian traditions. Furthermore, he does so in order to capture aspects

14 Whether Matthew is himself responsible for the translation is a key question.
of Jesus’ character, identity, and mission that are integral to his portrayal of Jesus. Here he presents Jesus as the enigmatic Davidic messiah, who is surrounded by increasing hostility evidenced in his interactions with various people and groups in Matt. 11–13. The primary link between the quotation and its context is to be found in a developed contradistinction between injustice and justice. The Pharisees’ concern for strict adherence to halakhah, their unjust treatment of the people and concomitant failure as religious leaders are set against Jesus’ own concept of observance of the Law together with the justice evidenced in his care for the people as Davidic messiah.

To validate this thesis, it will be argued that Matthew’s usage of this formula quotation, and others, is bi-referential. In other words, the quotation contributes to the meaning of Matthew’s story on two levels. First, it possesses significance on the narrative, or linear, level and validates previous elements recounted in the life and ministry of Jesus. On a second level, its usage is fundamentally theological, that is, the passage is employed in light of the realities presented by the teachings and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth, the rejected messiah of Israel.

Problems

Previous studies of Matthew’s use of the Old Testament have been broad ranging, usually devoting a few pages to a particular citation and offering a brief analysis along with comments upon what ‘prompted’ the citation; hermeneutical issues are rarely broached. The great value of such

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synthesizes lies in their capacity to enable one to grasp the overall tendencies of an author. In this work, I have chosen a slightly different tack. It primarily seeks to consider in depth one troublesome quotation, Isa. 42.1–4 in Matt. 12.18–21, in order to determine its function within its surrounding context. In an age when studies are increasingly focusing upon minutiae, the limited scope of such an investigation may need to be defended.

Matthew’s use of Isa. 42.1–4 confronts the investigator with a host of challenges that demands a more extensive, thorough and nuanced study. First, as with many of Matthew’s distinctive formula quotations, Isa. 42.1–4 possesses idiosyncrasies in its text-form which appear to support christological and ecclesiological themes fundamental to the Gospel and its portrait of Jesus. Whether Matthew is personally responsible for these textual adjustments has not been immediately obvious to many; however, a thorough assessment of the mixed text-form has provided the common jumping-off point in a study of this nature. As a result, the text-form is
perhaps the most exhaustively explored area in analyses of Matthew’s OT usage. Nevertheless, a comprehensive theory of Matthew’s text-form(s) has thus far eluded investigators. This is not unexpected given the tenuous strands of evidence by which textual theories have often been strung together. One may find assistance in understanding Matthew’s text-form in the more recent discoveries of texts at Khirbet Qumran, Masada, Wadi Murabba, and Nahal Hever, which have challenged many of the theories concerning the development of the text-form that previously dominated the academic landscape.

Second, closely related to Matthew’s text-form is the matter regarding whether a relationship exists between the adjusted text-form and its context. Doubt continues to be expressed about the assertions that Matthew himself adapted/redacted the citations in light of his theological agenda and that these changes reflect the content of the narrative into which the quotations are inserted. Third, Isa. 42.1–4 is the longest of the OT quotations in Matthew, but at first glance very little of the citation appears to relate to the surrounding context. This would mean that much of the citation is essentially irrelevant and raises the troubling question why a conscientious redactor like Matthew would have haphazardly included such an extensive amount of superfluous material. It remains incumbent upon those who presuppose greater significance in the superfluous elements to explain their presence.

A fourth difficulty concerns Matthew’s


19 One might simply compare the comments by D. S. New, Old Testament Quotations in the Synoptic Gospels and the Two-Document Hypothesis, SBLSCS 37, Atlanta: Scholars, 1993, p. 121, who asserts that Matthew’s Bible was the LXX, with those by Davies and Allison, Matthew, I.52, who concur with the judgment that Matthew knew and translated directly from Hebrew.

20 The literature on 12.18–21 is extensive. In addition to the short discussions scattered throughout various books and articles, the passage has received focused attention from Stendahl, School, pp. 108–15; Gundry, Use of the Old Testament, pp. 110–16; Neyrey, ‘Thematic Use’, 457–73; O. L. Cope, Matthew: A Scribe Trained for the Kingdom of Heaven, CBQMS 5, Washington: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1976, pp. 32–52; and Schnackenburg, ‘Siehe da mein Knecht’, pp. 203–22. Recently, there has been a spate of short studies on other quotations in Matthew. For example, see Weren, ‘Quotations from Isaiah’, pp. 447–65; ‘Jesus’ Entry into Jerusalem: Mt 21.1–17 in the Light of the Hebrew Bible and the Septuagint’, in The Scriptures in the Gospels, edited by Tuckett,
insertion of Isa. 42.1–4 into what is perhaps the most thematically diverse and complicated context in the Gospel, chs. 11–13. Fifth, there is evidence that the quotation was part of both Jewish and early Christian exegetical traditions. It seems to have been interpreted messianically prior to the emergence of Christianity. Finally, taking a page from literary theory, the rhetorical function of the final form of the citation poses an intriguing challenge. The grammatical and linguistic adjustments in Matthew’s peculiar text-form create a new set of associations and distinctive meanings, affecting the rhetorical force of the citation within its context. Although this particular emphasis has been little explored, it may prove to be the most promising. When taken all together, these various issues warrant a more exhaustive analysis that may shed light upon the role of this formula citation within Matthew’s narrative and thought world.

Guiding presuppositions and assumptions

Essential to the process of understanding a biblical text is an awareness of the assumptions that one personally brings to both the book and the interpretative task. What is particularly difficult about Matthean studies is that numerous ‘introductory matters’ remain unresolved. Scholarship has, however, arrived at many reasonable and informed conclusions that offer a place to begin. Rather than taking the space to argue each position at length, I will simply state the assumptions central to this study, most of which have now generally become accepted views in Matthean scholarship.

Fundamental to the study is the question of the author’s nationality and literary abilities. Although a segment of twentieth-century commentators have posited gentile authorship, the evidence seems to support the

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historic position that Matthew was Jewish and wrote within a Jewish framework for a primarily Jewish audience.24 While it is difficult to say whether he knew Hebrew well, he does appear to have been ‘an intellectual’.25 His work, as evinced in the Gospel, suggests a thoughtful, reflective author who took great care with his sources and yet also adjusted them to create the grand composition of the Gospel.26 It appears that Matthew was written in the latter half of the first century, probably between AD 70 and 85.27 The Gospel’s Jewish content and the thematic development of conflict with the Pharisees seem to indicate a location of composition in either northern Palestine or southern Syria. Although Antioch is a possibility,28 serious questions remain regarding its feasibility. Another contentious issue concerns whether Matthew’s Gospel represents a community that was still connected to its parent body Judaism (intra muros)29 or had recently undergone a painful separation (extra muros).30 However


27 The case for a date after AD 70 relies upon Matthean dependence upon Mark and especially Matt. 22.1–10, which appears to contain a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem. Davies and Allison, Matthew, I.132–3, add 28.19 to the equation and argue that its theological sophistication would demand a date between AD 85 and 100.


one decides, the Gospel reflects a running conflict with the parent body. Finally, while acknowledging that the textual situation was perhaps more complex than has otherwise been suggested, this work presupposes Mar- can priority throughout and assumes that Matthew also had access to the sources known as Q and M.31

Limitations

The primary limitation of this work is that it will not directly address or interact with OT scholarship concerning the so-called ‘servant songs’. Several considerations have led to this restriction. First, the predominant interest of OT critical scholarship has been to locate the historical identity of the servant figure, thus rendering moot any application of the text in the first century AD.32 Second, Matthew’s understanding of the text does not represent the concerns of critical OT scholarship. This is no doubt a reflection of the increasing difficulty of squaring historical research of the Hebrew Bible with first-century studies.33 Third, the source-critical concerns behind Duhm’s programmatic agenda which argued that the ‘servant songs’ were originally lifted from one source and later inserted into Isaiah are of little import for a study of Matthew, for whom there existed neither Deutero- nor Trito-Isaiah. 34 Thus, it would be anachronistic to speak of Deutero-Isaiah, the role of the ‘servant’ in the theology


31 The recent rise in support for the Griesbach hypothesis is evidence that the issue of Matthean sources is more convoluted than the simplistic affirmation that Matthew used Mark, Q and the source M (most recently argued by W. R. Farmer, The Synoptic Problem: A Critical Analysis, Dillsboro: North Carolina Press, 1976). See, for example, the exploration of Matt. 18 in Jones, Matthean Parables, pp. 16–30.

32 Note the final footnote in T. N. D. Mettinger’s essay A Farewell to the Servant Songs: A Critical Examination of an Exegetical Axiom, translated by F. H. Cryer, Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1983, p. 46 n. 83, where the author offers two restrained comments on the servant in early Christianity. First, motifs similar to the christological usage in the Gospels are used of the church in Acts 13.46–7 (‘I have set you to be a light to the gentiles’); and second, ‘language and imagery used of Israel’ in the Old Testament are frequently applied to Jesus in the New Testament.
