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THE STILLING OF THE STORM IN MATTHEW: A RESPONSE TO GÜNTHER BORNKAMM

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I. His Thesis and Development

According to Bornkamm,[1] Matthew has interpreted the story of the stilling of the storm in a new way. He has taken the story out of its biographical setting in Mark and Luke, placed it in a different context in his gospel, and altered it in a characteristic way in order to make it serve a new motive. The new role in which the story is cast is that of a kerygmatic model of "the danger and glory of discipleship."[2]

The underpinnings for Bornkamm's hypothesis are provided by an initial methodological assertion: Kerygmatic faith in Jesus served as the foundation of the gospel tradition.[3] The gospels have been written, and therefore Jesus must be understood, from the perspective of the faith in Jesus proclaimed by the early Church. Consequently we do not have biographies of Jesus but rather a proclamation of his words and deeds drawn from primitive Christian tradition and shaped to serve kerygmatic concerns. Although the evangelists take pains to record the tradition accurately, they are clearly free to alter it in the light of pragmatic interests. This methodology is confirmed by the pericope found in Matt 8:23-27, the stilling of the storm.

Bornkamm's first contextual observation is that the story occupies a different place in Matthew than in Mark or Luke. Matthew has taken the story out of its biographical setting and placed it in a context of a series of miracles (chaps. 8-9) whose purpose is to show Jesus as the "Messiah of deed" after showing him as the "Messiah of the word" in the sermon on the mount (chaps. 5-7).[4] Thus observation of the overall context substantiates Matthew's free use of the tradition.

Second, careful analysis of the immediate context of the pericope demonstrates that its interpretation is not exhausted by labeling it a straightforward nature miracle as in the Markan account. Matthew has prefaced the story with two sayings of Jesus about discipleship *(akolouthein)*. To the scribe who has

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[1]G. Bornkamm, "The Stilling of the Storm in Matthew," in G. Bornkamm, G. Barth and H. J. Held, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963) 52-57.

[2]Ibid., p. 57.

[3]Ibid., p. 52.

[4]Ibid., p. 53.

pledged unfailing allegiance, Jesus warns of the perils of following him. To the disciple who wishes to bury his father, Jesus instructs as to the necessity of total commitment. The connection between the sayings and the story is found in that now Matthew has the disciples follow Jesus *(ēkolouthēsan autō)* into the boat, a deviation from the other synoptic accounts.[5]

The story is therefore an illustration of the costs and rewards of discipleship, providing us with a figurative expression of what has transpired in 8:19-22. Just as the disciples are rocked by the storm, so "the little ship of the church" must also stand against severe persecution. But Christ, as well as being the man "with no place to lay his head," is also the majestic Lord who can calm the roughest sea and vindicate his followers with a word.[6]

Bornkamm points to three unique details in the pericope to defend his thesis. First, it is only here that the disciples utter an ejaculatory prayer: *Kyrie, sōson, apollymetha.* In their desperate cry the disciples address Jesus as *kyrie* rather than *didaskale* (Mark 4:38) or *epistata* (Luke 8:24). Bornkamm interprets this variation as an attempt on Matthew's part to identify the desire of the disciples to follow Jesus at all costs. Second, only in Matthew's gospel does Jesus' rebuke of the disciples precede the miracle itself. Jesus accuses his followers of "little faith"—faith too weak to stand against the perils of discipleship. Bornkamm understands this lack of faith as symbolic of the hard road of the disciple. But no matter how difficult it becomes, the disciples can depend on the word of Jesus that overcomes the storm. Finally, Bornkamm draws attention to the fact that it is not the disciples but rather the *anthrōpoi* who give praise to Jesus following the event. This is characteristic of paradigmatic narratives and provides Matthew's audience and likewise us with an opportunity to imitate and follow Christ.

The story is therefore "a description of the dangers against which Jesus warns anyone who overthoughtlessly presses to become a disciple. At the same time it shows him as one who . . . is able to reward the sacrifice of abandoning earthly ties. The story becomes a kerygmatic paradigm of the danger and glory of discipleship."[7]

Bornkamm's initial methodological observation concerning the origin of the tradition (i.e., that it was shaped by the faith of the earliest Christians) and its use by the evangelists (i.e., that they were free to alter the tradition in the light of kerygmatic concerns) is foundational for analysis of the gospels and is not in question here. What is at issue, however, is whether, given such a *modus operandi* for the composition of the first gospel, the story of the stilling of the storm is properly understood as a paradigmatic portrayal of the danger and glory of discipleship. Contrary to Bornkamm, the present analysis seeks to establish that Matthew's concern is Christological—that is, that the story primarily attempts to define who Jesus is before would-be followers, whose misconceptions about him have led to false notions concerning what it might mean to follow.

[5]Ibid., pp. 54-55.

[6]Ibid., pp. 55-56.

[7]Ibid., p. 57.

II. The Larger Setting

It is evident that Matthew has placed the story in quite a different setting than his synoptic counterparts. Out of its biographical setting in Mark and Luke, Matthew has included the miracle as fourth in a series of nine miracles that follow the sermon on the mount. They include (1) healing the leper (8:2-4), (2) healing the centurion's servant (8:5-13), (3) healing Peter's mother-in-law (8:14-15), (4) stilling the sea (8:23-27), (5) exorcizing two demons (8:28-34), (6) healing the paralytic (9:1-7), (7) raising a dead child (9:18-25), (8) healing the blind (9:27-31) and (9) healing the dumb demoniac (9:32-34).

Throughout this section of miracles the reader is introduced to several groups who lack insight into the true purpose of Christ's mission: The "sons of the kingdom" lack faith (8:10-12); the citizens of the country of the Gadarenes beg him to leave their neighborhood (8:34); the Pharisees question his integrity (9:10-13); the disciples of John wonder why his disciples do not obey the Law (9:14); and the anonymous masses follow aimlessly (9:36). Even those with a sincere desire to follow Jesus misunderstand what he offers. Such is the case in the pericope of the scribe and the disciple (8:18-22), which immediately precedes the calming of the sea.

III. The Immediate Context (8:18-22)

Matthew's use of the tradition in this pericope is clearly redactional (cf. Luke 9:57-62). He eliminates the dialogue between Jesus and a third would-be disciple as if to establish a comparison between the first two. In addition he defines the anonymous man of Luke's account as a "scribe" and a "disciple" and has them address Jesus as "teacher" and "Lord" respectively. With the inclusion of 8:18 as a preface to the story ("he gave orders to go over to the other side"), he establishes its unique setting as an introduction to the storm miracle (8:21-27).

At first it seems inconsistent that Matthew would have a scribe address Jesus as "teacher" and then have him utter a strong word of commitment, pledging to follow Jesus wherever he goes. With the exception of 13:52, Matthew consistently portrays both the scribes and those who call Jesus "teacher" (Judas, Pharisees) as antagonistic to his activity. Similarly it seems strange that a disciple who calls Jesus "Lord" (an address usually reserved for the committed) would hesitate to follow in the light of his desire to bury his father.

Matthew's arrangement here, however, is not unintentional. Contrary to Bornkamm, the point of the pericope is not that these men have misunderstood the demands of discipleship but rather that they have misunderstood Jesus, who he is and what he offers, and consequently have misjudged what it might mean to follow him. The scribe's address *(didaskale)* identifies Jesus as one who might be followed as other teachers: by strict observance and memorization of their teachings. The response of Jesus does not comment on the perils of discipleship but rather focuses on himself. In essence he dissociates himself from other teachers. All foxes have holes and all birds have nests, but the Son of Man does not have a home. Unlike other teachers, he cannot rest in the structure and heritage of the legalistic tradition. The scribe's misunderstanding is further illustrated in Jesus' response to the disciple, who, despite his sincere desire to follow Jesus, has failed

to see the extent to which the coming of the kingdom supersedes and reinterprets the demands of the Law.

The misunderstanding of the scribe and the disciple provides Matthew with an opportunity to define for his audience who Jesus is and what exactly he offers. He does this by recounting the story of the stilling of the storm (8:23-27).

IV. MATTHEW'S USE OF *AKOLOUTHEIN* (8:23)

Unlike his synoptic counterparts, Matthew has the disciples follow Jesus *(ēkolouthēsan autō)* into the boat. According to Bornkamm, the simple meaning of *akolouthein* ("to follow after") is invested with deeper significance in the light of its association with the preceding pericope.[8] On the basis of this association the storm miracle is made a figurative expression of the discipleship defined in the previous dialogue. However, an examination of Matthew's use of *akolouthein* demonstrates that such an hypothesis is open to question. Matthew uses the verb twenty-four times (synoptic parallels in parenthesis): 4:20 immediately they left their nets and followed him (Mark 1:18); 4:22 immediately they left their boat and their father and followed him (Luke 5:11); 4:25 great crowds followed him; 8:1 great crowds followed him; 8:10 when Jesus heard him he marvelled and said to those who followed him (Luke 7:9); 8:19 I will follow you wherever you go (Luke 9:57, 61); 8:22 but Jesus said to him, "Follow me" (Luke 9:59); 8:23 and his disciples followed him; 9:9 and he said to him, "Follow me"; and he rose and followed him (Mark 2:14; Luke 5:27); 9:19 and Jesus rose and followed him with his disciples (Mark 5:24); 9:27 two blind men followed him; 10:38 he who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me (Luke 14:27); 12:15 and many followed him (Mark 3:7); 14:13 and they followed him on foot (Luke 9:11); 16:24 if any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me (Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23); 19:2 and large crowds followed him; 19:21 sell what you have, come, follow me (Mark 10:21; Luke 18:22); 19:27 Peter said, "Lo, we have left everything and followed you" (Mark 10:28; Luke 18:28);19:28 you who have followed will sit on the twelve thrones (Luke 22:28); 20:29 a great crowd followed him; 20:34 they received their sight and followed him (Mark 6:52; Luke 18:43); 21:9 the crowds that followed him shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David" (Mark 11:9); 26:58 Peter followed him at a distance (Mark 14:54; Luke 22:54); 27:55 there were also many women . . . who had followed Jesus (Luke 24:4).

In reference to Matthew's use of *akolouthein* four observations can be made: (1) Of the twenty-four occurrences of the verb in Matthew, eighteen are paralleled in one of the other synoptic gospels and six references are not paralleled; (2) all six passages without parallels use the same construction to express the idea of following after Jesus: *ēkolouthēsan autō* (4:25; 8:1; 8:23; 9:27; 19:2; 20:29); (3) all uses of the verb in discipleship contexts are paralleled in either Mark or Luke; (4) withholding judgment for the moment on 8:23, all passages without parallels are found outside discipleship contexts where the general use of the term, that of "walking behind" or "showing interest in," would seem appropriate.

[8]Ibid., p. 55.

On the basis of these observations it may be concluded that Matthew's use of *akolouthein* in discipleship contexts is not unique but is already present in the tradition he uses. However, the expression *ēkolouthēsan autō* is unique to Matthew and is used outside discipleship contexts to denote a general following of Jesus. While it is possible with Bornkamm to see the expression in 8:23 filled with the significance of discipleship and thereby have it stand as the sole unparalleled usage of *akolouthein* in such contexts throughout the gospel, it might be well to consider whether the expression could function adequately in this context taking the meaning Matthew usually reserves for it.

The expression is used predominantly of the crowds that follow after Jesus (4:25; 8:1; 19:2; 20:29). They are found following him through various geographic regions (4:25); marveling at his teaching (7:28); being afraid and glorifying God (9:8); laughing at him (9:24); misunderstanding his teaching (13:10-17); following on foot (14:13); staying with him three days without food (15:32-39); spreading palm branches in his way while proclaiming him the "Son of David" (2:19); and finally shouting for his crucifixion (27:23).

Jesus' reaction to them is varied. He sometimes wishes to escape from them, either to be alone or to be with his disciples (5:1; 8:18). Although he accuses them of being incapable of understanding (12:9-21), he has compassion on them (9:36) and earnestly desires their salvation (9:35-38).

The "following" of the crowd is not without meaning for Matthew. Out of it come both the true seekers and the curious bystanders. To follow after Jesus, to be one of the crowd, symbolizes an opportunity to encounter God. Those who follow Jesus but do not understand either try to please him by their meritorious behavior (8:18-21; 21:9) or attempt to force him to conform to their traditions (9:10-13; 27:23). Those of the crowd who do understand offer nothing but respond with a joyful committal of their personalities in faith (8:10).

In 8:23 it is now the disciples and not the crowd who follow him. At this point in Matthew the term *mathētēs* is probably not a technical designation for "the Twelve."[9] There are still disciples to be gathered (9:9-13), and "the Twelve," who are referred to as *apostoloi* (10:2), are not officially named or commissioned until chap. 10. In the light of this, it may be that Matthew intended the reader to view those disciples who follow Jesus into the boat as a part of a larger group of adherents to his teaching—a loyal segment of the crowd. Among these disciples may have been the scribe[10] and the disciple of the previous pericope and possibly some of the other men who would later comprise the inner circle of apostles.[11]

It is then the disciples—those who adhere to the teachings of Jesus but still fail to comprehend who he is or what he offers—who *ēkolouthēsan autō* into the boat. In doing so they are opened to a new opportunity to encounter God through a proper understanding of what Jesus was doing and saying.

[9]BAG, s.v. *"Mathētēs."*

[10]For a scribe who becomes a disciple see Matt 13:52.

[11]Clement of Alexandria, reflecting an early tradition of the Church, identifies the disciple who wanted to bury his father as Philip (*Stromateis* 3.6.16).

V. Source Analysis of the Pericope (Matthew 8:23-27; Mark 4:35-41; Luke 8:22-25)

In the light of the similarities that appear in a comparison of Matt 8:18-24 and Luke 9:57-62, the differences between Matt 8:23-27 and its synoptic counterparts are striking. Matthew did not use Q. Parallels between Matthew and Luke are incidental and virtually nonexistent in the "sayings" portions of the story. Matthew may have referred to Mark, but the parallels here are also slight and are for the most part confined to the events following the miracle (the calm sea, amazement that even the wind and sea obey him). Either Matthew used an independent tradition or else he significantly changed Mark to suit his own purposes.

VI. Parallels in the History of Religions: Jonah 1:3-16; Psalm 107:23-32

Jonah has traditionally been viewed as a traitor, a coward, and a prime example of little faith in his flight from Nineveh. On the surface it seems unlikely that Matthew would consider comparing Jesus with him. Linguistic parallels between the accounts are slight but significant in areas where Matthew does not follow Mark or Luke. Especially interesting are the appearances of *kyrie* and *diasōsẹ̄* in Jonah—both unique in Matthew's account of the miracle.

Matthew 8:23-27		Jonah 1:3-16 (LXX)	
8:24	*kai idou seismas megas egeneto en tẹ̄ thalassẹ̄, hōste to ploion kalyptesthai hypo tōn kymatōn*	1:4	*kai egeneto kalysōn megas en tẹ̄ thalassẹ̄, kai to ploion ekindyneuen syntribēnai*
8:24	*autos de ekatheuden*	1:5	*kai ekatheude*
8:25	*kyrie, sōson, apollymetha*	1:6 1:14	*hopōs diasōsẹ̄ ho theos hēmas* *kyrie mē apolōmetha*
8:27	*hoi anthrōpoi ethaumasan*	1:16	*ephobēthēsan hoi andres phobọ̄ megalọ̄*

Content parallels between the accounts are more striking:

Matthew 8:23-27		Jonah 1:3-16	
8:23	and he entered the boat	1:3	Jonah went down and found a boat
8:24a	and a great storm came upon the sea so that the boat was swamped by the waves	1:4	and a great storm came upon the sea so that the boat was in danger
8:24b	but he was asleep	1:5	Jonah was asleep and snoring

8:25	and they went and woke him, saying, "Lord, save us, we are perishing"	1:6	and the master of the boat came to him and said, "Call upon your God that your God may save us, that we may not perish"
8:26	and there was a great calm	1:15	and the sea became still
8:27	and the men marveled	1:16	and the men feared the Lord exceedingly

Rabbinic understanding of Jonah was significantly different from our present perception of him. The Jews considered Jonah a hero, a savior of Israel. His flight from Nineveh was regarded as an act of self-sacrifice intended to preserve the integrity of the Jews. On this Joachim Jeremias writes:

> According to the Haggada his flight (Jon. 1) occurred in the interests of Israel. He wanted to prevent the repentance of the Gentiles causing God to punish the impenitence of Israel. With this in view, he offered his own life for that of his people. "R. Jonathan (c. 140 A.D.) said: The only purpose of Jonah was to bring judgment on himself in the sea, for it is written: 'And he said to them, Take me and cast me into the sea' (Jon. 1:12). Similarly, you find that many patriarchs and prophets sacrificed themselves for Israel" (M. Ex., 12, 1). Jonah was perfectly righteous.[12]

While such traditions reflect Jewish thinking in a period later than that of the composition of the gospel, an indication that Matthew understood Jonah in a similar light is found in 12:39-41 where a parallel is drawn between the story of Jonah and the resurrection of Jesus. As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the fish, so Jesus will be in the earth for three days and nights. In the same context the scribes and the Pharisees are warned to take notice of the people of Nineveh who repented at the preaching of Jonah. Their faith puts to shame the overconfidence and calculated pragmatic behavior exhibited by those of "this generation" who reject the message of Jesus—a message far superior to that which Jonah proclaimed.

In addition to the story of Jonah several other OT passages reflect the Semitic understanding of God as one who delivers people from the perils of the sea.[13] Among these, the most interesting for our purposes is Ps 107:23-32:

> Some went down to the sea in ships, doing business on the great waters; they saw the deeds of the LORD, his wondrous works in the deep. For he commanded, and raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea. They mounted up to heaven, and they went down to the depths; their courage melted away in their evil plight; they reeled and staggered like drunken men, and were at their wits' end. Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress; he made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed. Then they were glad because they had quiet, and he brought them to their desired haven. Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to the sons of men! Let them extol him in the congregation of the people, and praise him in the assembly of the elders!

[12]J. Jeremias, *"Iōnas," TDNT* 3 (1974) 407.

[13]Pss 29:3; 65:7; 89:9; 93:3-4; 124:3-6.

This passage is the fifth stanza in a psalm that proclaims the deliverance of God. The pattern of deliverance begins with an act of God's judgment intended to bring the disobedient to repentance. Those in the storm react in fear and cry to the Lord for help. They are delivered and subsequently praise God. The Deliverer is the One who saves men from the perils of the sea.

VII. The Theological Significance of the Miracle

The expression, "This was done in order that what was written in the prophets might be fulfilled," is unique to Matthew. It focuses our attention on the fact that Matthew consistently interprets Jesus on the basis of OT messianic expectations.[14] In the light of such a methodology, the stilling of the storm can be understood as a portrayal of Jesus. As Jonah's act was in the interest of Israel and as Yahweh delivered those tossed by the currents of the deep, so Jesus is the Deliverer who saves those overwhelmed by the chaos and afflictions of life.

It is incredible that the story should end on such an ironic note. Even the wind and the sea obey Jesus, but how difficult it is to comprehend fully who he is and what he offers! Throughout Matthew's gospel many miss the point: the people who ask Jesus to leave their city (8:34); the scribes who accuse him of blasphemy (9:3); the Pharisees who insist that he avoid the sinners (9:11); the crowds who laugh (9:24). Here the ejaculatory prayer of the disciples ("Lord, save; we are perishing") betrays their misunderstanding. It stands as a desperate cry for Jesus to do a miracle to save their lives.

What they have misunderstood is that Jesus comes as more than a miracle-worker. His acts of deliverance attest to the proclamation of the coming of the kingdom of Heaven. With the coming of Jesus, all the power needed to still the storms of life is available to all. Jesus' rebuke of the disciples ("O men of little faith") identifies the root of their misunderstanding. The salvation they seek comes not in following Jesus' teaching, imitating his behavior, experiencing his miracles or feeling indispensable to his cause. What Jesus offers has nothing to do with the demands of discipleship that would make one accepted by any other master. Rather, a true understanding of Jesus' mission comes only in encountering the God Jesus proclaims in a joyful committal of one's personality to him in faith.

For Matthew, Jesus' words and works of deliverance were rooted in the message he continually proclaimed: The kingdom of Heaven has come (4:17). God is never moved to action because he owes us life. His regular gracious activity originates only from his choice to desire our greatest good. Having suffered the rejection of mainstream Judaism, Matthew's church needed to hear this message. The true Israel is composed of all those who understand Jesus as Messiah and live, having been delivered.

[14]Matt 3:3; 4:14; 8:17; 11:10; 12:17, 40; 13:14, 35; 15:7; 21:4.