

Whose Kingdom Is It Anyway?

|| The Sons of Zebedee as Antitypes for Adonijah in Matthew 20

Dominic Rudman

I. Introduction

In Mt 20,20¹–23; Mk 10,35²–40 a request is made of Jesus that the sons of Zebedee should be allotted a favoured position sitting on either side of Jesus when he comes into his own. However, there are a number of small but significant differences between these passages. These have been noted by scholars insofar as they might indicate Markan priority,¹ and to some extent as being illustrative of the way that each of these authors wishes to characterise the disciples.² Nevertheless, no attempt has been made to account for the differences in any consistent way, and such reasons as are offered for the variation between the texts often do not stand up to close scrutiny. On the basis of a comparison between these texts, this article aims to account for the most significant of the changes in Matthew.

II. Translations

Mt 20,20-23

²⁰ Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favour of him. ²¹ And he said to her, "What do you want?" She said to him, "Declare, that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom." ²² But Jesus answered, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" They said to him, "We are able." ²³ He said to them, "You will

Mk 10,35-40

³⁵ James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you". And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" ³⁷ They said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand, and one at your left, in your glory." ³⁸ But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptised with the baptism with which I am baptised?"

¹ Hagner, Matthew 578; Edwards, Mark 322.

² Harrington, Matthew 286; on Matthew, see Kingsbury (Matthew Story 129), and Brown, Disciples 151.

indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by the Father.”

³⁹ They replied, “We are able.” The Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink, you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptised, you will be baptised. ⁴⁰ But to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”

III. Text and Context

(a) Differences between the Texts

Setting aside minor linguistic issues, five main differences between the versions of the sons of Zebedee narratives contained in Matthew and Mark have been observed by commentators. These are as follows:

Matthew	Mark
1. Mother of James and John asks for position of authority on her sons’ behalf.	1. James and John ask for position of authority.
2. Direct request made from the outset.	2. Initial request is vague-only when pressed do James and John specify their desire.
3. Request is to sit on either side of Jesus “in your kingdom”.	3. Request is to sit on either side of Jesus “in your glory.”
4. Jesus’s response refers to cup only.	4. Jesus’s response refers to cup and baptism.
5. Favoured position is “for those for whom it has been prepared.”	5. Favoured position is “for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.”

(b) Scholarly Assessments of the Texts and their Differences

Generally, Markan scholarship has tended to focus on three aspects of the sons of Zebedee text. The first of these is the disciples’ initial request that Jesus “do for us whatever we ask of you” (Mk 10,36), effectively asking Jesus for an eschatological blank cheque.³ Only when pressed for specific details of what they want do James and John reveal their desire.⁴ The second aspect of interest to commentators is the precise nature of the request that the sons of Zebedee be permitted to sit alongside Jesus “in your glory” (ἐν τῇ δόξῃ σου), typically understood either as a reference to the

³ Donahue / Harrington, Mark 311.

⁴ Gundry, Mark 577; on the linguistic details of Jesus’s questioning cf. Reiser, Syntax 149f.

Parousia,⁵ or to the establishment of God's kingdom on earth, and therefore to a more worldly authority.⁶ The final aspect that has attracted comment is the irony of the fact that the Boanerges have misunderstood the nature of discipleship by focussing on serving themselves rather than seeking to serve others, as well as failing to perceive that the price of following Jesus involves sharing his passion (Mk 8,34-38).⁷

Matthean scholarship has concentrated more on the differences between the two texts, in part because of the perception of Matthew as having used Mark as a source.⁸ The most significant difference between the narratives in the two gospels is that Matthew represents the request for precedence in the kingdom as coming from the mother of James and John rather than from the two sons themselves. This change is accounted for in various ways. Some suggest that Matthew includes an historical detail omitted in Mark.⁹ The otherwise close relationship between the two texts is indicated by the fact that Jesus's response to the request of the Boanerges' mother is addressed to her sons in Mt 20,22 using the same second person plural verbs found in Mk 10,38: οὐκ οἶδατε τί αἰτεῖσθε ("you [plural] do not know what you [plural] are asking"). Matthew may therefore have decided for his own reasons that a pre-existing tradition asserting that the request came from the mother of James and John was important.

The fact that Jesus's reply is directed at the sons of Zebedee rather than their mother could actually support this position if one understands the two young men to have persuaded their mother to make the request in the hope that a woman's plea would carry more weight with a soft-hearted master.¹⁰ However, many argue that Matthew's introduction of the figure of the mother is simply an attempt to counteract Mark's negative portrayal of James and John as hungry for power.¹¹ Again, this need not imply that the story is a fiction, but if this is the sole purpose of the mother's appearance,

⁵ Wellhausen, *Evangelium* 84; Blunt, Mark 220; Mann, Mark 412. Jeremias, *Words* 205 links this expression with seating at the Messianic Banquet (Lk 14,15-24) or the heavenly throne room (Rev 4-5).

⁶ Schniewind, *Markus* 143; Evans, Mark 8:26-16:20,116; Edwards, Mark 322.

⁷ Cole, Mark 170; Edwards, *ibid*.

⁸ Senior, *Matthew* 117-19.

⁹ Albright / Mann, *Matthew* 242.

¹⁰ Filson, *Matthew* 216; Blomberg, *Matthew* 306. Keener, *Matthew* 485, notes that Jewish tradition contains several instances of women making requests of a powerful figure (Lk 18,2-5; 2Sam 14,1-21; 20,16-22; 1 Kings 1,11-16; 2,17). Matthew may reflect this.

¹¹ Allen, *Matthew* 216; Rawlinson, Mark 143-44; Hagner, *Matthew* 580.

then the fact that Jesus addresses his response at her sons undermines the Matthean author's efforts to cast the pair in a positive light.¹²

Finally, many note the fact that while Mark describes James and John as asking that they sit alongside Jesus "in your glory" (ἐν τῇ δόξῃ σου), their mother in Matthew requests the same position for them "in your kingdom" (ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ σου – Mt 20,21). Few scholars remark on this change: it is either ignored or the two expressions stated to be equivalent in meaning.¹³ Although I do not take issue with the idea of the basic equivalence of the two terms, no convincing argument has been offered as to why Matthew substitutes "kingdom" for "glory." Implied in this lack of scholarly comment is the idea that the use of *do,xa* in Mark is down to personal or stylistic preference, or is based on Jesus's comment in Mk 8,8 (cf. 13,26) about the son of Man's coming "in the glory of his father."¹⁴ However, Matthew places rather more emphasis than Mark on the "glory" of Jesus (Mt 16,27; 19,28; 24,30; 25,31), and one would ordinarily expect him to retain the Markan term in Mt 20,21.¹⁵ This suggests that Matthew must have had some reason for the substitution.

IV. Parallels with 1 Kings 2

Both of the changes in Matthew are explicable once it is realised that Matthew has structured his narrative on the story of Bathsheba's petition to Solomon in 1 Kings 2. In the latter text, Bathsheba, Solomon's mother, visits her son at the behest of Adonijah, who wants to marry Abishag, a woman formerly associated with David. Solomon detects a plot on the part of Adonijah (by marrying the woman of a former king, a prospective usurper could strengthen a claim to the throne) and immediately orders his brother's execution.¹⁶

Superficially, the narratives do not appear very similar, but the thrust of both is clear.

¹² Contra Edwards, Disciples 92.

¹³ e.g. Albright / Mann, Matthew 242.

¹⁴ Cf. Gundry, Mark 577.

¹⁵ Contra Gundry, Matthew 402.

¹⁶ Hertzberg, Samuel 350; Bergen, Samuel 410-11.

Mother-figure:	Bathsheba Pleads	Mother of James & John
To King	Solomon On behalf of Adonijah	Jesus James and John
Resulting in	For inappropriate position of power Sentence of death	Prediction of death

Certain parallels and contrasts are established by Matthew between the sons of Zebedee narrative and the Kings text. Firstly, the appearance of the mother (μήτηρ—Mt 20,20) of James and John here, the most significant difference between the Matthean and Markan narratives, creates an interpretative link with 1 Kings 2 in which Solomon's mother μήτηρ – 1 Kings 2,19-20,22) pleads the case of Adonijah. Of course, it must be admitted that for there to be a true parallel between the texts, Jesus's mother would have to plead on behalf of James and John. Nevertheless, the identification of both Bathsheba and the wife of Zebedee as mother-figures is significant.

Secondly, the verb αἰτέω ("ask, request") appears in Mk 10,38 and Mt 20,22 in Jesus's response, "You do not know what you are asking." However, in the initial question that elicits this response, Mark has the sons of Zebedee "say" what they want (λέγω – Mk 10,35), while Matthew places greater emphasis on the action of the mother of James and John when she "asks" her favour (αἰτέω—Matt 20,20). The greater emphasis on the act of asking in Matthew may be connected with the multiple appearances of the same verb in 1 Kings 2,16-22).

The replacement of the Markan "in your glory" by "in your kingdom" (ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ σου – Mt 20,21) creates another interpretative link with the events at Solomon's court. Adonijah's rationale for his request is that "the kingdom was mine" (ἐμοὶ ἦν ἡ βασιλεία – 1 Kings 2,15). Solomon, the current ruler of the kingdom, is outraged by his brother's nerve, and sarcastically responds to his mother, "ask for the kingdom (ἡ βασιλεία) on his behalf as well" (2 Kings 2,22). Although James and John are not plotting to usurp Jesus (as is implied in the case of Adonijah and Solomon), they have hatched a plan to obtain an inappropriate status in his kingdom, and have used a woman to further that purpose.

The irony implicit in the comparison between the Matthean and the Kings texts is underlined by Jesus's reply to James and John that "you do not know what you are asking for." Although many commentators see Adonijah's request as a prelude to making a further bid for the throne,¹⁷ this is not stated outright by the narrator in Kings, and it is possible to interpret the

¹⁷ Benzinger, Jahvist 11; Keil, Kings 29-30; De Vries, 1 Kings 37.

text to suggest that Adonijah (and / or Bathsheba) were genuinely ignorant of the implications of the request that they were making to Solomon.¹⁸ In both instances, the main characters are making a petition that will lead to an utterance concerning their own death.

Finally, there is an ironic touch in Matthew's addition of the term "my Father" to Mark 10,40. Jesus's comment that "to sit at my right hand and at my left ... is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father" (Mt 20,23) recognises that the status sought by James and John is in the gift of Jesus's Father, God. This may allude to the events of 1 Kings 1 in which Adonijah makes a bid to usurp the throne of Israel without the knowledge of Solomon's father David. David's intervention prevents the fulfillment of Adonijah's plan, and ensures that the position of power that Adonijah sought falls to Solomon. Therefore, the status which both Adonijah and the Boanerges seek is derived ultimately from the authority granted by the father of the one they approach. Alternatively, it is possible to understand Yahweh as the father of Solomon (2Sam 7,12-14) in this case. Adonijah interprets his failure to obtain the throne to the intervention of Yahweh (1 Kings 2,15), and so the position he sought was ultimately in the gift of God, the father of Solomon.

V. A Contrast with 1 Kings 2

Alongside the parallels with 1 Kings 2, one significant contrast, which lies in the activities of the two females asking the favour, may be discerned. In 1 Kings 2, Bathsheba, as the Queen Mother, is accorded a place of honour with a throne where "she sat on his right" (καὶ ἐκάθισεν ἐκ δεξιῶν αὐτοῦ – 1 Kings 2,19). The mother of James and John is said to kneel (προσκυνοῦσα–Mt 20,20) before Jesus with the intention of asking that one of her sons sit on Jesus's right (ἐκ δεξιῶν σου–Mt 20,21). Yet this contrast also underlines the connection between the two texts and, by presenting Jesus as hearing a request from a person, not seated as in 1 Kings 2, but kneeling (prosku,new) in the traditional posture of subservience to kings (1Sam 24,8; 2Sam 1,2; 9,6), suggest that Jesus is greater than the greatest of Israel's kings.¹⁹

¹⁸ Montgomery / Gehman, Kings 92; Gray, Kings 106.

¹⁹ Cf. Neyrey, Honor 66.

VI. Conclusions

Whether or not the inclusion of the mother of the Boanerges in the Matthean version of the sons of Zebedee narrative is understood to be a fictional element, or to reflect a genuine tradition, the exchange between the woman and Jesus appears to be based in part on that between Bathsheba and Solomon. Possibly, the idea of this literary construction is simply to present James and John, the self-serving brothers, as antitypes for Adonijah. But the Matthean author also invites his readership (who would have detected the allusion) to reflect theologically on an event that he saw in some sense as true, to ponder what it is to be subject to Jesus rather than Solomon. Solomon, as Israel's greatest and wealthiest king, was a man who, according to Jewish tradition, experienced every pleasure in his lifetime (cf. Koh 2,1-10; Mt 6,28-29), but was also the man who turned free Israelites into slaves (1 Kings 5,13 cf. 1Sam 8,11-18). Jesus's kingship was reflected in suffering and service, and though he too demands that his subjects become slaves (Mt 20,26), this slavery is voluntary, not forced. The cost of apparent disloyalty to Solomon for Adonijah was death (1 Kings 2,24-25). This, suggests Matthew, may also be the cost of loyalty to Jesus (Mt 20,23).

Summary

Mk 10,35-40, which relates how the Boanerges approached Jesus in the hope of obtaining a special position when he came into his own, has been subject to several changes in Mt 20,20-23, notably in Matthew's presentation of the request being made by the mother of James and John. This article argues that the introduction of the mother, and of several more minor changes, is the product of the Matthean author's desire to draw a parallel between the present text and 1 Kings 2, in which Adonijah, like the Boanerges, seeks to obtain an inappropriate position in a Davidide's kingdom. In doing so, the Matthean author invites his readership to reflect theologically on the motives of the Boanerges and on the nature of Jesus' kingship.

Zusammenfassung

Mk 10,35-40 berichtet, wie die Zebedäussöhne an Jesus herantreten in der Hoffnung, eine Sonderstellung zu erhalten, wenn er in sein Eigentum komme. Der Abschnitt erfährt in Mt 20,20-23 verschiedene Änderungen. Vor allem fällt auf, dass in der matthäischen Fassung die Bitter von der Mutter der Zebedäussöhne vorgetragen wird. Der Beitrag zeigt, dass die Einführung der Mutter sowie einige kleinere Veränderungen sich dem Wunsch des Autors Matthäus verdanken, eine Parallele zwischen dem vorliegenden Text und 1Kön 2 zu ziehen, wo Adonijah, ebenso wie die Zebedäussöhne, nach einer ihm unangemessenen Stellung im davidischen Königreich strebt. Dadurch lädt der Autor Matthäus seine Leserschaft ein, die Motive der

Zebedäussöhne sowie das Wesen von Jesu Königsherrschaft theologisch zu reflektieren.

Bibliographie

- Albright, W.F. / Mann, Chr.S., Matthew (AB 26), Garden City 1971.
- Allen, W.C., A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew (ICC), Edinburgh 1910.
- Benzinger, I., Jahvist und Elohist in den Königsbüchern (BWANT 27), Berlin 1921.
- Bergen, R.D., I, 2Samuel (New American Commentary), Nashville 1996.
- Blomberg, C.L., Matthew (New American Commentary), Nashville 1992.
- Blunt, A.W.F., The Gospel According to St. Mark, Grand Rapids 1939.
- Brown, J.K., The Disciples in Narrative Perspective. The Portrayal and Function of the Matthean Disciples, Atlanta 2002.
- Cole, R.A., The Gospel According to St. Mark, Grand Rapids 1961.
- De Vries, S.J., 1 Kings (WBC 12), Waco 1985.
- Donahue, J.R. / Harrington, D.J., The Gospel of Mark (Sacra Pagina 2), Collegeville 2002.
- Edwards, J.R., The Gospel According to Mark, Grand Rapids / Cambridge 2002.
- Edwards, R.A., Matthew's Narrative Portrait of Disciples, Harrisburg 1997.
- Evans, C.A., Mark 8:26-16:20 (WBC 34B), Nashville 2001.
- Filson, F.V., A Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew, London 1960.
- Gundry, R.H., Matthew. A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution, Grand Rapids 1982.
- Gundry, R.H., Mark. A Commentary on his Apology for the Cross, Grand Rapids 1993.
- Gray, J., I & II Kings. A Commentary (OTL), London 1964.
- Hagner, D.A., Matthew 14-28 (WBC 33B), Dallas 1995.
- Harrington, D.J., The Gospel of Matthew (Sacra Pagina 1), Collegeville 1991.
- Hertzberg H.W., I & II Samuel (OTL), London 1964.
- Jeremias, J., The Eucharistic Words of Jesus, London 1990.
- Keener, C.S., A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, Grand Rapids / Cambridge 1999.
- Keil, C.F., I & II Kings, Grand Rapids 1980.
- Kingsbury, J.D., Matthew as Story, Philadelphia 1988.
- Mann, Chr.S., Mark (AB 27), Garden City 1986.
- Montgomery, J.A. / Gehman, H.S., A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Kings, (ICC), Edinburgh 1950.
- Neyrey, J.H., Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew, Louisville 1998.
- Rawlinson, A.E.J., St. Mark, London 1947.
- Reiser, M., Syntax und Stil des Markusevangeliums (WUNT 2/11), Tübingen 1984.
- Schniewind, J. Das Evangelium nach Markus (NTD 1), Göttingen 1963.
- Senior, D., What are they Saying about Matthew?, New York 1983.
- Wellhausen, J., Das Evangelium Marci, Berlin 1909.
- Dr. Dominic Rudman
69 Newtown Rd
Eastleigh, Hants, 5050 9BX United Kingdom (GB)